# ON REASONS AND DISAGREEMENT IN ETHICS

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Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2007

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Produced on archival quality paper

# Abstract

This thesis explores reasons and disagreement in ethics, and their connection to personal identity. I begin by arguing that reasons are open; what gives them direction is how they feature in my life and weigh with me.

Of course, this does not tell us what reasons are available to a person when they act. In this connection I argue against Bernard Williams' internal reasons thesis, showing that there are occasions when we will want to say someone has a reason to act even though they are unable to see it. Continuing with Williams, I explore moral necessity, drawing also on the works of Winch, Rhees and Cordner, arguing that Williams too readily conflates psychological with ethical limits. In particular, the possibility of recanting what we took to be necessary should inform our view of moral necessity, since it can show that I had misconstrued the nature of the limits I took myself to have reached.

Following this use of recantation, I explore narrative in detail, arguing that my narrative is partly constitutive of who I am. My agency is therefore interpretive. This has ramifications for thinkers such as Christine Korsgaard and Jonathan Dancy, whose work I explore in two excursuses. In different ways, both fail to appreciate the significance of our interpretive identities.

In the final four chapters I concentrate on disagreement and argument in ethics.

Following Williams and Nussbaum, I argue that conflict between values can be unavoidable, and projects in philosophy which seek to avoid all such conflicts cannot succeed. Furthermore such conflict is to be distinguished from inconsistency. Drawing on Peter Winch I argue that inconsistency in ethics is rarer than is commonly recognised. The appropriateness of the charge of inconsistency depends on how ideas are taken up within a life in the first place.

Yet none of this means that we are without critical tools, nor does it empty disagreement in ethics of its content. Looking at Gadamer and Gaita I explore moral

disagreement and emphasise that it is between real people and takes place in dialogue. Charles Taylor builds an *ad hominem* conception of practical reason based on these insights - *ad hominem* because it addresses itself to the people actually involved in dialogue. His model is powerful, though he overstates what can be achieved, since nothing absolute will be learnt from such dialogues. Again drawing on Gadamer and Winch, I conclude by showing that the fact our identity emerges in a social and linguistic space provides rich resources for *Kritik*.

# Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length

# Acknowledgements

There is a risk that the list of people I would like to thank will begin to look something like an acceptance speech at the Academy Awards. However, I have been very fortunate in having the support of a great many kind people, and I am indebted to them all.

My first thanks must go to my first supervisor, Naomi Cumming, who provided important guidance as I adjusted to a new area of philosophy and a new scale of work. After Naomi's sad and untimely death, Chris Cordner took over the role, displaying considerable patience as I worked through the changes in direction which a thesis necessarily takes. Clare Rhoden was also invaluable for helping me settle on a clear and manageable topic.

During an extended period of study in Frankfurt am Main, the staff and students of the Institut für Philosophie at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität offered were wonderful for their welcome and showing me what life in Frankfurt has to offer. I would especially like to thank Axel Honneth and Rainer Forst for overseeing my research there.

My friends and family deserve praise for their endurance, support and good humour. Amongst them, my parents have been the most anxious. They cannot have foreseen the perverse consequences of their (perhaps too-successful) efforts at encouraging my education and interest in learning. For my part, I am deeply grateful for their efforts and success.

Even at work, I have been fortunate to have managers willing to make allowances, and my colleague Angela Henderson went well beyond the call of duty by helping with proof reading. Brief words of thanks cannot do justice to the wonderful support Megan Laverty provided me even as an undergraduate. And, finally and most importantly, Jen, you need not share me with this companion any longer - my weekends are free!

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# Introduction

### Orientation

This work concerns moral disagreement. In it, I argue for a kind of moral pluralism.

Being about disagreement, it is also about reason-giving and reason in moral life generally. I begin by looking at how we take up reasons for action. In the first place I note that it is individuals who act, and it is therefore individuals who take up reasons. How reasons are taken up is therefore responsive to who it is that is acting on them. Our agency is interpretive, so that situations are understood within a horizon of meaning, and the concepts we use likewise. Acknowledging this alters what we can say about others' reasons for action. Traditionally, theories of practical reason and theories of morality have been developed in order to bring differences between people into some greater scheme which enables final judgements. Understanding that our agency is interpretive and what gives rise to this will alter what we expect from moral theory.

Since I argue for an interpretive or hermeneutic understanding of moral agency, there was a temptation to make this an exercise in comparing thinkers in the tradition broadly labelled phenomenological or hermeneutic: Gadamer, Ricoeur, Heidegger and so on. These thinkers crop up, however my interest is not to defend a tradition but to concentrate on a theme. This has freed me to draw on the works of other philosophers who concern themselves with the role of meaning in moral life, thinkers such as Taylor, Winch and Gaita. It has also provided the space to bounce off the works of Williams, Korsgaard and Dancy, whose works overlap interestingly and informatively with my own. Agreeing in part with their projects, the limitations I find in their work have been helpful in elucidating my own view on matters such as the place of the individual and laws in moral reasoning and their connection to personal identity.

Being a work in moral philosophy, the concept of morality is central to this project. However, morality is a difficult concept to pin down. I can offer no definition here. While I agree there is a distinction to be made between the moral and the non-moral, I do not think it is clear-cut. Instead, the moral and non-moral seem to lie at opposite ends of a continuum. Trying to draw a clean line between the two would therefore involve a long digression which in any case would not contribute much to the issues I cover in this work. One way of approaching why I see things this way is to explain why I have also chosen to use the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' interchangeably. It is usually unclear what the distinction between the ethics and morality is really meant to be. Most commonly, the suggestion seems to be that ethics has to do with the good and morality with the right. The former connects to those projects and commitments which give my life depth and meaning, while the latter has to do with unbending laws that would trump all other considerations.

However, if this is what people mean, then the distinction is really of no help at all. If we are to acknowledge that the right should trump everything then this presumably results from an appreciation of its significance in the first place. This appreciation will be especially important for deciding what to do when rights conflict – for when rights conflict, we are forced to choose between them. That such conflicts may be irreducible is something I show in the chapter, 'Conflict & Consistency'. In this chapter I also show that if we think of moral requirements as unbending then we will be left with a morality with no room for an adequate notion of responsibility. For there are times when it will just be unsympathetic and clumsy to describe someone's action as 'wrong' simply because they had to choose between two conflicting moral requirements and therefore could not act on one. When moral requirements conflict, my choice between them can only be based on an appreciation of their significance, that is, based on an understanding of the role they play in life. However, this just is to appreciate how they give depth and meaning to my life.[1] So the ethical and the moral really do not seem so distinct after all. In addition, since a moral life requires us to understand the significance of different moral requirements across a spectrum of situations it seems difficult to say in advance just what reasons are going to lead to the conclusion 'this is right' and which are not. There will be a variety of deep and

[1] This point will crop up again, 'Reaching My Limit'.

overlapping concerns which will not fit a taxonomy containing only the groupings ‘moral’ and ‘non-moral’.

My interest in this topic began when I looked at the role personal identity played in debates on multiculturalism – the role that a perspective on how life should be led could not only emerge from the life we share with others, but depend on this life for its nourishment. In this way personal identity becomes something we act out of without reflecting on it or its conditions until we meet some obstacle to our fulfilment or routines – whether natural or enforced. Moral pluralism seems to me an obvious conclusion to draw when we look around us and admire the variety of ways people lead their life (though equally obviously this is not an intuition shared by all). For if morality answers the question of how I should lead my life, then it is clear that this could be answered in any number of ways. What’s more, the question will be taken up within the horizon of a life which is already being led. It is individual people who must lead lives. It is individual people who must not only answer the question of how a life should be led, but connect this to the leading of a life – namely their own.

**The Structure of the Work**

This is the point I make at the outset of the first chapter, ‘The Openness of Reasons’. It is a condition of agency that an individual must lead their own life, in the sense that she can only act for reasons which weigh with her. This does not stop you from only doing as you are told – doing as you are told is simply believing that the fact someone has told you to do something is a good reason to do it. Of course, the fact that someone has told you to do something is sometimes a good reason to do it. At other times it is a good reason not to do it. This introduces another argument made in the opening chapter: reasons have no internal compass. What gives reasons direction is how they feature in a life and weigh with someone – a reason must stand in the right way for it to be taken up by someone as the reason it is. Who the person is thereby becomes an ineliminable feature of what can be said about a situation. For a situation is not simply given, it must be taken up by a person, and this must be done within their horizon of meaning. Our agency is interpretive. For example, an alcoholic will have a different relationship to drinking from a tee-totaller, a teenager beginning to drink or a reformed alcoholic. The place of alcohol in their lives will

differ, and consequently, so will how it stands as a reason to act in various circumstances – and it is possible that it will go to the core of the lives. An alcoholic may loathe their addiction and themselves for feeding it; the reformed alcoholic may be fearful of collapsing back into self-destructiveness, of reverting to slavishness; the tee-totaller may believe any drinking diminishes or corrupts us; and the teenager may believe it is a sign of their maturity. Nor is there any one kind of alcoholic, tee-totaller or teenager, so that, for instance there will be considerable variation between alcoholics as how their alcoholism stands as a reason to act.

That we can only act for reasons which are available to us does not mean we must automatically endorse the reasons people give for what they do. Nor does it tell us what reasons are available to a person. It is in this connection that the second half of chapter 1 is an exploration of Williams' account of 'internal reasons'. Williams argues that a person can only act for reasons which connect to the set of motivations she has. The major difficulty with Williams' account is how it conceives of the connection to existing motivations. We can come to acknowledge new reasons in a variety of ways which do not spring from existing motivations. In view of how situations can be transformed by the acknowledgement of a reason for action, there are occasions when we will want to say someone has a reason to act even though they are unable to see it. That my interpretive horizon will limit the kinds of reasons I can act on or make sense of does not tell us how our understanding might be transformed.

A strand of Williams' project in ethics is to make sure our thinking in ethics is sensitive to the limits of particular agents. His internal reasons argument is intended to stop people foisting reasons on an individual, expecting them to be taken up no matter how remote they are from the agent's concerns. I share Williams' emphasis on the central role of individual agents in moral life. However, my approach leads to interesting differences from him. For this reason I look at Williams' work at a number of points in this work, sympathetic to his project and at the same time at some distance from it.

My analysis of Williams continues in the second chapter, 'Reaching My Limit', in which I also draw on Rhees and Winch to introduce the idea of moral necessity. In line with his project, Williams develops a notion of moral incapacity. The idea is

akin to that of practical necessity - when, for instance, I declare it impossible for me to climb the ship's mast because of vertigo. Both forms of necessity are located in the character of the person, however moral incapacities are distinguished by the way in which they arise in deliberation. While sympathetic to the place Williams' gives to character in establishing limits, drawing on Cordner I argue against the conflation of ethical limits with psychological limits. In particular, an appreciation of the nature of recantation should inform our view of moral necessity. The narrative I give to my life might show not only that there were reasons available to me which I was once unable to appreciate, it might also show that I had misconstrued the nature of the limits I took myself to have reached.

Another limit Williams connects with particular individuals is one placed on ethical theory proper. Williams argues that 'impartial morality' breaks down when it comes up against the projects and relationships which give meaning to an individual's life and give him a reason to continue life. He calls these projects, 'ground projects'. Since meaning and a reason to go on living would be stripped from life without them, an impartial morality cannot coherently make demands that would crush our ground projects. When it runs up against ground projects, morality must give way. This is a surprising view for a thinker who elsewhere argues for the possibility of tragedy and that moral conflict cannot always be avoided (explored in more detail in Chapter 6). There is no reason to think the world is ordered so that our lives may not be crushed by the demands morality makes on us. In addition, Williams seems to mischaracterise ethics. If we are to understand morality as generating this crushing requirement, and understand it as moral, we at the same time understand its significance. This means that life is not stripped of all meaning and sense can be made of following its requirements. This being said, I would not want to suggest that the fact that morality gives sense to an action and some meaning to life afterwards will always compensate for what is lost. It is in this connection that I look briefly at Winch's suggestion that the good person is protected from harm as long as they will the Good. However, even Winch acknowledges that the force of some events might overwhelm us.

At the outset I described agency as interpretive, and in my response to Williams I draw on conceptions of narrative which are deeply connected to who a person is. In

Chapter 3 I develop my conception of narrative identity. Our identity is constituted by more than just the values we have. It is also constituted by our narrative: how I narrate my life and actions constitutes who I am. While my values might change, and I might therefore be said to be a different person to the one I once was, narrative gives continuity to my identity – it tracks me even as I change. In doing so, it also provides continuity of responsibility. While narrative might give continuity to a life, this does not mean that it must be unified around a particular theme, for instance a conception of the good. In arguing this I respond to Taylor as much as I draw on him. Taylor introduces the idea of a 'best account' – the account which makes best sense of my life. On the one hand this makes clear how deeply narrative operates in my life. On the other hand, his development of it suffers from his contention that we construct our narrative around central goods. Discussing the 'Best Account' should not mislead us into thinking there is some absolute or final account of my life. For one thing, it is possible for me to offer any number of accounts of any event in my life, since it can be approached in terms of any number of themes I find in it – or in connection to any other event. For another, my narrative will change over the course of my life, as I come to revaluate parts of it – this is central to my objection to Williams' understanding of necessity.

Personal identity and its connection to morality has been written on extensively recently. One particularly influential thinker has been Christine Korsgaard, who connects personal identity to the Kantian understanding of moral agency in terms of law-giving. In the first of two excursuses, I explore Korsgaard's, *The Sources of Normativity*, in some detail. While showing some of the power of giving personal identity a role in moral theory, her conception of personal identity suffers from not attending properly to the interpretive dimension of agency. Her conception of identity is too bound to her conception of agency in terms of law-giving. In addition, she has an overly reflective conception of personal identity. (This contrasts with a strength of much of Williams' work, that he does not want moral agency to be made overly reflective.) Our identities are usually not things we hold before ourselves and use to justify or guide our actions; rather, we act out of our identity. My personal identity is reflected in how the world stands for me, and it is out of this orientation to the world that I act.

In the second excursus, I turn from a thinker who overplays the role of law in morality to one who wants to remove law from morality altogether. Jonathan Dancy describes himself as a particularist and a holist. The former label refers to his belief that morality cannot be described in terms of laws or principles; the latter to his belief that a feature which serves as a reason in one situation can in another be an opposite reason or no reason at all. While I find much to agree with in Dancy's work, his account lacks a sense of the way in which our agency is historical because it is given in narrative. Narrative brings out the way in which our agency is historical, the way in which who we are now and how we see the world draws on our understanding of what has come before. Dancy believes experience has a role in moral judgement, however his account of it is attenuated – for Dancy, if experience plays a role, it cannot be that it helps us to arrive at principles or even rules of thumb inductively. The particular situation must always have priority, not any generalising idea which may be laid over it. However, experience is necessarily related to our history because it is tied to our narrative, which places experience in a history (and orients us to the future as well). As I argue in the first chapter, reasons do not emerge only from situations, they are bound up with who I am. Therefore, how I take up a situation draws on resources which go well beyond the situation at hand.

Dancy's holism plays on a different axis to the one I introduce in the first chapter. Holism concerns how features of the world can generate reasons from one moment to the next – each case will be different and so the same feature can serve as a different reason between different cases. My thesis that reasons are open concerns the way in which reasons depend on an agency which is in the first place interpretive. What we take to be a reason in any case, and even what we understand is entailed by the same reason will depend upon the agent who takes it up. Not only do reasons have no vector internal to them prior to being instantiated, they depend for their sense upon an understanding of the agent and of the context in which they are taken up. In 'Conflict & Consistency' I argue that the relation between reasons operates in a similar way. Drawing on Winch, I argue that the upshot of this is that inconsistency in ethics will be more open to interpretation than in formal logic since how reasons stand to one another in a life will depend upon how they are taken up. All lives will involve negotiating the tensions between competing values. That our values and commitments are in tension need not mean there is anything wrong with them – it

need only reflect the fact the world is not arranged for our ease. On the other hand, what might appear a matter of no importance to one person may be understood quite differently by another. Whereas I may see no tension between the account of creation in *Genesis* and Darwin's theory of evolution, another may be struck by their incompatibility.

In the last three chapters I turn to showing the possibilities for *Kritik* which remain, given all that I have argued until then. My arguments for an interpretive understanding of moral agency might be thought by some to lead me to an empty relativism or even subjectivism. This would be mistaken. That narrative constitutes personal identity, reasons are open and consistency in ethics more open than usually acknowledged still allows for a person to be mistaken in their sincere moral judgements, and still leaves us with resources for *Kritik*. Dialogue plays a central role in what I write, since it takes place between real people who are located in a debate emerging from their actual way of life. My model of dialogue is tacitly that of a conversation between people. Dialogue can occur between cultures or indirectly, and the conversational model will not always apply. However, exploring these possibilities would take me well beyond the scope of this work. Instead, I concentrate on dialogue as it most directly applies to argument, and either of us may be mistaken.

In 'Disagreement & Dialogue' I show how the phenomenology of value prevents moral life from sliding into an empty subjectivism in which someone is taken to be right in their moral judgements as long as they are sincere. Drawing on Gadamer, I thematise disagreement in ethics, showing that it will be disagreement between people. This means that disagreement is responsive to who is disagreeing and their outlook in the first place. It also means that disagreement takes place in dialogue. Following this lead, I continue to draw on Gadamer as I explore dialogue in more detail, arguing that it does not have to be oriented to consensus, although if we are serious in dialogue then we must be open to the question which draws us into it in the first place. The question has priority, inasmuch as assuming that we have the answer and others are simply mistaken moves us from dialogue into didacticism.

Charles Taylor's account of practical reason also begins with the insight that disagreement will be between people located in a particular context. This means that argument does not work from the ground up, but begins at a point at which people

agree with each other – or at least are prepared to begin their dialogue. Taylor's model of argument is therefore *ad hominem*, in the sense that it is addressed to the interlocutor as a situated person, and focuses on the actual concerns which are at issue. The outcomes of argument are therefore provisional. Since they are not developed from the ground up or *a priori*, and they may well be superseded, we are misled if we think of Taylor's model to be one of practical reason. The practical reason tradition has in general sought to ground principles by which we can adjudicate on the question of whether our reasons for action are rational and therefore adequate. Taylor has quite correctly given up this aim. However, thinking of his model of argumentation as being in the practical reason tradition leads him to misconceive his achievement at times. For whatever we learn in these dialogues, it will not have the finality that he sometimes claims. The shape and nature of our lives and understanding is too open-ended to admit of finality.

In the final chapter, again drawing on Gadamer and Winch, I show how we (and therefore our dialogues) are located in a world of meanings which are not of our own creation. We grow and develop in a social world. Things take on their significance against a background of social practices and meanings utilising a language we share with others. While narrative shows the influence of events on my life as I use it to draw connections between experiences, it does so in a language that is not mine alone and using concepts that play off others. For no matter how much I emphasise the role of the individual and idiosyncratic understanding in the early chapters, we must never think of agency atomisticly. We are located in a world of meaning which we share with others, even as we take it up in new ways. This provides a great resource for *Kritik*, because it is possible for us to be confused in our understanding. This might show the limitations on the concepts we use, or might only reflect individual misunderstanding. For while it is me who must lead my life, this does not mean that others cannot shed light on how I might do so better.

# 1. The Openness of Reasons

We act for reasons. There is nothing controversial in this. In this chapter, I begin by emphasising it is individuals who act for reasons, and it can only be on the basis of reasons which weigh with them. We learn how and whether reasons weigh with people by how they take them up in action. That is, we learn what the reason is – how it stands as a reason – by how it is taken up. Understanding this leads to the thought that reasons are open – that they have no content and do not point to any course of action until they are instantiated. Reasons are open because what might count as a reason for one course of action for one person may count for the opposite action for another. This is not to be confused with particularism, which is usually concerned with relations between *situations*.[2] The thought I develop here concerns how reasons stand between people. Reasons for action are therefore intimately connected to who it is that takes them up, and they are given their compass by how individuals take them up. This connects to our agency at another level: we are interpretive agents, living in a realm of meaning which, while not our own to mould as we please, is not given in advance either. Our interpretive agency will only be introduced here, its ramifications bobbing up throughout the chapter.[3]

In the second half of the chapter I turn to differentiate my view of reasons from Bernard Williams'. Arguing that we can only act on the basis of reasons which weigh with us at first glance resembles Williams' argument for internal reasons. Williams argues that I can only act on the basis of reasons which are appropriately connected to the set of motivations which I have. Demanding that someone act for reasons which do not in any way connect with their existing motivations is therefore not only pointless but usually moralistic. Drawing especially on Millgram, I argue that Williams' internal reasons argument is too limited, drawing the line too early when deciding what an 'appropriate' relation to existing motivations might be.

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[2] I deal with this at length later in, 'Excursus on Dancy'

[3] This conception of agency will be developed throughout this work, see especially the chapters, 'Narrative Identity' and 'Critical Dialogue'.

**The Openness of Reasons and Interpretive Agency**

In the set of notes published posthumously under the title 'Deciding What I Ought to Do', Rush Rhees imagines someone finding themself in a moral dilemma – having to choose between actions, all of which are morally required. The person is understandably perplexed as to what to do. Rhees considers the person considering their options, and asks:

> What would be the relevant reasons for or against?….What sort of 'objectivity' is there in these reasons? There are circumstances in which I would say he is mistaken, or in which I would say I was mistaken in my judgement at that time. But I cannot show – demonstrate – his mistake or mine with anything like the finality of a demonstration…in arithmetic.[4]

We can consider Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Sue has married Phillotson, and is now unsure if she in fact ought not to have married him. As her great aunt has dryly observed, 'I can mind the man [Phillotson] very well. A very civil, honourable liver; but Lord! – I don't want to wownd your feelings, but – there be certain men here and there that no woman of any niceness can stomach. I should have said he was one. I don't say so *now*, since you must ha' known better than I, - but that's what I *should* have said.'[5] Sue has also fallen in love with Jude, who is her cousin. That they are cousins is the least of their difficulties, for, in the eyes of the law and society, Jude also has a wife, through an unfortunate marriage, naively entered into and soon fallen apart. Sue is caught between her aspiration to honesty in life, her obligations to and regard for Phillotson and her love of Jude. Her love of Jude is further complicated by the unjust constraints of society, particularly with regard to marriage and sexual morality, which will smother whatever happiness she and Jude might ever have together: marriage is forbidden; adultery is not to be tolerated (least of all by Sue herself).

What ought Sue to do? Rhees' response is that she must decide for herself; no one can tell her what to do. It is a condition of her agency that Sue must decide, for whatever she decides the action will be her own. However, the point runs deeper than

[4] Rhees 1953a: 84-5
[5] Hardy 1995: 159

being a reiteration of her agency. It is not just that she must ultimately act, the point is also that, because she must act, it must be on the basis of considerations of her own that she does so. Whatever the reasons for the choice she makes, they will be her own, even if they were first proffered by another. The difficulty is that her situation is a dilemma and she does not see any one of her aspirations and obligations as annulling the others. Sue's concerns do not stem from self-interest – she is not *tempted* to be with Jude. Her love of Jude is not mere desire, to be weighed against her vows of marriage. Her love brings with it concerns of fidelity, authenticity and what she owes to Jude. The considerations which pull her in opposing directions are of different kinds and not commensurable. While they do not cluster neatly around the axis of the moral/non-moral distinction they do nevertheless connect with the moral. Sue's dilemma runs to her core and none of the considerations trumps the others; nor is there any further reason that can tip the matter one way or the other. She is clear on all this – the trouble is that she does not know how to proceed.

Rhees sees her situation in the light of tragedy: even foreknowledge could not help her because she would still have had to decide what to do. The situation would have remained essentially unchanged by foreknowledge – she would still love Jude and be married and obligated to Phillotson. And this point, he feels, connects to the possibilities of others to provide advice. Rhees does not think others can understand her situation, but even if they can understand it, and somehow imbue Sue with that understanding, she would still have to make the decision for herself. Her decision would be made in the light of the reasons she recognises and how they weigh with her. Others' understanding would therefore be just another variety of foreknowledge, since even with their advice, she is still left with the need to make a decision. She is left having to choose between alternatives which all have a deep significance for her. Whatever advice she receives, she must weigh it up and judge its salience. She will be responsible for her reasons as well as her decision - they will be hers just as the decision is. Rhees writes, 'Foreknowledge might have helped you to avert disaster. It has no bearing on [a tragedy].'[6]

I shall explore the limitations on others proffering advice later in this piece. However, before I do so I would like to emphasise an important twist to any such

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[6] Rhees 1953a: 79

activity. Any reasons you give must stand as reasons for the person in the right way. I have noted well enough that whatever reasons Sue acts on, they will have to be her own. It is also true that whatever reasons Sue recognises as reasons, they will also be her own, even though they may well be hers in her own particular and even idiosyncratic way. How often in discussion with someone is there agreement that some feature of a situation is a reason, but disagreement on what exactly it is a reason for? In a discussion on capital punishment, one might emphatically assert that human life is sacrosanct, thinking this implies capital punishment is wrong, and find one's interlocutor agreeing it is sacrosanct and continuing that this is what makes capital punishment the only punishment suitable for murder. Again Sue's love for Jude could be both a reason for her to see him, and a reason for her to keep away. In both instances her love for Jude would be a moral impetus, since she might see her love as requiring a kind of fidelity to her beloved, or her love might be taken as something that tempts her away from a husband to whom she feels obligated. It is in light of these considerations that I consider reasons to be open. That is, by themselves reasons have no internal compass; they do not point any particular direction prior to their being taken up by someone. Talking of reasons' existence prior to their being taken up by someone risks implying a misleadingly metaphysical picture of reasons. The point is that a reason can only be said to lead to any conclusion in light of how it stands as a reason for someone in the first place.

What gives reasons direction is how they feature in a life and weigh with someone. Understanding this also goes some way to meeting a concern some might have with what I just contended regarding the openness of reasons. Someone might say that if a particular reason needs to be understood in connection with other features of a person's life or thinking, and if we find two such people differ at this level, then I am incorrect to assert that these reasons were ever the same to begin with. The objection has the merit of demanding that reasons be elaborated in terms of how they fit together with other considerations that stand for a person. If, in response to the question, 'Why won't you see Jude?', Sue were to reply, 'Because I love him', it would be common to want to explore her thinking in more detail. The objection is lent more force by an asymmetry in our responses: if Sue had wanted to see Jude because she loved him, we are unlikely to have felt the need for Sue to elaborate. However, even such a brief answer as 'Because I love him' serves in both instances,

and to this extent it might be thought to stand as a reason. There seems no definitive way of looking at the problem, and debating it risks being tantamount to asking how many angels fit on the head of a pin. Nevertheless what the objection and my contention have in common is that an elaboration in terms of how that reason connects with a person's way of life is central to understanding it as a reason. This leads to another important observation: if Sue's reason does need to be connected to others in order to be understood properly, then it is significant that she connects it to *this* reason and not to another. My point remains the same, the reason can only be said to lead to any conclusion in light of how it stands as a reason for the agent in the first place.

Reasons being open, how a person sees or renders their situation will reveal much about them. Because reasons do not stand alone, but are to be understood against the backdrop of how a person positions themselves in their life, what a person takes to be salient in their situation can reveal much about that person's life. The person is located in their situation in a non-accidental way. That is, while it might be a matter of contingency that someone finds themselves in the situation they do, the way they inhabit that situation will be closely tied to who they are. Someone else may be largely untroubled by finding themselves in love with someone other than their spouse; Sue is not such a person. Her situation has a meaning for her that it may not for others in part because the elements that go to make it have a different meaning for her. An important aspect in the situation is therefore Sue herself, for who she is is in part to be understood through the values she has, which will in turn inform how she views the world. We are subjects of meaning, and there is an ineliminably interpretive element to our situation that extends not only to how we render the situation, but also to the terms through which we render it.

An interesting corollary of this to be noted in passing is that observed by Rhees. The situation I am in can be quite clear to me, even if the question of how I should proceed is agonising. To this extent, the situation is in fact not the problem, it is me, since it is I who must decide what to do. Rhees writes, 'What presents the difficulty is not 'the situation' – and anything baffling there may be in that – it is yourself.'[7] This is not intended as an additional curse upon a person; it is not that we are fallen

[7] Rhees 1953a: 78

and benighted creatures whose fault it is that we are in the position in which we now find ourselves. Instead, the point is that a corollary of our being able to take up problems as we do – to interpret our situation in the modes in which we do (for instance as moral, pragmatic, fun) – is that how we actually interpret is expressive of who we are. Our situation is not to be separated entirely from who we are, and in an interesting way it is who we are and how we see things that creates the problem. This need not oblige us to try to see things differently and thereby dissolve the problem – indeed to do so may be to deceive ourselves. Sometimes the best account to be given of a situation is one that makes clear just how difficult it is.

Who the person is who must decide what to do enters decision-making at another point, namely that to act one way and not another things must weigh with you appropriately. Reasons are not only open and lack an internal compass, they can only ever be reasons for a person who has the standards appropriate to them.[8] How I describe my situation reveals how things stand for me, nevertheless nothing precludes another person from offering another perspective. There is, however, always the limitation that the reasons you offer simply will not be recognised as reasons by the person to whom they are offered. We could talk with Sue about love, marriage, honesty and integrity. We could talk about how these ought to relate to broader social constraints, and we could talk about the place of women in all of these matters. Sue may or may not be influenced by such a conversation, but it would be intelligible enough and she could no doubt see its point. If I were to introduce the colour of Jude's eyes as a consideration she would no doubt be uncomprehending or incredulous – what possible bearing could that have on the matter at hand? Whether Jude's eyes are blue, brown or hazel just does not matter. Sue can only act for reasons that she recognises – for reasons that are her own – and she would not see the colour of Jude's eyes as having the slightest connection to her circumstance.

Another perspective on this feature of moral deliberation is that there will also be diversity in people's sense of what will be a matter of moral concern. For instance, Jude sees his capacity for excessive drinking when faced with the collapse of some personal ambition in a moral light. What he says when drunk on such occasions demeans what he holds dear, how he behaves demeans him in the face of others, and,

[8] Rhees 1953a: 82

most importantly, he has made an undertaking to Sue never to abuse alcohol because of personal distress. To do so now would involve breaking faith with Sue and he would then be unworthy of her. For Jude, the consumption of alcohol has become a moral matter, and one connected to his sense of self-worth. For someone else, on the other hand, the consumption of alcohol need not carry anything like this significance. I might drink frequently and in response to stress and yet not be concerned by this in anything like the same way. I may worry about its effects on my health without thereby being concerned about my moral state. I may even connect my drinking with who I am without seeing it as a moral issue. Marketers play on such associations all the time – witness a recent scotch advertisement, the hoarding depicting a woman staring provocatively at the viewer, with the caption 'She used to wear braces. But then, you used to drink bourbon.' While we might worry that they reinforce identities about which we have misgivings, they at the same time play off them, responding to the ways people see themselves in the first place. Interestingly, these considerations can overlap with issues of self-worth, for instance when it's suggested that you can't be a real man if you don't like beer. We would be loath to call such a concern a moral concern, and yet it can connect with self-understanding and self-worth. That being said, while matters that touch on our sense of self-worth may not be moral, it is difficult to think that matters of moral concern would not touch on our sense of self-worth.

This might raise the concern that what I have argued so far will mislead us into taking someone at face value who ought best be seen as pathological in what they take to be of moral concern. Giving personal identity a central place in ethics does not entail that there are no normative evaluations to be made of how a person sees things. I shall show this later in the chapter when arguing against Williams' view of external reasons. The last three chapters deal with this as well. Summarising the last of these chapters, I would note that identity is not formed in isolation from others. Our historical and social situation is vitally important in how the world has shape for us. There are numerous ways in which society influences us, whether it be through such general things as language formation and the concepts available to us in language, how the world in which we find ourselves refers to the lives and projects of the others around us, or simply the way in which we understand ourselves in part through our relations with others. Our historical and social situation need not

determine us, and yet it will saturate our thinking. This at least opens up a space of shared meanings in which talk of intelligibility gains some leverage.

I have already mentioned that how a person sees their situation can be as of much interest as what they finally choose to do. The terms in which someone renders their situation can reveal something about them. Furthermore, what the person does finally choose to do can reveal something about how particular reasons for action weigh with her.[9] What is revealed in how a person sees their situation is the horizon within which they see the world. Clearly it would be too much to suggest that the entirety of their horizon is revealed for us. Similarly there are clear interpretive issues for the person who is observing someone else. However, we do at least catch a glimpse of how the person sees the world, gaining insight into how things stand for them. For our values in part constitute who we are and they are manifested in all their complexity not only in our behaviour, but in how we orientate ourselves in the world in the first place.

If I value honesty, then this will be displayed in my actions. I may not always be honest, but then I will have some special relation to the moments I was dishonest. It may be that I claim the situations were special, or that I regret what I did or I may deny altogether that I was dishonest. The last is of especial interest because it may shed light on how I value honesty, or what I take honesty to be. That is, honesty is not a quality that is simply given. What it is has been debated, as has the place it should have in a person's life. My actions and my account of them will reveal something about both these aspects – the place it has and what I take it to be. In this sense I think identity and agency are hermeneutic, or at least, that the subject is one of meaning.

None of this should be taken to mean that we are transparent to ourselves, or that we are always capable of articulating what our concerns are. Indeed, part of the emphasis I wish to place on what our behaviour reveals about us stems from an awareness that our reflective self-understanding can be the product of self-deception and/or a limited capacity for representing ourselves, whether through inarticulacy or blindness. It is important to acknowledge that what people say about their situation or how they see themselves may diverge quite spectacularly from how they behave.

[9] This is not the same as saying that *motives* reveal something about how reasons weigh with a person.

Neither a person's behaviour, nor their personal testimony can be given priority in thinking about these things, especially since each will inform what can be said of the other. What's more, both will at some point have to be located in the broader society in which they move. I do not intend to enter the domain of social theory in this paper, however the complex debates surrounding it at least attest to the subtle ways our social world influences and fills out who we are. What I am primarily concerned with here is the way in which our behaviour must in the first place be connected to how the world has meaning for us.

Rush Rhees remarks at one point:

> I am inclined to say…that although reasons for and against enter in, and although they may be what cause a serious perplexity, nevertheless it is often not by a consideration of reasons that I do reach my decision. This at any rate is what I have had in mind in saying 'I came to know something about myself'.[10]

Consider Sue Bridehead again. What can she come to know about herself? Thus far, what I have said would suggest that she would come to learn how things stand for her and something more about the horizon within which she sees the world. However, I have already remarked that it is possible for someone to see their situation quite clearly and still be confused as to what they ought to do. The problem is mine, inasmuch as how I see it is expressive of who I am and it is I who must decide what to do. I have also suggested that it is ultimately not by a consideration of reasons alone that Sue resolves her dilemma, for they conflict with one another without any taking precedence. Furthermore, I have claimed that how we act is expressive of who we are and draws on who we are since we are in part constituted by our values. All these considerations taken together in fact risk denying the possibility of dilemma, for it would seem that always immanent within us is the well-spring of values from which we shall draw to resolve any situation. And yet, while she is clear on what she thinks of her situation and the values that give it the bite it has, Sue agonises over what she must do. The situation is wholly new for her.

[10] Rhees 1953a: 85

That the situation is entirely new is important here. To begin with, it is important because of what I suggested earlier about reasons and values: namely that they cannot be taken in isolation but are to be made sense of in the context of someone's life. If values are constitutive of who I am, then it is important to see that who I am is made rich and lifelike by how they are interwoven to form the whole cloth which is me – no matter how weather-beaten, torn and frayed. Values therefore do not remain static, just as I do not. What's more, there are at least three ways they and I can change.

Firstly, Sue may never have considered what she should do if faced by a conflict between love and marriage. She may be struck by features of the situation that had never occurred to her when imagining it. Working through the problem would then result in a reorganisation of her values; the relation between her values would change and, as a result of her thinking, the values themselves would be modified. Thinking more about her marriage and her love, she might conclude that love is too ephemeral and uncertain compared to the obligations she has to Phillotson, for whom she also has such a high regard. It would then be out of her values that she resolves the situation – however it would be on the basis of reasons. What Sue comes to know about herself is what emerges from her deliberative activity.

Alternatively and secondly, Sue may suddenly hit upon what she ought to do, finding in the moment of her distress how things stand for her. She may find she gives more weight to love than marriage, and leave Phillotson for Jude. What she would find then is a kind of narrative aspect to herself. She may talk later about how she had never considered what she might do in such a situation and, being in it, found that love really was more important to her and it seemed truer to herself as well as to her husband that she leave him for love. What she comes to know about herself is what she discovers in the process of deciding; having drawn out the central place love has for her, she comes to know that she gives love more weight in these situations. In recounting her story, there will most likely be a pressure toward suggesting that what she came to know was something that was true of her all along, but had remained dormant until the situation arose that demanded its expression. If she has changed, then it is as a result of the reflective attention brought to this aspect of herself. Reflective awareness of an aspect of oneself alters that aspect; the place it has in my

life is altered, as are the possibilities for my drawing on it. Her narrative smoothes any discontinuity and represents this priority of love as having been present, though latent, all along.

Thirdly and finally, the response to the situation may be one that involves a greater breach with what came before it. It may be that the force of the different elements remains the same and that the situation as a whole becomes recast in the light of the choice that Sue makes. Not until the moment that she chooses is she sure what she ought to do, and it is only in that moment that she finally becomes aware of it. Sue's understanding may be transfigured by the situation; it would not only be the case that there were features that she did not think would be present in such a situation, her moral understanding has been changed by it. For circumstance can be the catalyst or site of radical change. What I come to know in such a circumstance is how things now stand for me. Such a knowing might seem like an epiphany – it is also a forging of myself.

There is nothing final about this list. Sue may never be certain she made the right choice. She may even come to regret her choice. This in turn will no doubt develop her view of these issues. In the next half of this chapter, we shall see that the possibility of changing our understanding has implications for what follows from my placement of the agent at the centre of ethics. The three examples of change I have just given draw in different ways on who I am before the decision. That people can change in their outlook is hardly controversial. However, given my contention that people can only act for reasons which are their own, it might seem unclear what the scope for such change might be. More importantly, it raises the question of when we might want to say that it is not enough for someone to act from the reasons they recognise – what about when someone ought to act from reasons they apparently do not recognise as applying to them? This is an issue covered extensively in the debate springing from Bernard Williams' paper, 'Internal and External Reasons.'[11]

What I have argued so far will seem akin to Williams' argument for the primacy of internal reasons. That is, it may look as if I also believe that the only reasons available to an agent are those that connect directly with the set of their subjective motivations or interests. In what follows, I argue that this in fact does not follow

[11] Williams 1980

from what I have argued. I do so by showing problems in Williams' own thesis and showing how change which takes the form outlined in the third of the examples draws on more than the agent's existing motivations. While I share Williams' concern to make ethics responsive to individuals, understood as having limitations, Williams narrows too quickly the scope of considerations available to agents.

**Williams on Internal Reasons**

In his paper 'Internal and External Reasons' Williams argues that an agent can only act for reasons which connect to the set of motivations she has. The thesis is intended not only to describe how reasons feature in explanations of actions but also to give a role to rationality in relating reasons to actions. Of more importance is the second part of his paper where he denies the possibility of what he calls external reasons – reasons which do not connect to any desires in the agent's set of motivations.

The first half of Williams' paper is an exploration of the internal reasons account, identifying along the way four key propositions regarding internal reasons statements. It begins with a summary of the internal reasons model: 'A has reason to φ iff A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his φ-ing.'[12] The first thing to note is that 'desire' is a term of art here, since it can include a range of things, such as, '…dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects…embodying commitments of the agent.'[13] Nor is there reason to think that, just because these reasons are 'internal' to the agent, they must therefore be egoistic. If the agent has no appropriate desire, then the internal reason statement, 'A has reason to φ', is falsified.

Of course there is a range of cases where an agent may feel himself to have a reason to φ, and yet we would want to say he does not, or vice versa – for instance, cases of false belief. Williams gives the example of a person thinking they have a reason to drink petrol, falsely believing it to be gin. He writes that we should not think of the person as having a reason to drink the petrol, because he in fact has no desire to do so: his desire to drink the liquid is based on a false belief – his desire to drink some gin or quench his thirst will not be met by his drinking this liquid. In addition to their role in explaining action, internal reasons will also have to do with an agent's

[12] Williams 1980: 101
[13] Williams 1980: 105

rationality (or lack of it). So, false belief about a desire ('I feel like drinking this gin') will falsify an internal reason statement, as will a false belief about the relation of an action to the satisfaction of a desire ('drinking this liquid will quench my thirst'). A natural extension of this is that someone can be ignorant of, or falsely believe, an internal reason statement about themself.[14]

The issue of rationality recurs at a more important level. For instance, a desire may be unknown to an agent because it is unconscious. However, on Williams' account, though such a desire may explain an action, it will not provide a reason for action inasmuch as it is not *rationally* related. A member of the agent's 'subjective motivational set' provides a reason to φ 'only if φ-ing is rationally related to [that desire]'.[15] That is, 'internal reason statements can be discovered in deliberative reasoning.'[16] Williams is careful to note that deliberative reasoning need not take the form only of causal means to end reasoning – finding that water will quench a thirst, for example. Indeed, he observes that such a discovery is not a piece of practical reasoning. Instead, deliberative reasoning can be used to work out what course of action would be the most 'convenient, economical or pleasant' way to satisfy some desire. Practical deliberation can also include such things as: thinking about ways of combining desires (for instance by time-ordering them); considering which desire carries the most weight if a number are irresolvably conflicting; or finding constitutive solutions – given I want to be entertained, what sort of entertainment shall I pursue?[17] I shall return to the issue of the forms of practical reason in a moment, because it plays a central role in what Williams takes to be the problem with adducing external reasons. However, to understand this, we must first look at what Williams takes an external reasons statement to be.

What of the occasions when we want to say that someone *really* does have a reason, even though they do not recognise it? Williams contends that the italics do too much work in such cases; usually when people contend that someone really does have a reason though the person in question may lucidly deny it, they are using reasons in the 'external' sense. 'The whole point of external reason statements is that they can

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[14] Williams 1980: 103
[15] Williams 1980: 103
[16] Williams 1980: 104
[17] Williams 1980: 104. For more on the kind of deliberation available to an internal reasons theorist, see Williams 1996, esp. pp 110-1.

be true independently of the agent's motivations.'[18] For an external reason statement to be true, there must be a reason for a particular agent to φ, even though they lack any motive which will be furthered by φ-ing. On the axis of explanation, external reasons must fail: only something which motivates an agent to act can motivate the agent, and the external reason clearly does not do this. Nor does the agent have the appropriate beliefs to connect the external reason to an action – if she believes the external reason statement was a reason to act, the reason statement would be true internally rather than externally.

External reasons being unable to explain action, Williams turns to look at how one might come to believe an external reason – how it can be transformed from being an external to an internal reason. Controversially, he contends that the external reasons theorist will only be satisfied if the agent comes to believe the external reason by the right means – not only should the agent come to acquire the appropriate motivation, but do so because she is considering the matter aright.[19] Williams continues, that the way the external theorist will require the agent to come to form the belief is through correct deliberation. However, as he points out, there is no element in the agent's motivations from which to deliberate, and so any deliberation will be a non-starter. If there were a motivation from which the agent could deliberate and acquire the proper motivation, then the acquired motivation would already have been an internal reason.

**Internal Reasons & Open Reasons**

How does Williams' argument bear on what I have been writing? I shall begin by looking at the three possible ways I described through which Sue's values and self might change when she decided what she must do. The sort of account an internal reasons theorist might give of these examples will help clarify where we overlap as well as serving as a useful springboard for disagreement. The first example suggested that Sue became aware of features she had not considered before when she found herself in this new situation. Deliberating with these hitherto unnoticed features in mind, Sue is now able to decide what she ought do. This description of decision-making fits straightforwardly into Williams' internal reasons account: facts about the

[18] Williams 1980: 107
[19] Williams 1980: 108-9

situation have been made clear to Sue and she is able supplement these by drawing on existing motivations in her deliberation.

In the second case, I described Sue as discovering what she ought to do in the moment she chose – finding how things stand for her in the moment of crisis. In this example I emphasised how narrative would feature in how she might make sense of her decision-making. It would be common for such a person to say that they drew on who they were, but that this was only found in the moment of decision. Having to make the decision had clarified things for her, however this was not by bringing to light features of the situation hitherto unrecognised, but simply by demonstrating to her the centrality of some value or feature of her life. The narrative she gives confers on her a continuity that would not otherwise be possible if we saw the change as gestalt. This is an example of the way in which narrative can operate to construct who we are, and can unify a life which inevitably involves change – an issue that will be explored in more detail in a later chapter. For this example, what is worth attending to is the way in which the narrative Sue might adopt would suggest that she was acting on the basis of reasons which connect with her existing motivations. Even though her self-understanding is changed by the decision – and her 'motivational set' no doubt has been as well – this transformation can still be seen as emerging from her existing motivations.

The third case – in which Sue finds what to do in the act of choosing – may be seen as a particular understanding of the second. That is, Sue's decision is also a discovery, because she only learns what she ought to do at the moment she does it. After making the decision she has discovered something about herself – namely, how the various reasons for acting weigh with her. The case can be seen as fitting an internal reasons model so long as we understand Sue to be acting from reasons which pre-existed her decision, even though their relative importance for her had previously been unknown. On this reading, the third case simply moves the operation of reasons back a further step: instead of the matter becoming clear to her in the moment before making the decision, it becomes clear in the act of making it. The experience may be transformative of Sue since it may lead to a change in her self-understanding, with this change rippling to affect her outlook on much of life. However, the transformation need not be radical.

On the other hand, the second case suggests another possibility. What if Sue's interpretive outlook changed because of her experience of the situation? No longer was it a matter of simply becoming clearer about the facts at hand, of what they meant to her. The situation itself shook her into a new recognition. Something like this seems to occur near the end of the book when, after Jude's child murders his half-siblings, she recants on all the liberal ideals she had been developing and collapses into a life of pious conformity. Her outlook on the world is radically changed: suddenly she comes to look at her tragedy as proper punishment for her hubris and wickedness: to lead a life of sin is already wrong, smugly believing one can be happy and successful leading such a life only invited destruction.

How does this impact on the internal reasons perspective? The first thing to note is that Sue has come to this new outlook (and consequently, to have a new set of reasons and motivations), not through deliberation, but through experience. As we shall see in a moment, one might see it as akin to conversion. It seems reasonable to say that prior to her tragedy there was no way of bringing Sue around to the idea that her relationship and life with Jude was sinful or wrong. Sue was clear, the trouble lay with society's expectations, and this conclusion was based on very careful deliberation. It was not that Sue was making bad inferences, it was that counter-arguments no longer held any weight with her – the considerations on which such arguments would be based no longer moved her at all. However, part of Sue's remorse and repentance involves a recognition that she was wrong all along: she had every opportunity to lead a 'proper' life and saw all the reasons given for it, it is just that she rejected them all. She could have done otherwise, and she has come to think she ought to have. The case with Sue is more complex again, and I shall return to this later. However, halting her story at this point, a few issues are already beginning to emerge: what alternatives to rational deliberation are there? What sort of legitimacy might these have? What does this mean for the internal reasons theorist?

McDowell forcefully argues that Williams is wrong when he contends that the external reasons theorist requires that an agent come to see matters aright *for the right reason*. On Williams' account all that is needed for a theorist to get external reasons off the ground is that they show that that the (external) reason was true throughout the transition from the agent not being motivated by the reason, to their

being motivated by it. Contrary to Williams' assertion, this leaves open the question of how the agent comes to be so motivated; certainly there is no requirement that it must be through correct deliberation.[20] There are other ways that the transition to seeing the matter aright can be effected. McDowell gives the example of a roughly Aristotelian upbringing, in which proper behaviour is habituated, as is the appropriate outlook for thinking about life. It is through such an upbringing that a person may come to see things aright, yet the process of being so brought up is not one of coming to see reasons through rational deliberation. Another example is conversion. Williams only mentions this in passing, though he must think it is not a way of coming to hold a reason which an external reasons theorist could accept.[21]

These arguments against Williams' rejection of external reasons are targeted at the place he gives to correct deliberation. That is, it is not through deliberation alone that we can come to see ourselves as having a reason for performing some action. Importantly what these arguments are trying to show is that the agent had this reason all along - not only is Williams' account of how we may acquire a reason too narrow, we can at times say that the agent had this (newly recognised) reason all along. These claims depend upon what agents themselves would say about their reasons – that is, it would depend upon the narrative they would give to their transition. This becomes clearer in the example of Archie 'the insensitive' given by Millgram.[22]

Archie is a man terribly lacking in sensitivity. The lack blights much of his life, since he finds it difficult to make friends and is not often invited out to social events. While he cannot diagnose the problem, Archie is aware his life could be better. There would be rewards to becoming sensitive which Archie is presently incapable of appreciating, such as the joy of developing trust in friendships. There is nothing present in Archie's motivational set that might provide him with a motive to become more sensitive, nor from which he could deliberate to see its worth. Why might we say that Archie has a reason to become more sensitive? '[W]ere he to experience them, he himself would acknowledge the extent to which his life had improved. It is natural to say that Archie has reasons to change his ways, reasons which are not grounded in elements of his [subjective motivational set] and are consequently

[20] McDowell 1995: 71-3
[21] It is clearly not a way which an internal reasons theorist can recognise, with some forms of rhetorical persuasion counting as conversion or coercion (Williams 1996: 115-8
[22] Millgram 1996: 203-4. 'The insensitive' is my own moniker.

external reasons.'[23] It only seems natural to suggest this because we imagine that Archie himself would say it *if* he were more sensitive. That is, what carries the weight here is the role that Archie's testimony would play; his testimony in this instance is what he would say of his own life – that is, how he would narrate it. If, after a conversion or habituation, we are going to claim that a person had the reasons all along which they have only recently begun to recognise, then it is only going to be because of the narrative in which they understand their life. Of course, the narrative is one which is constructed on the basis of experience. While narrative plays a vital role, this is only because narrative is the medium in which experience is interpreted and given its significance in a life – that is, narrative is the medium in which we develop our self-understanding.

Millgram's own point is an important one and it connects back to our interpretive agency as it plays out in narrative. The point for Millgram is that hitherto unrecognised reasons for action can be discovered through experience (just as for Sue above).[24] To illustrate the point, Millgram makes an analogy between reasons for belief and reasons for action. In the case of reasons for belief, it is clear that we do not always come to new beliefs through deliberation alone, we can arrive at them through experience: just by the experience of *seeing* something we can change our beliefs about it. Similarly for reasons for action: we can find new reasons simply through experience.[25] We can discover new reasons through experience, and in narrative demonstrate that these reasons were available all along. Millgram continues that part of the power of experience is that it can be transformative of understanding in a richer sense – and it need not have the 'bolt-from-the-blue quality' of many conversion stories, nor depend on something as momentous as what befalls Sue. Conversion sits on a continuum – it can be abrupt and radical, like Paul on the road to Damascus, however it can take smaller and more mundane forms.[26] In experience we do not necessarily discover new elements of our motivational set, or new facts which can be fed into our deliberation. Instead, experience can transform our understanding of something inasmuch as we can often only learn what something is like by living through it. What's more, transformative experiences need not be like

[23] Millgram 1996: 204
[24] Millgram 1996: 206
[25] Millgram 1996: §§2,3, and pp. 206-7
[26] Cordner 2001: 556

bolts from the blue. If we are interpretive agents and interpretation runs deep in our experience, then it can come as no surprise that our outlook can be transformed by experience. This clearly also connects with the role of narrative in self-understanding and therefore of our outlook. I shall return to this in a later chapter.

I have begun with the end of Millgram's argument concerning Archie, for more is involved in the argument than the fact that Millgram thinks that an agent's testimony would demonstrate there had all along been reasons for changing. Millgram's argument involves not only the attempt to show that on Williams' terms there are external reasons, but that for Archie's condition Williams' account is left with nowhere else to go. I shall outline how Millgram's argument proceeds and then move to explore its ramifications.

Millgram describes Archie as extremely insensitive, such that his insensitivity blights his life to the extent that he can recognise he is worse off than he might be, but cannot recognise the role his insensitivity plays. Millgram maintains Archie's insensitivity is a reason to act. For instance it gives Archie reason to keep away from people who are grieving since he only makes things worse. The problem is, Archie just does not see it. His very lack of sensitivity blinds him to its role in his life. Archie's situation is such that if he were to see his insensitivity as a reason to act, he would already be more sensitive. That is, there is no deliberative path which Archie might take to see his insensitivity as a reason for action. The path is blocked because Archie's insensitivity means he has nowhere from which to deliberate; if he did see his insensitivity as a reason to act, 'he would *ipso facto* be sensitive enough not to have these reasons.'[27] Millgram's point is twofold: if Archie's insensitivity is a reason for action, as already mentioned, it is a reason which cannot be arrived at through rational deliberation. Furthermore, if it is a reason, it is one which cannot explain an action because it is a reason only when it is unavailable to the agent.

This last point is interesting. My account differs from Williams' because I do not restrict how we might come to acknowledge a reason for action, even though we converge in arguing the individual agent limits what can be said about deliberation in ethics. The case of Archie has to do with when we would want to say of someone that they have a reason to act even when they themselves do not recognise it. The

[27] Millgram 1996: 203

point with Archie is that he is currently in no position to be brought to see his insensitivity as a reason. It is something that will, it seems, never weigh with him. This opens a distance from the agent which allows for criticism of the agent – that someone does something because alternatives could gain no traction with them does not foreclose the possibility of critical comment, on Millgram's reading. On the other hand, Williams is quite clear, '…that it is precisely people who are regarded as lacking any general disposition to respect the reactions of others that we cease to blame.'[28] Here he is clearly talking of people who are pathological in their indifference. While it is important to retain a critical distance from a person, their outlook and actions, Williams is right to temper our assessment of a situation with an understanding of who is involved in it. How we hold Archie responsible for his actions will depend on how we describe his condition in the first place. The point remains, who the person is should feature in our judgement of what has occurred. This ought to be the case not only for the pathological, but also result from a recognition of the kinds of differences there are between people. It is this recognition of the depth of people's differences, resulting from our interpretive agency, which motivates the pluralism which I describe in the course of this thesis. Leaving room for *Kritik* will be an ever present concern, though only dealt with in detail in the last chapter. The subtle role of practical reason in how we think about reasons and ethics comes into view in the course of Millgram's and Korsgaard's analyses of Williams' position.

Millgram concludes that the example of Archie may not, in the end, entirely refute internalism, because this type of counter-example can be disregarded by an internalist if it is conjoined with an instrumentalist model of practical reason.[29] An instrumentalist model of practical reason on this reading is one in which a reason's force is to be made out *only* in terms of satisfaction of elements of an agent's subjective motivational set (noting that the varieties of deliberation Williams provides (listed above) are instrumentalist in character).[30] Instrumentalism breaks the analogy between reasons for belief and reasons for action because, 'If truth is the formal object of belief,…there is no real analogue of truth in the practical domain.'[31]

[28] Williams 1989: 43
[29] Millgram 1996: §5
[30] Millgram 1996: 209-10
[31] Millgram 1996: 212

Belief is controlled by elements which are external to it. However, on Williams' account there is nothing else about which an agent can be mistaken, if he is not factually mistaken in the ways Williams specifies (that is, not suffering from false belief or a misunderstanding about the relation between various elements of his subjective motivational set).

This seems akin to Korsgaard's point that the kind of motivational analysis Williams provides already depends upon his view of practical reason. Beginning with Hume's means/end conception of practical reason, she gives the example of someone choosing between a greater and a lesser good. On Hume's account, reason cannot control the passions and so rationality remains relative to what a person cares about. So choosing the greater or the lesser good only provides evidence for what the person cares about; there is no scope for charging the person with irrationality. However, Korsgaard observes that any number of things can intervene and cause us to be unresponsive to rational considerations (e.g. rage, grief and distraction). This being the case, there may be alternative readings of the person's choice, '…whether you accept [the Humean reading] depends on whether you *already* accept the limitation to means/end rationality….The point is that the motivational analysis of the case *depends* upon your views of the content of rational principles of action, not the reverse.'[32]

In a similar vein, Korsgaard argues that Williams' 'motivational scepticism' is parasitic on an unacknowledged 'content scepticism', even though it is not means/end. That is, instead of limiting what might count as a practical reason, Williams' argument that something only counts as a reason if it is properly related to an agent's existing motivations in fact stems from a prior scepticism as to whether there are unconditional principles of reason.[33] Korsgaard thinks that such unconditional principles of reason do in fact exist. Williams more or less concedes Korsgaard's basic point about the thought guiding his scepticism, at the same time reaffirming that he doubts there are such principles, and observing that what needs to

[32] Korsgaard 1986: 16
[33] Korsgaard 1986: 23

be argued is that such requirements of reason really are part of everyone's motivational set.[34]

What seems to emerge from Korsgaard's and Millgram's analysis is that the conception of practical reason which guides Williams' argument is, to adapt Millgram's phrase, 'logically soft'.[35] That is, it might serve its purpose inasmuch as it shores up Williams' intellectual position, but at some cost. While Millgram's broader program remains unannounced in his paper, Korsgaard's is clear, and, as it is developed in *The Sources of Normativity*, it overlaps illuminatingly with my own.

What I have argued here has related primarily to Williams' foreclosure of important avenues to coming to see things aright which the agent themselves might subsequently endorse. There are therefore limits on any motivational scepticism such as Williams'. Korsgaard's argument shows her primary concern is with any 'content scepticism', since her own project is to explain the source of normativity in terms of practical reason. In Chapter 4, I shall explore her conception of practical reason in more detail, arguing, amongst other things, that she underestimates the depth of the interpretive element of agency – that situations must be taken up within an interpretive horizon and that reasons do not escape this horizon either.

What intrigues about Williams is his emphasis on individuals' character and horizon of action. It does not extend to seeing agents interpretively, however he is serious in seeing people's individuality as significant. In the first half of this chapter I argued for the need to see people's decisions in ethics as not only necessarily reflecting something about them, but that this is properly so. To this extent I share Williams' interest, however his argument for internalism comes at the cost of disregarding too much of what goes to make up our life in the first place – amongst other things, the transformations we can undergo as we gain in experience. I have only just begun to outline a variety of pluralism which emerges from a recognition of how a life in ethics takes shape interpretively. It shares with Williams an agent relativity. However, the issue of when we might say that someone has a reason to act which they do not recognise is an important one.

[34] Williams 1989: 37, see also ftn. 3
[35] Millgram 1996: 213

One of the reasons for this has to do with the validity of attributions of blame: if the person could have done the right thing, and there were good reasons at the time for doing so, then how should we hold them responsible for what they did do?[36] I have not dealt with blame here because it is something I would wish to downplay in connection with this debate. Williams is right to argue that varieties of external reasons theory can be moralistic, but this is a risk of moral judgement generally. Later, in Chapter 6, I look at the complexity of responsibility in more detail. For the moment, I would observe that the internal reasons debate might mislead into a dismal all-or-nothing apportioning of blame.

Could he or she have come to acknowledge the right reason for action? Why not? The state of Sue by the end of *Jude the Obscure* again illustrates the difficulty of seeing what reasons are available to people even before we make judgements about whether someone is to be held responsible for their action. Sue is now convinced she was wrong ever to have been with Jude. But we also have the clear sense that she has been so damaged by her trauma she is unable to recognise her deep attachment to him, let alone act in the light of it. Would we want to say she has a reason to be with Jude after all? Would we want to rule out a personal healing in which she is able to do so? Should we view any of her future behaviour against this possibility? (Obviously it is not reason to see her with Jude again now.) There are too many cross-currents to get a proper grasp on the issue of blame, and it is only at its extremes that the internal reasons debate will have much to contribute to it.

People's limitations are varied, some for the better, and some for the worse. In connection with this, in the next chapter I shall look at another strand of Williams' project to make morality responsive to individuals.

[36] See for instance, Williams 1989; Skorupski Forthcoming

# 2. Reaching my Limit

In the context of my argument, Williams' work is of interest for the way he too argues for an understanding of the relationship between individuality and morality, albeit from a quite different perspective. In this connection, I will consider two ideas in Williams' work on this theme: moral necessity and the demands 'impartial morality' can reasonably make on us. By arguing as he does on these topics, Williams contends that who the person is can play a role in two interesting ways. Firstly, it can determine what is morally necessary or impossible for them – moral necessity; secondly, it also sets limits on what can be demanded of someone by 'impartial morality' and hence by third parties. I begin my exploration of these issues by looking more closely at what Rhees and Winch might mean when they write that when I decide what I ought to do in a dilemma I am also discovering something about myself. They assert that what I discover is what is morally possible for me in this situation and in doing so introduce the concept of moral necessity, which Williams explores in more detail. After summarising some of Williams' writing on the subject, I turn to look at the space which remains for criticising someone who we might say acts from necessity. Drawing on Cordner, and noting the role of narrative in self-understanding, I argue that the idea of moral necessity is more provisional and precarious than is commonly recognised since recanting later can not only show I am no longer under moral necessity, but that I never was.

In the final section of the chapter, I turn to look at Williams' argument that 'impartial morality' can make unreasonable demands on us. I argue that Williams mischaracterises the nature of morality when he sees its impartiality as being entirely divorced from the person's interests. That a person sees herself as conflicted because of morality's demands already shows that calling morality impartial does not mean it is thin or empty for us. What's more – and surprisingly – Williams' argument appears to be an attempt to preserve the good ordering of the world: seeming to assume that a moral life could not also be one which is blighted. In response to this implicit strand of Williams' argument, I return briefly to Winch and the revealing

limit he reaches when suggesting why it is not straightforwardly false to think the good man cannot be harmed.

## On necessity

### *Decision & Discovery*

In the previous chapter, drawing on Rhees, I emphasised the personal aspect of moral decision-making. It is finally me who must decide what I ought to do, and I will have decided on the basis of reasons which are my own. My reasons are my own because they reflect how the world stands for me. The circumstances in which I find myself are not simply given, they are not brute facts upon which everyone would agree. My situation has meaning within a particular horizon. It is not the circumstances alone that make a situation, because how I stand with regard to them brings into play who I am in the matter: 'what presents the difficulty is not "the situation" – and anything baffling there may be in that – it is yourself.'[37] This gives an explicitly personal edge to all moral situations and means that when I decide what I ought to do in a dilemma, I am also discovering something about myself. This was only touched on very briefly in the last chapter, I shall first look at what I am deciding.

What am I deciding? In the first instance I am deciding what I ought to do. Interestingly, I am not only deciding what I ought to do, I am deciding something about myself. However, this 'decision' is not conscious – it is a corollary of the decision I am attending to, 'what ought I do?'[38] In situations of moral conflict such as that of Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* or Captain Vere in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, the reasons for action are evenly poised. What breaks the tie is me: I must decide what I ought to do, and in deciding what I ought to do I discover how things weigh with me. I therefore also indirectly decide how things weigh with me. To the extent that my values constitute my identity (and hence who I am), in deciding how things will stand for me I am deciding something about myself. It is important to be clear at this point that this does not mean I have to hold myself before my mind's eye and contemplate how I shall make myself. I neither contemplate nor shape myself like a sculptor might shape unformed clay. In general, the focus of my concern is the

[37] Rhees 1953a: 78

[38] Unfortunately, the limitations of language hamper the point I am trying to make here. It is easy to err in suggesting the 'deciding' is more conscious and active than it is, or by suggesting it is passive. Much like 'waking', I am not actively doing it, but nor is it a process in which I am simply passive.

situation and the significance of the alternatives I am choosing between. In general, if I am deciding something about myself, this is only indirectly, since the intentional object of my decision will not normally be my self. This is especially so when we consider that moral considerations are in general other centred.

There are obviously possibilities for my self to enter explicitly into my decision-making. Often they are shallow, revealing that I have lost sight of what is at stake for others and have become too self-regarding or narcissistic. Sometimes they can be more enlightening, bringing about a clearer understanding of the significance of my actions. In some situations I may reflect upon the kind of person who would do *x*, and this in at least two ways. Firstly, I may learn from another's character, for instance noticing that my role-model or someone I admire would not do what I am contemplating – to do so would be to fall away from their example. An alternative possibility is provided by Gaita when he gives the example of a man who contemplates murdering his lover's husband so he can be with her and have the husband out of the way. Gaita observes that the man gets more than he bargains for: he not only gets his lover to himself, he gets himself as a murderer as well. 'He can live with her as though her husband were merely "out of the way" only if he plunges into a life of radical self-deception, but short of abandoning himself to the evil that will spread through his life, no degree of self-deception could hide his murderous self from him.'[39] These examples show on the one hand there is a variety of possibilities for the self to enter deliberation. However, what is worth noting is their peculiarity and that they fall a long way short of being characteristic of all moral deliberation.

A more subtle variant on the last example is Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*. Sue understands what is at stake in her situation - this is why she finds it so difficult. Interestingly, she often curses herself, worrying for Jude and Phillotson, since she feels that her being in the predicament she is reveals what a terrible woman she must be. Her situation is not unconnected with who she is. What she has done reveals something about herself. Clearly therefore, what she does in the future will also shape and reveal more things about her. Sue may well be aware of this, however she

[39] Gaita 2004: 233. Gaita in fact provides this as an example of a defence of the Socratic thought that if we know what evil is then we cannot do it – a thought Gaita in fact suspects is not true (Gaita 2004: 231).

is obviously not deciding which of the alternatives would result in the 'best Sue'; she is focussed on the problem at hand: on Jude, on Phillotson and how her relationships with them both leave her conflicted. Her decision will have implications for her later self-understanding, particularly for what she can honestly say about herself. However, this is not a consideration for her since it is entirely parasitic on her making the right decision in the first place. She might curse herself later and call herself an adulterer, or a woman who could not sacrifice for love, or any of a myriad of other possibilities. However, these are only matters for concern if she gets things wrong now, and if she gets things wrong, as she sees it, their wrongness is in virtue of considerations quite other than who she is.

These last two examples provide an intriguing mix of narrative self-understanding, self constitution and the role of the self in deliberation, which presages some of what I will discuss in later chapters. What all the examples show is how, in some situations, when I decide what I ought to do, I am also deciding something about myself. The last is, in fact, the most conventional, since the deliberation does not actually involve considerations of who Sue is and who she will become in the future, though what she decides clearly has implications for her self-understanding.

So, in a situation of moral conflict when I decide what I ought to do, I also decide something about myself. This decision is at the same time a discovery. It is a discovery because in the end the reasons bottom out and, in deciding what I ought to do, I discover how things stand for me. The reasons 'bottom out' because there is a point at which there are no further reasons to adduce. There are a number of actions I can choose, and each is an option on the basis of valid reasons. The problem is that the reasons conflict with one another, or at least the actions for which they are reasons are in the present circumstances incompatible. Sue cannot stay with Phillotson and go to Jude; Vere cannot hang Budd and spare the man innocent before God. Winch observes well that the situation can be perfectly clear to Vere and to Winch, and both can agree on all the reasons for and against the different course of action available. In the final analysis, however, their different reactions simply show that the reasons weighed differently with them both in that situation: for Vere, upholding martial law was more important than hanging a man innocent before God;

for Winch, it was the other way around.[40] Each has therefore discovered something about themselves.

However, Winch and Rhees do not believe the agent finds out only what has weighed more with them, they believe the agent has discovered what was morally possible for them in that situation.[41] 'She is deciding that the one course of action is the only thing she can do.'[42] Rhees arrives at this point by observing that Sue's decision to go one way is not simply a preference. 'No, the other way is not all right also, if this is the way she *can* go… If she is deciding *something about* the alternatives, it is not deciding something independent of herself.'[43] He also emphasises that this is the only thing she can do *in the circumstances*.[44] This is important, because, as was noted in the last chapter and will be explored later in more detail, the circumstances have their own history, closely connected to the agent's own – something Rhees himself observes.[45] The situation is not simply given, as if it has appeared from nowhere, but connects to a larger story – the story the agent brings to it. Its place connects with the larger narrative of a life. The circumstances gain their particularity from this fact, that they are embedded in a pre-existing web of meaning.

*Necessity*

With the assertion that the agent finds what is morally possible for them, Rhees and Winch have taken on the language of necessity. I shall now turn to explore the concept of necessity in more detail. I shall focus on Williams' account before looking more critically at necessity in the next section. Read one way, Kant can be said to have argued for a kind of necessity in moral action: the categorical imperative having the force of necessity. However, Kant was arguing for an agent-neutral conception of necessity: the free will is bound to the categorical imperative because of the will's nature as a law-governed causality – albeit one which is governed by the laws it gives itself. The Categorical Imperative (and therefore the obligations which emanate from it) tumbles out of the requirements of practical reason, which in their turn hold independent of who the agent is. Kant's conception of necessity in moral

[40] Winch 1965: 163
[41] Winch 1965: 163; Rhees 1953a: 80.
[42] Rhees 1953b: 73
[43] Rhees 1953b: 73
[44] Rhees 1953b: 73-4
[45] Rhees 1953a: 81

life is therefore quite unlike Rhees', Winch's and, as we will shortly see, Williams', all of whom argue for a conception of moral necessity which reflects the individuality of the agent. In the circumstances in which Rhees and Winch hold that moral necessity applies, it is who the person is which finally decides what must be done, not agent-neutral practical reason.

For Williams, necessity can be located in character if not explained by it.[46] Williams focuses his attention on necessity in two articles with slightly different emphases, 'Practical Necessity' and 'Moral Incapacity'. In his analysis he observes that how we arrive at a necessity can be instructive. I may find what is morally possible for me negatively when I think it impossible for me to do something – anything else is possible, just not this action. Alternatively, I may arrive at a positive necessity when I find that there is only one thing I must do, and the alternatives are thereby excluded.[47]

However it is arrived at, Williams' conception of the reality and nature of practical and moral necessity is demanding: *must* means must and *cannot* means cannot. 'Must' is not just decisiveness or certainty. As the cases of Sue and Vere show, it may only be after an anxious or uncertain deliberation that I find what I must do. Indeed, in his analysis, Williams closely connects necessity to deliberation. Necessity shows itself in an entwinement of character and deliberation. Identity (or, in Williams' terms, character) is revealed not only in what I do, but also the terms in which I see things. Not only does my deliberation and my action reveal something about me, but the horizon within which that deliberation takes place does so too.

At this point it is worth noting that Williams is concerned with a particular kind of limit in his papers 'Practical Necessity' and 'Moral Incapacity'.[48] He is not concerned with the kind of incapacity which simply reflects the way of life the agent inhabits. In the previous chapter I emphasised the interpretive dimension of agency, in which the metaphor of an horizon of meaning reflects the finitude of our thinking as well as the indeterminacy of its limits. My character is revealed by the decisions I

[46] Williams 1993a: 47
[47] Williams 1981: 127
[48] As the title suggests, he explores necessity further in *Shame & Necessity*, however his discussion there is obliquely related to these two papers. His most concentrated analysis of it in *Shame & Necessity* concerns shame and later 'supernatural necessity' – the latter as a vehicle for looking at present day understandings of autonomy and agency.

make within the broader limits of my horizon of meaning. This outlook circumscribes how I can see things. It means that some ideas are ruled out even before they can be entertained; they quite literally would never enter my head. Colonial histories are filled with moments when one side finds the other's outlook incomprehensible – for instance, it would not have occurred to a British settler to treat the land as an Aborigine did. If the settler were to think about issues of land at all, they would never have included the kinds of considerations an Aborigine might bring to it. My outlook will constitute who I am.[49] Who I am therefore limits what will occur to me and thereby what I can do. However, it is not this kind of limit which interests Williams.

Williams is interested in the kind of necessity or incapacity which presents itself in deliberation.[50] However, these limits also make me who I am. As Williams writes, 'Incapacities can not only set limits to character and provide conditions of it, but can also partly constitute its substance.'[51] Practical necessities are distinguished from moral necessities by Williams in terms of how they feature in deliberation. My vertigo is a practical incapacity. It means that I will choose to travel an extra day to find a ford where I can cross a river, rather than use a rope bridge over a deep ravine. I cannot cross the bridge, and so I must find another way. My vertigo – my incapacity – is a feature in my deliberation, it 'cuts it short' and means I must find some other way across. However, in the case of moral necessity, the necessity does not feature in the deliberation, it is the conclusion of my deliberation. It is only at the conclusion of my deliberation that I cannot do this thing, or must do something else. The reasons are the same, whether I conclude I *ought* to X or *must* do so, for instance 'it would be disloyal' or 'it would be cruel'. What is different is the conclusion drawn from those reasons: instead of the familiar obligation of 'ought' we have a personal necessity. In the case of moral necessity the reason is 'totally decisive'.[52] It is only in thinking about the matter that Winch finds he could not hang a man innocent before God; Sue finds she cannot live in sin with Jude any longer. 'In the cases of moral incapacity, my deliberative conclusion not to do the act, reached on the basis of these totally decisive considerations, just is the conclusion that I cannot

[49] See also Winch 1968: 178.
[50] Williams 1993a: 46-7
[51] Williams 1981: 130
[52] Williams 1993a: 51

do it.'[53] Whereas my vertigo features in deliberation as a stumbling block, making me think of some other way across the river, moral necessity can be discovered deliberatively in the thought that 'I cannot do X because it would be cruel.' I identify with a moral incapacity in a way I do not with a practical one. I might try and overcome my vertigo, I will not try to free myself from an aversion to inflicting cruelty. If I do try to overcome a moral incapacity, this shows not only that I no longer identify with it, but that it is no longer a moral incapacity, 'but rather one that is merely psychological.'[54] In the case of moral necessity, then, identification is important. The agent must in some sense understand themselves in the light of the consideration that gives rise to the necessity, and this transforms the necessity from being merely psychological to being moral.

There is in fact a question as to what exactly Williams is wanting to show when he concludes that moral necessity emerges as the conclusion of deliberation. Is he suggesting that this is the only feature that distinguishes moral necessity from other kinds, or only that it is one amongst others? There is reason to think it is the latter. For one thing, the example he provides uses a thick vocabulary which is characteristic of moral concerns: 'disloyal, shabby'.[55] While the vocabulary may be bound up with a warped conception of what is most important in the person's life, it will still have to feature in the reason which is 'totally decisive', otherwise, if it just cuts thought short, it looks like a practical necessity. While erasing this ambiguity is not essential, it provides a useful background for my argument later, that the capacity for narratives to change (in particular for recantation) undermines the stronger claims made concerning necessity.

*Necessity and Criticism*

There are subtle differences in the accounts of necessity provided by Rhees, Winch and Williams. They may be the result simply of their different interests when they touch on the issue, or of deeper underlying philosophical commitments. The question of whether we can be mistaken in claiming necessity is such an issue. Later, we shall see that the question breaks down into two parts: can I be mistaken in believing that

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[53] Williams 1993a: 51. He does in fact explore the relation between necessity and identity in *Shame and Necessity*. Williams 1993b However, the way in which he does so runs at tangents to my concerns here.

[54] Williams 1993a: 54

[55] Williams 1993a: 50

this was the only thing I could do; and, when it is true that this is all I could do, can my action still be wrong?

While all three are concerned with placing the individual at the centre of moral decision-making, Rhees emphasises this strand most passionately. However, because the decision is somehow generated from within, or is distinctively the agent's own, Rhees struggles with the issue of what might constitute a mistake. When asking what I ought to do, the question demands that I make the right decision, and it therefore seems possible to make the wrong one. Ultimately, he concludes that, at least in the case he has described, the agent cannot be wrong. Somewhat cryptically, he writes:

> …that necessity, that 'it's being the only thing she can do',…is bound up with the way things have gone. Now, nothing else is possible…Can she be mistaken about that? I do not see that she can. That is the decision she reaches, that is all… [I]t makes no sense to ask whether she is mistaken. By which I do not mean that she is infallible or that she must be right. I just mean that the question has no sense here.[56]

Intriguingly, writing elsewhere around the same time, Rhees observes that the phenomenology of moral decision-making includes the sense that I can be mistaken in the matter, and furthermore, I may well come to feel that I did make a mistake.[57] The question of 'what ought I to do?' is so personal for Rhees, so bound up with who the person is and what is possible for them, that it is no longer clear how an agent can be mistaken in some situations. Yet the possibility of being wrong shadows moral deliberation, and it is always possible for the agent herself to believe she made a mistake. I shall look at this in more detail in a moment.

Whereas Rhees' thoughts are unfinished,[58] Winch's at least are located in a more systematic argument, albeit one which runs at tangents to my interest here. For Winch, necessity crops up almost as an aside in a broader argument intended to show that moral judgements are not always universalisable; that the rightness of a person's

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[56] Rhees 1953b: 74
[57] Rhees 1953a: 87 and Rhees 1953b: 73
[58] Provocative though they are, the works of Rhees I have used were published posthumously from his notes and letters.

action may be in virtue of who the person is, with the consequence that another may act differently and also be right. His argument is structured around rightness, and therefore so too is his brief analysis of necessity. The question is left open as to whether the idea of necessity can be applied to someone who acts wrongly. Winch describes three ways in which a person's claim to have acted rightly might be false.[59] Firstly, we may not believe the agent has concerned themselves with moral issues at all. If Vere's decision in favour of martial law is administrative rather than guided by moral concern, then its 'rightness' is questionable. Secondly, we might believe that while the person sincerely professes that their concern is moral, it may nevertheless be so far off beam that we cannot treat seriously the idea the person has acted rightly. Finally, the agent's later behaviour may belie their claim to have acted rightly – they may show the kind of remorse or torment which shows they do not think they acted rightly. The question is still left hanging as to whether, if the person acted wrongly, they can still claim they could not have done otherwise.

Williams leaves us in no doubt on this matter. Necessity is to be located in character, and consequently when it arises it may be admirable or demonstrate a failing.[60] What's more, I can be blamed for what I must or cannot do, since such actions are quintessential expressions of who I am and, as such, are my own as much as any action can be.[61] Williams is concerned with necessity in human affairs *per se*, and is not intending to suggest it is always good or bad. Reading his interest in necessity in the light of his other writings, it may be that what concerns him is the need for us to treat such necessity seriously because of the way it is bound to the individual. If moral life is going to be that of real humans, then it is important to understand features of it which express its being part of human life. This will mean treating limits seriously as people find them. Williams is being sympathetic to people in such a plight, and this sympathy is easily confused at times with an unstated endorsement of people who act from within their limits. However, locating necessity in people's character says nothing about the quality of that character or of the action, only that we must be sensitive to how the two can be entwined.

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[59] Winch 1965: 166-7
[60] Williams 1993a: 46
[61] Williams 1981: 130

Getting the right distance between the individual and their actions is difficult, as Wiggins observes when he criticises Winch for holding them too close together.[62] The project of making moral judgements and thought responsive to individuals cannot be allowed to slide into an uncritical endorsement of whatever an individual sincerely holds to be right. Williams is perhaps clearer about this than either Winch or Rhees – though Winch at least is cautious about extrapolating to all situations the insights he has adduced from cases of dilemma such as Vere's.[63] What necessity shows is the idiosyncratic force that some concerns can have in our life, concerns which may not be shared by others. While the concern might be intelligible to them, that it can hold this force in someone's life may not be.

Wiggins, along with Winch in his way, is concerned with judgements made in the third-person: Winch argues that on some occasions a person can be judged to have acted rightly just because of who they are while Wiggins distrusts such a close connection between a person and what is right for them. Cordner on the other hand approaches necessity, and Williams in particular, from a first-person perspective. I can change my opinion on matters and discover that what I took to be a moral limit was in fact no such thing, but was only a psychological limit.[64] Cordner gives a number of examples of people who recant an earlier position which would fit the description of moral necessity which Williams provides. Cordner contends that by recanting as they do, they show that an ethical limit was not in fact reached at the time. The most sustained example provided is that of Pik Botha, the former foreign minister of apartheid South Africa.[65] As foreign minister, Botha seemed to believe that administering the system of apartheid was something he had to do for moral reasons: black people were not the equal of whites. While blacks should not be mistreated, it was important not to demean whites by allowing blacks to associate equally with them. 'Justice required a social order which reflected the difference in moral status between blacks and whites, and apartheid sustained that order.'[66] On this description, Botha felt he had to do (many of) the things he did because 'human'

[62] Wiggins 1987: 173
[63] Winch 1965: 161
[64] Cordner 2001: 547-49
[65] Cordner 2001: 547. For the other examples see Cordner 2001: 549. Cordner notes that we can be certain about neither the thought underlying Botha's recantation nor its depth. All that matters for my purposes is that the example is plausible, whether or not it is historically accurate. This becomes more important as I build on the example later.
[66] Cordner 2001: 547

dignity required it. At the time this was a moral necessity: he had to enforce apartheid, since to do otherwise would be to debase whites. However, Botha later came to see that what he did was morally appalling and was only the expression of a racist arrogance. Being immoral, what he did was not the result of a moral necessity, but only expressed his own limitations. An ethical limit had not in fact been reached, only a psychological one.

Williams has addressed this in two ways. The first has already been mentioned – he might say that this was indeed a moral necessity of Botha's at the time, and remind us that he does not mean this to be an endorsement. Botha's was a moral necessity that was simply an expression of a perverted morality. The second is to observe that Botha has simply lost this necessity – that he worked to lose it shows he no longer had it. These responses are clearly not incompatible and both contend that losing the necessity or the world view which underwrote it does not demonstrate that it never applied. By contrast, Cordner is contending that the necessity may never have been moral, and this is because of what the agent himself says about it. Botha himself has come to see that he was labouring under a misapprehension – firstly with regard to his view of the blacks and whites, and secondly with regard to the point he had reached in his moral outlook. At the time he thought his actions were expressive of a genuine limit he had reached, one which can only be described as moral. In fact he had not reached a moral limit, only a psychological one. In this case the force of Cordner's argument at this point rests on us being able to see Botha's testimony as persuasive and authentic.

When exploring external reasons in the previous chapter, I introduced the thought that a person's narrative is the medium of a person's self-understanding. In the next chapter, I shall argue that it is constitutive of a person's identity – our identity is a narrative identity. Botha's change in perspective on apartheid and racial inequality has also transformed his understanding of his outlook at the time. He has not simply lost a necessity, he now doubts he ever really laboured under one. Certainly he was limited at the time, but his latter-day transformation only shows that this necessity was only ever apparent.

The first-person perspective transforms what can be said about his outlook at the time. We might think that Botha's later view of his earlier self could be treated the

same as a third-person observing his behaviour at the time. The third-person may view his conduct as that of someone finding what was morally necessary, albeit in the service of a corrupt morality. However, Botha's view of the matter is not in the third-person, it is his view of himself. If his recantation is genuine and he feels remorse for what he has done, having come to his new understanding he cannot think that his earlier view was indeed a necessity at all. He was wrong, albeit for psychologically understandable reasons. Of course, that does not mean that it would have been easy for him to have changed his mind at the time. The point is only that, like 'Archie the Insensitive' in the previous chapter, he would agree that there were reasons available to him at the time which he did not recognise and his racist arrogance had led him flatly to disregard. Acknowledging these reasons now, he cannot turn around and suggest that there was no way he could have recognised them. He now believes that blacks are not an inferior kind, and cannot seriously believe that they possessed this equality only from the day he himself came to believe in it. He had simply been wrong not to see this. What he comes to understand of himself later transforms who he was earlier. As mentioned, I will argue the role of narrative in our lives more extensively in a later chapter. What I have shown here (even if only provisionally) is that in this case it is a mistake to think that a moral necessity once applied and then did not. Recantation can show that there was never really any necessity.

In cases of practical necessity - which is more readily conceived of as straightforwardly psychological - can narrative play the same role? It seems unlikely that this argument applies to practical necessity as well as moral necessity. I will explore this only very briefly because it introduces questions of psychology which I am not in a position to address here. Moral necessity is interpretive in a way that practical necessity may not be, since the terms in which it is understood are constitutive of the necessity.[67] This is not to say other necessities are interpretation-independent, only that the interpretive saturates moral necessity in a way it does not practical necessity. 'I cannot do that because it would be cruel', or 'a betrayal' or 'cowardly' is different in this way from saying, 'I cannot do that because I would get vertigo' (though it is obviously true that there is a subjective element at play in what

[67] Although Williams himself is not clear if a moral necessity is also going to have to use a thick vocabulary. See my brief discussion of this above.

will count as ‘a great height’). Because of the deeply interpretive aspect to moral necessity, narrative can be critical (in the sense of *Kritik*) in a way that is not obviously the case for practical necessity. I may be critical of myself for being afraid of heights, but this is different from being able to engage in *Kritik* of my vertigo. In recanting, I come to see that the considerations underlying the necessity I discovered were not reasons at all, or there were other reasons which I failed to see. This is the transformative aspect I introduced earlier. However, in the case of vertigo, if I overcome it later in life I may come to see it as baseless, but I may have agreed that to be the case all along. Psychology enters into practical necessity in a brute fashion. Once I am cured, it would be absurd to say I never really suffered from vertigo. Psychological and ethical limits differ, as Cordner suggests.

The argument from narrative suggests that, just as narratives themselves are provisional, so are claims of moral necessity. However, this should not be taken to reduce their significance, let alone sincerity. While narratives are provisional and the arc of a life might turn us to recantation, they also register the reality of my situation. Even at the moment I give my opinion or carry out an action, I may see my perspective as provisional and be fully cognisant of the fact I may change my mind later. However, this is not always so, and even though our narrative is provisional because it expresses who I am at the same time as constituting me, its content will not always reflect this. If I am certain, so will be my language. If I cannot do anything else, then I will describe myself as being unable to do anything else.[68] As mentioned earlier, Williams is concerned about maintaining a focus on the implications for moral thought as it applies to human life.

However, Winch and Rhees treat necessity through the example of dilemmas which seem evenly poised until the agent finally breaks them with her or his decision. Williams states that a necessity may be arrived at after careful deliberation. However, if the dilemma was indeed evenly poised – as Winch and Rhees respectively suggest Vere’s and Sue Bridehead’s were– then the whole matter might seem to be closely run. How easy would it have been to have chosen differently? And what then? This question brings us to the door of a labyrinth of counterfactuals.

[68] What I have written here presupposes that what I say about myself is always accurate and authoritative. Clearly personal narrative is not always so straightforward. I deal with these issues in more detail in the next chapter.

If I had chosen differently, would I now be standing here believing I had done the right thing? The phenomenology of moral necessity suggests the answer could only ever be 'no'. The person who believes they chose the only option they found to be morally possible will obviously believe they did the right thing. Vere's thought might be that if he had chosen otherwise, he would not have chosen differently, but wrongly. His ruminations would then not be idle, but remorseful. Nor could he extend to himself the sort of understanding Winch extends to Vere: he did what I would have found morally impossible, and he 'did what was, for him, the right thing to do.'[69] This is because of his first person relation to the agent at the centre of the counterfactual. 'It is me who would have done this thing,' and what he knows now is that what he did was the right thing because of the overbearing import of the reasons in favour of doing it (for Vere, the importance of martial law at sea).[70] If he wonders about the quality of these reasons relative to those he had to put aside, then he is wondering if he did the right thing. If he is wondering this, then the label of 'necessity' no longer seems to apply. Winch makes a similar observation, noting that when Vere dies muttering Budd's name, while this shows the punishment still plays on his mind, Melville is clear the question of punishment's rightness is never in question.

What my examination of necessity has shown is that claims to necessity in moral life are more precarious than their tones would suggest. This is not because an incident may play on their mind later, but because they may actually come to a new understanding of it later. They may recant, or may throw the question open, wondering if they should not in fact have chosen otherwise. It is the location of necessity in the individual which on the one hand makes it responsive to the shape of human moral lives, and yet at the same time shows how precarious it is. Although a person's sincerity may not be in question and they may well have reached a psychological limit, the course of my life might lead me to recant what I had believed earlier. In view of this, Williams' example of Luther may well be

[69] Winch 1965: 163
[70] See my argument in Chapter 3, 'Narrative Identity', where I show how narrative identity makes clear how responsibility continues even when the self changes.

apposite,[71] since we can be most confident of a necessity being found by a person known for their obstinacy.

Yet if we can ruminate on a decision years later, if we can know we did the right thing and still find it blights our life, as Vere's would appear to have been blighted, what does that tell us about what is involved in leading a good life? How much might doing the right thing cost us? I shall now turn to look at this question.

**Doing good and suffering harm**

Necessity is one kind of limit, and Williams locates it in character. However, Williams argues that in moral life we may encounter other limits which are personal. These limits are akin to those of necessity even if they are not the same. Necessity's force lay in the agent's inability to do otherwise. The personal limits which I will now turn to concern the projects and commitments I have which may not be moral, but which are central in giving meaning to my life. These projects set limits not so much on the person, but on morality itself, for Williams' argues that an impartial morality demands too much when it requires that a person give up what fundamentally gives meaning to an agent's life. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall explore what Williams writes in connection with this issue. By arguing as he does, Williams seems to be demanding the good ordering of the world, although what he writes elsewhere suggests that he is aware this is not something we can hold out for. Furthermore, his view of 'impartial morality' mischaracterises moral requirements and by seeing them as empty rules neglects the way in which they have meaning for us. This prompts me to conclude the chapter by contrasting Williams' position with what Winch writes on whether the good person can be harmed.

The limits that someone might find in their deliberation may not just be moral, they may reflect other concerns to which the person is intimately tied. In his article 'Persons, character and morality' Williams argues that it is a flaw in moral theory as it is commonly undertaken that its requirements are thought to be absolute independently of what is possible for the person, given *who* that person is. We have

[71] Williams 1981: 131

what Williams calls 'ground projects' which are constitutive of our character, 'and which to a significant degree give a meaning to [one's] life.'[72]

Ground projects provide an answer to the question of why a person should go on living at all. On this account, that we do not usually confront the question of whether we should bother only illustrates the fact that we have such projects which head the question off. Ground projects give an individual a reason to go on living; they do not need to be shared by others, though, of course, they can be. What matters is that they hold the individual and give meaning to their life. To lose them is to lose an interest in life. What chance losing them? Williams notes that because they do not arise out of moral concerns they can conflict with morality's requirements.[73] If morality is conceived as impartial and its requirements ultimate, then there is the risk that an unreasonable burden can fall on a person and they be expected to relinquish the very things that give meaning to their life.

> For impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win; and that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all.[74]

Williams notes that the chance of conflict is reduced by the fact that our ground projects will take shape in a social context in which we commonly take on the norms around us, and to this extent our projects will embody or accommodate commonly held moral beliefs. Where conflict nevertheless occurs, it need not result in suicide or a total loss of meaning. Since it is possible to have a number of ground projects, having one thwarted, while terrible, need not strip life of all its meaning. However, this still leaves open the possibility of a crushing blow in life, or of us finding ourselves in a tragic dilemma having to choose between what we feel to be right because it is demanded of us by impartial morality on the one hand, and on the other,

[72] Williams 1976: 12
[73] Williams 1976: 12
[74] Williams 1976: 14

personal commitments which are dear to us. It is the expectation that the former should always triumph which Williams thinks is unreasonable. Indeed,

> Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant supreme importance to the impartial system…[75]

The thrust of this argument is what Williams is primarily concerned to make in the article: since impartial morality depends for its sense on a life which has substance and meaning, which go to make up our character, then morality reaches its limits when it presses against what gives our lives meaning. Who a person is should be integral to an understanding of morality.[76] Drawing on what has been said on necessity, it might then be contended that what an appreciation of character can provide is an appreciation of the limits of moral theory as well as practical limits we face in action – limits which can block us from or force us to particular actions. The notion of moral incapacity or moral necessity only makes sense when connected to a notion such as character. Character also, of its own, introduces limits because there are some kinds of blows in life we ought not *expect* people to bear.

When Williams explores Fried's example of the man choosing his wife when faced with the choice of saving from a burning house either his wife or someone unknown to him, he looks at what justification there might be for the choice. He observes the tendency toward artificiality in moral theories which contend the man is justified in acting from the thought that in situations of this kind it is permissible to choose one's wife. Famously, Williams observes that this involves one thought too many. The justification surely need only be, 'because she is my wife'. His choice is clearly born out of his relationship with his wife. One might even imagine that the man could be expressing a necessity – 'what else could I do?' In passing, Williams makes another subtle observation. Even if this is not a justification, it is an explanation of the man's choice 'which should silence comment'.[77] If, as an explanation, it silences comment, it would seem to do so because no one else could be in a position to counter it (except perhaps the other person's family?). The silence would seem to acknowledge

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[75] Williams 1976: 18
[76] Williams 1976: 19
[77] Williams 1976: 18

that the explanation can serve as a justification, and do so because of who the speaker is. As will be explored in a later chapter, justification itself takes place in a broader context than moral theory traditionally allows and, what's more, occurs between real people who can only speak with the authority of their own experience. His observation that much turns on what we expect from justification is important, for attention to this point also brings to the fore limits on what we can expect from life: doing the right thing may involve crushing what otherwise enriches our life.

There is much that is right in Williams' arguments, not least the conclusion regarding the role of character (or identity, as I have called it) which is given its place through an understanding of the need for our activity to make sense to us. One limit, however, is the underlying thought that we need to resolve these conflicts. Williams seems to want to find an escape valve that will see us avoid having to give up what is most dear to us because of an impartial view which is not our own. However, there are indeed conflicts which will leave us cowed in the way Williams seems to want us to escape. Of course, these are not to be wished on anybody. It is just that in looking for a justification we cannot always be looking for one which will nullify the other demands on us. Indeed, we must remain open to the possibility that at times the thing we must do is in fact that which will leave us crushed. We need to resolve these conflicts in action – the man rushing into the burning house must, it seems, choose whom he is going to save. However, this does not mean that any justification we give for our action can expunge the awfulness of the choice and the fact the choice is awful because of what it involves: someone will likely die, and the man will have to choose between two lives. That he can make this choice, and that he can give good reasons for it, does not eliminate the significance of what has happened.

This last feature points to a limitation in the analysis Williams provides. His introduction of ground projects is intended to contrast with the way in which life can seem emptied of humanity in accounts given by much moral theory. At the same time that he is arguing against the emptiness of moral theory, by distinguishing ground projects from it as he does, Williams misses the more important point that morality is not to be reduced to empty rules in the first place. Moral requirements do not emerge from empty rules, but from an understanding of the significance of various features of a situation. If the moral requirement seemed only to reflect an

empty and inhuman theorisation, then it would not pull on the agent the way it does. The agent is faced with a dilemma precisely because he understands the terribleness of the situation and his position in it: someone is likely to die; I can save only one; this woman is my wife. The last is clearly the controversial consideration in the context of the debate which Williams enjoined. However, that 'she is my wife' might feature in our deliberations seems reasonable, since surely our particular relationships do place further and special requirements on us. The question remains what its place should be. I do not need to respond to this last question when observing that what the agent must do in this circumstance is weigh the competing concerns correctly and come to the right conclusion. This connects to the point which particularists make when they argue against viewing morality as a set of rules, and I shall explore this in more detail in a later chapter. What is to be noted is that splitting ground projects from moral requirements risks missing how they can blur at points – the moral requirements which are identified from the impartial view in the first place matter because of the significance of specific features of a situation. The good agent is in dilemma precisely because he understands the significance of the various features of the situation: the importance of his wife and the importance of the life of the other person. Characterising any of these requirements as empty because they can be rendered from an impartial view misses the point. Their mattering depends upon an appreciation of the significance of the values they embody and not whether moral theory can render them in various abstracted ways.

An appreciation of this point also recasts the nature of the dilemma, since now moral requirements are not austere and empty, but requirements whose significance we appreciate when we deliberate. Understanding their significance as we do, we can be said to be attached to them: they are partly constitutive of us since, casting the situation and entering our deliberations as they do, they clearly form part of the horizon within which we understand our world and ourselves. However, this seems to run counter to the possibility of the person Kant was impressed by, who acts from duty even after losing all interest in life. Alternatively, it suggests that Williams was wrong to think that any moral demand could empty life of its meaning, since we find meaning in the demands we find in morality. Will we always feel rewarded by acting from the requirements of morality? Clearly not. Indeed, part of my disagreement with (one reading of) Williams, as mentioned earlier, is that we cannot seek ways out

of acknowledging the awfulness of what we have done by looking for justifications. Or, rather, the justifications we will have for our action will not remove the significance of its consequence. Even making morality a ground project does not address this problem, since it can still conflict with other ground projects. In any case, what my argument suggests is that what matters is correctly judging the significance of the elements of my situation, those which give it its distinctively moral aspect and the others which connect with other parts of my life. Understanding something as being of moral import is to understand its connection to a range of values in one's life – as we shall see in a moment, it is just this which Winch suggests might in fact protect the Good person from harm.[78]

We can therefore gain a better understanding of how it is that someone might indeed choose to do what is morally required though they know it will cost them what brings meaning to their life: not all meaning is lost, for the action they choose also carries meaning. This is no palliative for what is lost to the person. Cordner touches on this when he explores the example of the man whose daughter will die without a kidney transplant – he can save his daughter if he acquires a kidney illegally taken from an orphan through the black-market.[79] It is possible to imagine that his daughter means everything to the man, and yet he might still refuse, and do so because he understands what it would mean for him to have taken this kidney. For Cordner, that Williams thinks it is unreasonable to think that morality might require someone to give up what gives meaning to their life only demonstrates that Williams himself believes in the good ordering of the world. 'Why *must* there be a way in which things can turn out 'all right' in such circumstances? Sometimes, if you are unlucky enough, there will be no such way.' [80] Because of his love for his daughter, the man might be checked by the thought, 'what if it had been my child?' The thought opens the man to an understanding of the kind of destruction he will be wreaking if he purchases the kidney. His decision has sense: it is based on an understanding of the moral requirements bearing on him, and yet it will be made in full knowledge of the toll it will take on his own life. The decision is in fact made because not *all* meaning is stripped from the man's life. A residue of meaning remains because the action which

[78] In fact, these thoughts can be seen as cohering with Williams' broader project to break down the distinction between morality and ethics.
[79] Cordner 2002: Ch. 9
[80] Cordner 2002: 175. Italics in original.

brought about the man's ruin is meaningful – it was chosen because of an understanding of its meaning (and what it would mean if he chose the alternative). The difficulty is, of course, that the life he has left has been hollowed out. Pointing out that over time he will likely find new purpose in other things is not of much help – they will clearly not replace his daughter, even if they do fill his life. The positing of ground projects draws our attention away from the meaningfulness of moral action in the first place. It is not that morality has an overarching meaning which can be spelt out (millennia of moral philosophy have surely taught us that), but to be able to act morally depends upon the ability to appreciate what is at stake in a situation in the first place, at least if doing the right thing is to be more than accidental.

*Winch on doing good and suffering*

In arguing this, I am not arguing that the significance of doing the right thing replaces the suffering which will follow. Nor am I arguing that we avoid harm or suffering by doing the right thing. Winch provides an interesting contrast to Williams on this matter for he suggests that it is the meaningfulness of moral action which might protect us from the harm that Williams argues it is unreasonable for impartial morality to demand a person suffer. At the same time as showing the terms in which he develops his argument to be unhelpful and distorting, I have argued that Williams is wrong to rule out the possibility that doing the right things might strip what is most meaningful in our life – wrong because of what it is to understand the significance of what the particular moral requirement embodies in the first place. He is wrong to think that we avoid harm in morality by having its demands lapse when they would do too much damage to deeply important projects and attachments.[81] Winch also thinks it may be possible for a good person to avoid suffering harm – not by avoiding moral requirements when they clash with important projects, but by adopting a particular attitude to unavoidable affliction.[82] Quoting Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*, Winch writes, 'One can be forced into the narrow prison…and necessity is the tyrant; but one cannot be forced into patience…He [the patient man] brings a determination of freedom out of that which is determined as necessity.'[83] Patience is an attitude which anyone is free to adopt. The good person takes the view of Eternity, and not

[81] It is puzzling that Williams argues this, given what he argues elsewhere, for instance in 'Ethical Consistency' – itself an interesting article which I draw on in chapter 6, 'Conflict & Consistency'
[82] Winch 1966
[83] Winch 1966: 206

the world view; to take the eternal view involves being able to bring unity to one's actions. However, what one chooses to do will depend upon such changeable things as particular circumstances, the position of the agent, who they are, their age and so on. What brings unity to these 'is their relation to a central enduring concern to act decently and justly.'[84]

Winch thinks that acting decently and justly might still bring about affliction: affliction may be unavoidable just because we see there is no decent or just alternative to the course of action whose consequences we would otherwise wish to avoid. However, on this picture, as long as we are motivated by our concern to be good and adopt an attitude of patience we can at least avoid suffering harm. It seems a rough distinction is being made between harm and affliction or suffering. Winch is suggesting an attitude of patience and a relationship to the eternal can prevent harm, and patience is to be adopted in the face of unavoidable affliction. However, internal to this is an acknowledgement that the agent is enduring affliction and this cannot be set aside for it is why patience is necessary in the first place. Winch introduces his argument by looking at punishment.[85] In cases of punishment, the good person who acknowledges they are being punished at the same time acknowledges their wrongdoing and therefore sees their punishment as beneficial – they are not being harmed, even while they suffer, since the punishment simply follows from their wrongdoing. In the broader case of someone suffering affliction which is not punishment there clearly need be no connection to any wrongdoing and we may be left wondering, 'why me?' On Winch's Kierkegaardian account we avoid the harm by voluntarily adopting an attitude of patience.

What is worth noting, however, is Winch's final acknowledgement that even patience can be overwhelmed by affliction. In the end it is possible for the good person to be harmed – even while adopting the attitude of patience, the good person is not justified in proclaiming they cannot be harmed 'whatever happens'. What could harm the good person is that she ceases to will the Good.[86] To will the Good is to accept that it is paramount, and nothing is as important as acting justly and decently. This enables the good person to bear unavoidable affliction patiently. The

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[84] Winch 1966: 204
[85] Winch 1966: 197-201
[86] Winch 1966: 207

risk is that the person might lose this orientation to the Good and this can happen when affliction overwhelms us. So rather than thinking that morality cannot make demands that might crush us, Winch proposes the possibility that moral understanding – an appreciation of how the moral concerns me – is what might fortify me since it can enable an attitude of patience which in turn protects me from affliction. However, even Winch acknowledges there is nothing absolute in this protection. The blow can be too hard and shatter the sense that willing the Good gave my action in the first place.

There is, then, an acknowledgement that the good person can suffer affliction despite their goodness, and that this affliction may come to seem a harm. It seems enough to say that we can suffer despite our doing the right thing. How we can cope with this suffering is an additional question. The fact that we did the right thing out of an appreciation of its significance may well make an obvious starting point for reconciling ourselves to what has happened, and to this extent ameliorate our suffering. There is, however, finally no reason to think that doing the right thing will prevent us from suffering and seeing ourselves as harmed or damaged.

# 3. Narrative Identity

In the last two chapters my discussion of Williams gave a place to what a person says about their life in constituting the reality of that life. In emphasising the interpretive aspect of life (and moral life in particular) I shall continue to have recourse to the role of narrative, since it is central to my conception of interpretive agency. It is therefore a good point to explore narrative more thoroughly. Since my thesis is not primarily about narrative, what I say about it here will not be able to cover anything approaching all that I would like it to.

I first approach narrative arguing for the continuity of responsibility. Linking ethics to an individual whose identity can change might seem to suggest that we can shed our responsibilities when we change. However, we are constituted by more than just our values – our narrative is inescapable and continues even as we change. After introducing some of the relations between narrative and identity, I show firstly that our narratives are selective and do not include every detail of our lives, and, furthermore all an individual's narratives need not be unified around some overall theme, project or conception of the good. The last argument is primarily developed in response to Taylor's conception of the relation between narrative, selfhood and various kinds of good in our life. Underlying all of this is Taylor's own phenomenological conception of agency, which involves what he calls the Best Account Principle – the account which makes best sense of my life. The idea is a helpful one in thinking about narrative identity (and will crop up again in the chapter, 'Taylor on Practical Reason'). While I thereby make the subjective perspective central to my notion of narrative, this does not mean either it is made in isolation from others or that they might not be more accurate at times in their rendering of me. Amongst other things, I can always deceive myself. I discuss all of this before concluding with a look at the place of honesty in narrative, showing not only that it is important but that it is also to some extent unavoidable.

An intentional implication of what I have argued in the work so far is an ethical pluralism: it is possible to recognise other people's sense of what is rich in life and see why it might be rewarding while at the same time disagreeing with it.[87] A central part of my reasoning has been the way in which our values constitute our identity; who a person is is in part constituted by the values through which they see the world. Since people are different from one another, it should come as no surprise that they differ in their ethical horizons, and in ways that are readily recognised as legitimate. However there remains the question of whether it is possible for me to view my own past in this spirit of pluralism. Is it possible for me to reflect upon my past activities, and find some that I can no longer endorse and think they were morally wrong, and yet still say that they fall within the scope of legitimate difference. 'I was a different person then,' I might say. I was a different person because the values I held were so different from those I hold now; I saw the world through what seem like different eyes.

The question of my judgement of my past actions is one matter, but what of my other relationships to them? Since I am not held responsible for the actions of others, why should I be held responsible for actions in my past when I can quite reasonably say that I have changed and become a new person? I see the world so differently, I might say, and am so thoroughly changed that I am now a different person. Being a different person, how is it that I can now be held responsible for the things that were done before?

The continuity of responsibility is only a problem as long as we think that identity is constituted only by our values and way of life. If this were the case, then it would indeed be difficult to determine the continuity of responsibility, since the agent would be changing whenever their values changed – being a different agent, they could not now be held responsible for the actions of 'the other' person. That change in values alone does not entail the cessation of our previously incurred responsibilities, even though it does involve a change in aspects of our identity, can be illustrated through instances of remorse. Imagine an executioner who, for whatever reason, comes to believe that capital punishment is wrong after all. As a result, the executioner believes that he was wrong to have killed the people he did.

[87] There are of course other possible forms of disagreement. I explore disagreement in more detail in the chapter 'Disagreement & Dialogue.'

Concurrent with this new understanding would be a feeling of remorse for what he had done to his victims. It would seem absurd for the executioner then to turn around and say that his sincere remorse for these killings showed that he was a different person from the one who had performed the executions and that, being a different person, he therefore ought not feel responsibility for them. Sincere remorse would then be a sign that he should not feel any remorse. However, remorse necessarily involves an ongoing connection to the past; in experiencing remorse, we acknowledge that connection.

Remorse might be seen as a special case because of this necessarily historical aspect. What of all the other possible cases in which someone does not acknowledge their responsibility because they see themselves to be a different person? I cannot discuss *all* cases in this section. However, for many situations, there does seem to be a possible approach, and that is to give a greater role to the narrative aspect of our lives and how we render and understand them. Morality depends upon a temporal aspect to agency – an identity that continues from the past, through the present and into the future. If I have given my word to someone to accomplish a task, then I am bound by the promise I made in the past until that point in the future when the task is at last accomplished. Narrative is also constitutive of identity and it gives a kind of continuity to agency (and therefore responsibility).

When we consider how we narrate our lives, the pull of past events becomes clearer. The person who wishes to claim that it was someone else who performed an action they have come to understand as wrong through a change in their values is inevitably drawn back to making themselves the agent in the past through the way they tell the story. 'I was once an executioner. I believed that capital punishment was the proper punishment for some criminals.' It is difficult to avoid the use of the first-person in these situations, even at the same time as we wish to distance ourselves by saying, 'I was a different person then.' A different person, certainly, but the 'I' remains. What's more, the event in question could not be adequately rendered by the person without some reference to their involvement in it. What they would be describing would be based largely on memory, and their understanding of the event would be conditioned by their memory. The way that my actions are my own is peculiar and important – my relation to them is special inasmuch as it is through first-person

memory. I remember the action in the first person and from within it, not as someone who saw it from a distance. There is clearly much more that could be written about memory in relation to both narrative and ethics, but it would take me too far away from my primary concern here.[88]

**Narrative & Identity**

Philosophical discussions which seek to isolate personal identity before exploring it often become nebulous. In approaching questions which touch on personal identity it is important to keep in mind that it is not an identity like any other – in Ricoeur we find a helpful reminder of this. Ricoeur argues strongly that identity in general is to be understood in the first place along two axes: (i) *idem* identity, being the identity of sameness; and (ii) *ipse* identity, being the identity of selfhood.[89] Whereas the permanence in time characteristic of *idem* identity answers the question 'what?', the permanence in time characteristic of selfhood answers the question, 'who?'.[90] Personal identity is characterised by both aspects of identity, since there are aspects of it that involve relations between the two, namely *character* and *keeping one's word*.[91] He notes that, 'The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity.'[92] The reason for this difference, and the reason for introducing narrative identity stems from what it is to answer the question, 'who?'. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Ricoeur contends, 'To answer the question 'Who?'...is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the 'who.' And the identity of this 'who' therefore itself must be a narrative identity.'[93] It is narrative that, '…justifies our taking the subject of an action, so designated by his, her, or its proper name, as the same throughout a life that stretches from birth to death'.[94]

Ricoeur's main concern in T*ime and Narrative* is to explore the issue of temporality, arguing that it is narrative that enables us to span the breach between cosmological time and phenomenological time.[95] Although my own interest in narrative is

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[88] As a good starting point, see for instance Margalit 2003
[89] Ricoeur 1988: 246; Ricoeur 1992: 1-4, 113-39
[90] Ricoeur 1992: 118
[91] Ricoeur 1992: 118-9, 123
[92] Ricoeur 1988: 246
[93] Ricoeur 1988: 246
[94] Ricoeur 1988: 246
[95] Ricoeur 1988: 244

tangential to Ricoeur's, it is worth noting that narrative's connection to time is not only by way of reference to the past. Narrative relates our present concerns to the past, and to each other. What's more, it can relate all of these to the future: we can see past events as having as yet unlived or unknown repercussions in the future; the interests we have often make reference to the future through the aspirations they embody – our imagined future can in this way feed back into our present, orienting our present activities. When asked why I am doing something now, I may answer in terms of how my past has brought me to this point, or I may tell my story forwards into an anticipated future, explaining how my current activities will (I hope) lead to this ideal outcome.

Narrative is an important part of personal identity, and it is for this reason that Ricoeur speaks of 'narrative identity'. It fills out our identity beyond values, and connects our activities to each other. By providing temporal continuity it accretes a history to identity, a store of events and actions which fill a person out beyond their values. Importantly, this history is not just a set or store of past actions; likewise, the future is not a set of actions yet to be performed, or states yet to be lived. Instead, narrative weaves a history into a kind of cloth. Our actions are given meaning and are often linked through narrative, giving sense to each other and shape to a life. To emphasise, the self is historical, it understands its present situation in part through its past, which we often see as having brought us to this situation.

Our actions, and the world we observe, are therefore once again placed squarely within the realm of meaning. Things do not 'just happen' – they have significance for us and repercussions later. Where a moment ago I mentioned that our person is partly filled out by a 'store of events', the events in question are not to be thought of as static or simply given. How we come to see past events will depend upon how we connect them to other events and themes. As my life goes on, how the threads of my life are woven together will change – the themes in terms of which I see parts of my history will change, as will the way I cast events. If a student spends five years on their doctoral studies and then finds work entirely unrelated to them, how they see that time may well change as time passes. They may find tenuous connections between their work and studies, or tell their life episodically, keeping the two separate, or consider the whole study a waste of time in hindsight. Where once it

seemed worthwhile, now it seems irrelevant. All this may change again if they return to academia.

Our narrative can now be seen as constitutive of our identity because of how it connects our values to actions and events over time and helps make up the interpretive horizon through which we understand the world. This does not mean that we connect all our actions in one grand narrative, nor even that we are able to make sense of everything in our lives.

## The Shape of Narrative

Denying that our actions must be connected by one grand narrative can be broken into two parts. The first is simply to note that narrative, like biography and story-telling generally, does not feature *everything* we did. The second part is that our narrative need not have an over-arching theme which unifies the whole. I explore the second part at greater length, looking briefly at MacIntyre's suggestion that life is unified as a narrative quest before turning to Taylor's more thoroughgoing conception of a life given unity by our devotion to a fundamental good. While people can and unify their life in this way, I argue there is no reason to think that all our narratives must make reference to such a unifying idea.

### *Narratives are Selective*

Firstly, we do not tell the 'story' of our lives in one go. If narrative does unify a life, then it cannot be as a 'grand' narrative, connecting all the moments of our life to the others. Looking at biography assists in this point – chronology alone is not enough. Narrating life in the sense I mean is not a breathless series of moments linked by the conjunction '…and then…'. The first thing a biography must do is present the story of a person's life in an intelligible fashion. Chapters are used to break aspects of a the subject's life in informative or edifying ways, providing insights into matters that often overlap with one another, and criss-cross each other temporally. One occasion in the subject's life may be considered of such importance that the biography (and therefore the narrative of the life) will pivot around it. Subsequent events are seen to emerge from and respond to it; the life prior to it is seen in terms of how it leads to this moment (even when it strives to emphasise that no one foresaw this happening nor prepared for it explicitly). Not only are events narrated in an order different to

that in which they occurred, not every event is narrated. Not everything that happens in a life is significant, nor does it need to be narrated. If I tell someone about writing my thesis (or recall it for myself) I will not discuss with them the times I went to the shops to buy groceries and so on.

That narratives are selective in this way, however, does not mean that they escape the mundane. For what I have said so far regarding the meaningfulness of actions applies also to mundane ones. Actions cannot be understood in isolation and depend upon their situation in a life in order to be meaningful. This means that actions are connected to each other as well as to the ends the person has, and this runs to the very root of meaningful action. My visits to the shops to buy my groceries may be described as mundane, but they are clearly not without their significance – I would not have food on my table if I did not do the shopping. Mundane activities will still need to feature in a narrative, for they need to be placed in some way. The question of what sort of a narrative they should feature in primarily serves to draw our attention to the fact that there are a number of narratives in operation at any time, operating at different levels in our lives. They will also often overlap with one another in theme as well as the moments they cover.

If there are multiple narratives in my life, in what way are they connected? I have just mentioned that they overlap in themes and that the same event may well be rendered differently according to the concern that guides the narration at any time. The effort to organise transport from one city to another when travelling overseas may be told in the light of discussions about time management and travel, or about my experience of negotiating in foreign cultures. The one event can carry significance in a number of areas in my life and thereby be connected to a whole series of goals, concerns and actions. On the other hand, it may be quite straightforward and I might not connect it to many concerns at all. My shopping, for instance, will not normally be connected to larger concerns I have in my life, except, perhaps, indirectly: the need to purchase victuals takes time away from other activities that I feel contribute more directly to my larger goals. Narratives can link to form an inhomogeneous web, with clumps tightly knit together in one place only thinly connected (if at all) to other parts.

*Narratives need not have a unifying good*

The alternative is to see our narratives as guided by some over-arching concern, usually this is pictured as an overall good to which we are always oriented; narrative not only situates events, it collects them and locates them with regard to a single conception of the good. For MacIntyre, the unity of an individual life consists in, 'the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask "What is the good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask "What is the good for man?" is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common.'[96] Moral life is provided its unity by attempting to systematically answer these questions, and live in the light of this answer. MacIntyre continues, 'The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest.'[97] The quest requires, 'some at least partly determinate conception of the final *telos*…Some conception of the good of man is required.'[98] This conception of the good, on MacIntyre's account, will enable us to order all the other goods we have. There is no reason to think that MacIntyre thinks the object of the quest is simple or clear, indeed he notes that what it is will only be discovered in the course of the quest itself. This is interesting, inasmuch as the character of the object of the quest will change with the narrative; that is, I discover more and more about this good as I continue on this quest, and what I discover is only to be understood in narrative through the quest.

However, this picture first of all depends upon someone having a clear sense that there is one conception of the good that regulates the others, even if they do not yet know what that good is. Certainly, it is possible to have such an outlook and some people do: a monotheistic world view, for instance, lends itself naturally toward this. However, it seems to pre-judge the issue to think that there must be one conception of the good in a person's life which regulates the others. In the previous chapters I discussed how I might learn how things stand for me at the point when I decide what to do in a dilemma. This seems to fit well with MacIntyre's point that it is in the quest that we learn more about the good which is the object of the quest. By having to have made this decision in dilemma, I have learnt something about myself and how things stand for me – I have learnt something about the relation in which the

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[96] MacIntyre 1985: 218-9
[97] MacIntyre 1985: 219
[98] MacIntyre 1985: 219

goods I value stand to one another. However, even acknowledging that some goods matter more than others, it still seems to be an unjustified leap to think that this implies that one good will be left standing unconditioned at the end *and* that this good will regulate the others. For even if it happened that one good in my life was never trumped by any others, this is not the same as saying that all the others would be seen in terms of this good.[99]

An alternative way of conceiving one good as being at the centre of our narrative self-understanding is put forward by Charles Taylor. Taylor begins this discussion by noting that how we are positioned with regard to our conception of the good matters to us in two ways ways. Firstly, how near or how far are we situated from it; secondly, and more importantly, whether we are heading in the right direction (are we heading toward the good, or falling away from it).[100] For instance, no matter how little mastery she may actually have achieved, the 'believer in disengaged objectification, who sees the mastery of reason as a kind of rational control over the emotions' will find it a source of deep satisfaction that she has taken up the scientific attitude and is set in the right direction.[101] Because we are so concerned with our movement toward or away from the good, we understand ourselves in relation to this movement and are in this sense always *becoming*.[102] Consequently, I can only make sense of my life as a narrative, as an unfolding story into which my sense of the good is woven. For Taylor, this alone is enough to unify our lives, since we cannot understand who we are without also knowing how we have become this and where we are going.[103]

> Thus making sense of my present action, when we are not dealing with such trivial questions as where I shall go in the next five minutes but with the

[99] To some extent it makes sense for MacIntyre to wish to draw all one's goods together, since he is wishing to place virtue at the centre of moral life. Since virtue is meant to be a feature of character, its unity depends upon the unity of a life. It would seem that a life cannot be considered unified unless the relations between the goods in it are orderly. (See MacIntyre 1985: 205)
[100] Taylor 1992: 42-6
[101] Taylor 1992: 45-7
[102] Taylor 1992: 46-7
[103] Taylor 1992: 47

> issue of my place relative to the good, requires a narrative understanding of my life, a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story.[104]

This quote reveals a chink in Taylor's otherwise forbidding armour, for I would claim that any meaningful action is going to depend upon its situation for its meaning, even a trivial or mundane one. Furthermore, these mundane activities usually emerge from semi-autonomous goods: they neither stand entirely isolated as trivialities, nor need they be connected directly to any ultimate good. I shall deal first of all with the issue of how my actions, even mundane ones, might be connected to the good.

Later in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor distinguishes between goods. 'Life goods' are the goods toward which we aim because their achievement would make manifest a life led in conformity with the structure of reality, as it is understood in Taylor's terms. For Taylor, reality is constituted by goods, the love of which empowers us to do and be good;[105] the world can only be adequately described evaluatively, because the nature of reality cannot be understood without reference to a notion of good that makes it up and with respect to which we orientate ourselves.[106] For instance, a rationalist might suggest that what is distinctive of human agency is our capacity for rational action, and it is also this which gives us our dignity – for us to act with dignity, we must do so in accordance with rational nature. Reason in this picture is a constitutive good because it is interwoven with human reality in such a way that it cannot be unpicked from it and at the same time enables the rationalist to see life as meaningful. In light of this the rationalist will aim toward freeing herself from superstition and so on.

However, this approach risks viewing action too much from the top down. While it may be true that I orient myself according to my sense of an ultimate good in life (leaving aside for the moment how this might be described), the mundane activities that fill much of my time seem to arise from the bottom up. We might say that we buy groceries in order to have food in order to have the health and energy to engage in the tasks that serve our other projects and larger goals which themselves are

[104] Taylor 1992: 48
[105] Taylor 1992: 93
[106] Taylor 1992: 57-8

aligned with ‘the good’, however this seems artificial. Eating is clearly a precondition for higher activities, however the other and more immediate ends it serves, namely those of physical wellbeing, are semi-autonomous goods; they do not emerge from my interest in some ultimate good. How I conduct mundane activities *need not* refer to higher concerns. I have described mundane pursuits such as eating only as ‘semi-autonomous’ and mentioned that they ‘need not’ refer to higher concerns because there are cultures and cases where they clearly do intersect. Their autonomy arises because some kind of concern with nutrition will always feature in human life. Emerging from ‘the bottom up’, my interests in nutrition can still intersect with concerns from ‘the top’; in this way mundane activities’ autonomy is conditioned. A religious based objection to taking any life means that some people are forbidden various foods, such as meat. Some religions restrict how food can be prepared, and secular notions of purity or good-living can see people restrict their diet in other ways.

The point here is that if some kind of narrative structure situating my actions is a requirement for meaningful action, then it does not follow that the narratives applied to my actions must bring me to some notion of the good that overarches all of life’s activities. Since I have multiple goods in life, it is not surprising that they will be in tension with one another; their relationship to each other will have to be considered and they may be altered in light of where they are then found to stand. As indicated above, the connections between them will mean that paths can be tracked that will link any activity to another through the web of meanings in my life. However, even though I can recognise that some goods have priority over others and run deeply within me, it does not follow that all my actions boil down to the service of some overarching grand narrative whereby I am moving toward one grand end, a substantively conceived ‘constitutive good’. I am not arguing that it is false to think that the love of such a good might move us to be good, only that it need not determine all parts of my life, nor need they make reference to it. It is a complex matter, and Taylor in his works shows how matters of considerable significance have tendrils that can extend into many areas in our life, but this does not mean they extend into all areas of a person’s life. As he points out at one point, a person can see

their purchase of a chocolate éclair as expressive of a straightforward desire for the delicacy, or as the manifestation of an ignominious craving for rich foods.[107]

### Features of Narrative

Central to understanding a person is a sense of the significance that things have for them. Any adequate description of them is going to have to incorporate this sense of things' significance as the person's life unfolds. This is central to narrative, since it joins moments and ideas in a meaningful way. I have already mentioned Ricoeur's invocation of Arendt contending that to answer the question of 'Who?' is to tell the story of a life. Winch and Taylor in their different ways make clear that the story will have to incorporate a sense of things' significance and meaning for the agent. I begin by drawing on Winch to introduce the importance of the agent's perspective in the adequacy of a narrative. I develop this by exploring in more detail Taylor's idea of 'Best Account Principle'.

Winch emphasises that an action is fundamentally to be understood by the description 'under which [the agent] deems it to fall'.[108] Furthermore, in order to explain the action, we may only use concepts which can be grasped by the agent. Actions depend at some point upon the agent for their meaning, even when the (third person) explanation departs from what the agent would actually say about themselves or would even be able to say about themselves.[109] On these occasions Winch does not explore the temporal extension of the issues with which he is dealing, the closest he comes to such an exploration is only implied when he develops his conception of meaningful behaviour by reference to Wittgensteinian rule-following. Consequently, he does not connect narrative to meaningful action, nor does he seem inclined to. It is not clear what Winch would think of narrative concepts of agency, though the points of overlap are interesting. The most suggestive is his emphasis on situating action in a milieu. This connects meaningful action to a broader society, which I do not intend to pursue in this section.[110] Instead, what I wish to take from Winch is twofold.

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[107] Taylor 1977. Although I will turn to look at Taylor's distinction between strong and weak evaluations in a moment, it is worth noting that if there are to be weak evaluations in human life, then it seems to follow that the terms in which they can best be rendered need not make reference to the greater goods we recognise.

[108] Winch 1964: 315

[109] Winch 1990: 46-51 This last point is summarised more fully in the later chapter, '*Kritik* in Dialogue'.

[110] For more on this, see the chapter '*Kritik* in dialogue'

Firstly there is the need to understand the meaning of actions, practices and so on as being situated in a life. To understand a feature of a person's life, it is necessary to broaden our vision beyond a single moment, and recognise that moments interpenetrate and cannot be understood in isolation. Secondly, to understand a person's meaningful actions, it is necessary to use concepts which are intelligible to them.

Taylor sees narrative as constitutive of reality for a person, because it would be a feature in the best account of themselves: although the narrative will not feature in the best account, it would seem that the best account could only be provided through narrative. For Taylor, I cannot understand myself unless I locate myself with respect to the good, and this can only be done narratively. I can only understand myself and my situation through a story of how I came to be here and where I intend to go from now. Once again, no feature of me or my life can be understood in isolation, but must be situated more broadly in my life.

While agreeing with the centrality of narrative, I have already argued that it need not always make reference to an overarching good. What does seem reasonable, however, is Taylor's other claim, forcefully argued throughout his academic writings and with its clearest and most comprehensive treatment in *Sources of the Self*, that evaluative language is ineliminable from our self-understanding. Language that construes our situation in terms of higher and lower, worthiness and unworthiness and so on is a necessary feature of our lives. This is the language of 'strong evaluation', to be contrasted with 'weak evaluation' which concerns itself only with pragmatic considerations surrounding success and planning and is not concerned with questions surrounding something's worth, depth or richness[111]. Attempting to avoid such language hobbles us, since we can no longer give expression to crucial experiences in our life. Human agency is characterised for Taylor by our seeing our lives in these terms.

Taylor's argument for the centrality of 'strong evaluation' culminates in his claim that such evaluation and the values that are inherent in it form part of the fabric of our reality. Taylor's conception of human reality is therefore strongly phenomenological, with reality taking shape in large part through the meanings

[111] Taylor 1977

human affairs and our engagements with the world beyond ourselves have for us, and these meanings in turn are often ineliminably ethical in their nature.[112] 'What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives?'[113] While it is true that the natural sciences have achieved their success partly by limiting evaluative terminology in their language, Taylor contends that it is question begging prejudice to move from this to claim that only things that can be so described are real and that conceptions of the good contained in strong evaluations are not. It does mean that they are not part of the world as it is studied by natural science. However, just as forces, energy and sub-atomic particles are considered real because of the role they play in explaining natural phenomena, since our frameworks of significance are also necessary for understanding ourselves, these too must feature in any adequate description of human conduct, and ought in this sense to be considered real as well. They are real because they are inescapable facets of our lives, which would be unrecognisable without them. This is the motivation for Taylor's development of the 'Best-Account Principle' (BA-principle): 'The terms indispensable for the latter [life uses] are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time…'[114] The best account, then, makes best sense of our actions, thoughts and feelings. In trying to make sense of what I have done in a given situation, it is no use my saying only that I left a room, when I feel that my doing so displayed a kind of cowardice. Did I really just leave – or did I flee, retreat or escape from it? The neutral description elides what is for me a crucial element of the situation, namely how my actions connect to how I see myself.

The BA-principle fits well with a conception of identity which depends upon narrative because central to it is a concern for properly establishing things' significance – the meaning they have for me. This also fits well with a broadly phenomenological account of human agency. Commensurate with this is that the truth usually sought in the natural sciences will not apply in human affairs. It should be noted in passing that 'best' may be misleading for it cannot be a final account,

[112] Taylor 1992: 56-7, 68-9, see also Rosa 1998: 231-9, 489
[113] Taylor 1992: 57
[114] Taylor 1992: 58

since by its nature it changes and develops in the course of my life. The best account principle, as its name suggests, is concerned with truth-telling, however it is important to note that central to the notion of truth being used here is the concept of significance. The meaning that an event or action will have will be tied closely to the language and a way of life, inasmuch as these condition the possibilities of meaning in a given context. The best-account is the one that best makes sense of how things stand for me. In this sense it is enabling, because it enables me to be clearer about my motives for acting and therefore enables me to act in ways that are best suited to the ends I have.[115]

Granting the centrality of interpretation in human agency; and the role of narrative, it still seems possible for us to be wrong in what we say about ourselves. We can lie to others, deceive ourselves, misunderstand a situation and our motives. It cannot be enough merely to say that because I sincerely believe something to be the case, and hold deeply that it has the significance for me that it does, that my word must be taken at face value and the reality this creates taken as final.

The issue of lying in narrative is in some ways beside the point that I am trying to make here. If lying is taken to be the intentional telling of things that are not true (with the intention of having them pass as true), then it should not be forgotten that the claim I am making here is only that we cannot understand ourselves except through narrative. I can lie, but in doing so, I understand what I am doing is lying. I understand that this is not how I see things at all. It remains the case that in order to understand what I really take to be my situation I will have to do so historically, connecting it to what has come before or what I hope for in the future or a myriad of other details in my life. Lying is something I do to others, but narrative is ineliminable from *self*-understanding. This is important for seeing how it limits the BA-principle. The best account clearly depends upon the person at least being honest when attempting to give the account of themselves because it is the one which best makes sense of their world. It is the best account the person could provide which best reveals the reality for that person. 'Could' is important, for connecting it to practical reason as he does, Taylor makes clear that the Best Account can be found or provided by others and therefore can be as enabling just as it is descriptive.

[115] For more on the role of Taylor's BA Principle, see the later chapter, 'Taylor on Practical Reason'.

## Others and Narrative

The narrative I am primarily concerned with here is the one through which the person understands their life. The question of normativity does not enter at this stage. That is, whether I can improve my moral vision to a superior one is not what I am presently concerned with. I have thus far wanted to argue first of all for the centrality of narrative in self-understanding, and consequently, that our identity is in some ways a narrative identity. In doing this, I have also wanted to reinforce how deep this goes, such that narrative, interpretation and the meaning things have for us become connected to give a broadly phenomenological understanding of reality in human affairs. It is in this context that I have introduced Taylor's notion of the best account principle; in doing so, I have deviated somewhat from the question toward which he sees it as being primarily oriented: how is it possible for us to make reasonable assessments about competing values and worldviews if the agent is at the centre of the moral horizon? Setting aside the question of whether there are ethically superior outlooks, what are the possibilities for someone getting their own narrative wrong? Am I always right about what I say about myself because it is me saying it and I am best placed to know how things stand for me?

The possibility of error and misunderstanding is always present in the narrative of narrative identity. Sense-making in a life is at issue here, and narrative draws together values and disparate moments in a particular life. In doing so, narrative also draws on influences beyond the individual: language, cultural norms and patterns of behaviour as well as cultural narratives. In the first chapter I discussed how our behaviour can reveal how things stand for us. That is, the connections between things can be revealed in my behaviour, and to this extent a narrative is implied, which may, in principle, be explicated by someone with the self-awareness to know these influences. It is all too common, however, for someone else to see better than me how I react to things and how they affect me. A friend might observe that I get pugnacious whenever someone suggests what I should do – I am always protective of my own sphere of action. A psychologist or sociologist might, on the other hand, have identified concepts which undergird this behaviour, and see it as expressive of or related to this: perhaps I am playing out a notion of autonomy, or masculinity or both. This means that even within one's own culture, there may be people who can make more perspicuous some of the background or significance of my own actions.

There is therefore always the possibility of someone else making better sense of a part of someone's life than they can themselves, or someone else helping bring a person to a better sense of their own life.

This returns us to Taylor's notion of the Best Account as an enabler. A central feature of this is that the drive for it makes better sense of my situation and reduces error, enabling me to see better the constraints of my situation, or sometimes even remove them. Maybe I'd get more done if I took people's suggestions in my stride and did not get distracted worrying about incursions on my masculine role. However it is easy to see how an impasse can quickly be reached, for I may not see how the description offered by another is in fact more perspicuous than my own. This may be pig-headedness, it may be blindness or it may be cognitive failure. It may simply be that they are in fact wrong – their description is not better after all, it simply isn't how I see things.

A further complexity is that even if another person is able to identify influences on me, or able to articulate how things hang together in a way I had not been aware of, even if I see this as somehow more accurate, the knowledge can be transformative. This is, for Taylor, a good thing – the transition to a better way of seeing things is important and gives point to practical reason. However, if narrative is an essential element in self-understanding, it does not always follow that the narrative I tell is the most accurate. Others may in fact have a better grasp of how things hang together for me, knowing this through familiarity with me and also my situation.

The narrative that goes toward constituting my reality would seem to have to be the one which emerges from my behaviour, being expressive of my view on the world, itself shaped by how I tell that view. That is, even where the narrative which I can consciously tell departs from the one someone else would adduce, mine will usually be included in another's, for it is the one in the light of which I normally act (allowing for cases of self-deception and false consciousness). If I adopt the narrative told about me, then this will transform my self-understanding and also how I now tell myself.

What this also makes clear is the provisional and unfinished nature of the narrative which joins the threads of my life and through which I understand myself. It is

provisional, only inasmuch as it is always open to revision and change as I go through life. This certainly does not mean that I always see it this way. Some things run too deep in me to be able to see that I might ever see them any other way, even though later I may come to. Telling someone that they might one day see the death of a parent as something other than a loss might strike them as outrageous. The changes that occur need not be radical and might occur slowly over time. If I begin university by studying physics and end up majoring in philosophy, then, by the time I end my degree, I will think differently about the interests I had and decisions I made before I embarked upon my studies. Whereas when I start, I might emphasise how I did well in science and always liked how things fitted together in maths, at the end of my degree I might describe how really I had always gained a pleasure from humanities subjects at school which I did not properly appreciate for some time.

The unfinished nature of my narrative is meant by comparison with fictional narratives, and much biography. Of course, my telling of my narrative ends when I die. For me what I can say about my death is constrained and must be future oriented. Ricoeur admonishes MacIntyre for conflating too readily literary narratives and those embedded in personal identity, noting that where literature will feature a beginning and an end, life's narrative cannot: I do not remember my birth and I will not be able to tell my death.[116] Telling my end can only ever be prospective.

There is also an indeterminate aspect to narrative because my life is not one single narrative, but involves a number of overlapping narratives. I tell and conduct myself differently with different audiences. My relationships differ between groups and people, responding also to their input. They therefore have a place in how I understand myself. I have already said that a single unity cannot be given to my narrative because of the complexity and amount of endeavour in a life.

There can be multiple narratives at the one time because how I understand an event or a problem can change with the telling and even with the audience. Who I am with can shape how I see myself and my issues. We are social agents and this runs deeply in us, since our identity is in part formed in relation to others, whether this is through intimate or formative relations, or in hostile relation to people or outlooks we reject or who reject us. My voice changes, or the matters I discuss, or the pattern of my

[116] Ricoeur 1992: 160

conversation when I change interlocutors. With all of this, I come to understand myself differently at times according to the audience.

While I might express myself differently to different audiences in the light of the relationship I have with them, the fact that I have a relationship with them means they are responding to me and I pick up on this. How people respond to me can inform how I see myself and what I say about myself. I might notice that they treat others differently, and, importantly they might tell me or suggest the reasons for this difference: 'girls don't play footy'; 'you're such a shy person'; 'we didn't take you because you never enjoy that sort of thing'; 'look what happens when you hurt people'. In short, others can not only shape my narrative understanding, they can almost speak it for me or impose it on me. It is easy to come to believe and take on the associations people suggest, indeed it is part of normal socialisation. For better or worse, many people can have an influence on how we as individuals see ourselves in relation to a whole series of issues that arise for us or come to see the world, and what we say about our place in it.

This takes place not only at the level of immediate relationships with family, friends, peers and colleagues, it occurs also at the broader social and cultural level. I have already mentioned briefly Winch's argument, drawing on Wittgenstein, that meaningful behaviour is to be understood in terms of concepts which are available to the agent. These are socially available, and to be understood in terms of the way of life in which they feature and how they interweave, or, as Winch puts it, in terms of the grammar they express.[117] Ricoeur points out that many of these concepts are to be understood in terms of, and themselves emerge from, broader social narratives. Whole communities as well as individuals may even define themselves in relation to cultural narratives. Self understanding can therefore be expanded to including the role of broader social and cultural patterns – seeing the connections between my own narratives and my society's.

This also provides a clearer link between the narratives of history and fiction and those of identity, for how we go about constructing the former narratives can influence how we conceive of selfhood, our place in the world and hence how we narrate ourselves. As Taylor observes, new notions of the self make possible new

[117] Winch 1964: 316; 1990: 46-51

notions of narrativity, since different identities are conceived from different underlying goods; these are accompanied by new forms of narrativity.[118] The reverse also seems possible, for, as Ricoeur explains, literature can be seen as a site for thought experiments about selfhood, allowing us to find what is possible.[119] In the light of literary narrative, we may therefore come to new understandings about ourselves.

### Honesty in Narrative

Earlier, I contended that there remains a continuity in agency because of our narrative identity. However, if narratives change, then surely so do the responsibilities I have. Why not simply choose a narrative that enables me to shed inconvenient responsibilities, much as a cynical business owner might use phoenix companies to offload inconvenient debts in a new business structure? After all people do do this. Once again, in the broadly phenomenological identity I am arguing for the sense of seriousness that surrounds the activity of making sense of one's life demands an honesty with oneself. One point to make is that my narrative is inescapably mine, it is how I understand my story and it cannot simply be willed from thin air. To see these matters as serious in one's life is also to see the need for honesty with regard to them. Socrates demanded honesty from his interlocutors for similar reasons – the matters are of a seriousness such that you are not reflecting properly about your life unless you are doing so honestly. The conception of honesty at play here is a difficult one, for it is clear that self deception plays a role in everybody's lives at some time.

We can be pessimistic like Iris Murdoch, seeing this as a fundamental characteristic of our lives – for Murdoch, we are self-deluding creatures characterised by our selfishness.[120] It is also possible to see our capacity for self-delusion as residing in other areas: as the operation of ideology or of an afflicted psyche. Whatever account is given, it must be acknowledged that our narratives can be untrustworthy for all sorts of reasons. We might trust our own sincerity, and yet still find we have deceived ourselves: a man might sincerely feel that it is the role of a husband to be the sole financial support for his family; later he feels that this was in fact the

[118] Taylor 1992: 105
[119] Ricoeur 1992: 148-51
[120] Murdoch 1967: 364, 368, 382

expression of a cultural disposition to exclude women from public life, and he wonders if it didn't also make him feel more secure in his relationship with his wife at her expense. He had been sincere before, at one level, and yet this does not mean that the narrative through which he understands himself is the final word. As Taylor points out – and anyone who believes we can improve ourselves must feel – there is a role for clarification; Murdoch also believes this is possible, but only in the light of the Good, and then only after we have removed our concentration from ourselves and 'unselfed'. This will clearly require honesty about oneself.

This returns our attention to the way in which narrative is productive of identity even at the same time as being descriptive of it. Who I am is revealed by my behaviour, and this is to be understood in terms of the concepts best employed to describe it. That is, the narrative through which I understand my situation or place in the world also reveals how I locate myself and therefore, in a sense, describes me. Change in narrative identity can occur from a variety of sources, as my earlier discussion on external reasons revealed: it can change as I integrate new experiences, reflectively rework old ones, or develop new aspirations. In some therapeutic processes I can actively set out to reconceive myself by changing the things I say about myself, or how I tell my own story. Someone who has suffered gross abuse might feel themself to be worthless because they feel they were responsible for the abuse. Changing how they narrate their role in past events can also help to change how they see themself more generally. This can be done therapeutically, or destructively, as occurs in some bullying, when a person is ceaselessly run down by someone else and comes to accept and internalise what is said about them. The often slow process involved in therapy and bullying ought also to demonstrate that changing my identity by changing what I say about myself is not a simple task when matters run deep. I cannot simply will myself anew and choose whatever I want about myself. Some things matter in a way which denies simply choosing how I shall understand them, and by implication myself, in future. This is why it would be misguided to think that ethics is opened to caprice by making narrative constitutive of identity at the same time as connecting identity to ethics.

My writing of the need for honesty should not be confused with a relentless quest for 'the truth' in all matters. There are always aspects of myself, my history, my

relations with others and so which I could go on to explore further, and doing so might aid me in making sense of my life. Such a drive could also swamp me, compelling me to chase rabbits down burrows and side-track me from the projects in my life which actually give it meaning and which narrative brings out. The honesty needed here is that there are matters in life which, in a sense, I turn my back on. Part of the art of life would seem to be knowing which ones I can honestly do this with. Some matters cannot be resolved, even though I am tormented by them. Melville describes Captain Vere as he lies dying during a sea battle muttering Billy Budd's name, as if his decision to execute Budd still haunts him even though he felt he had made the right decision. Consigning a matter, for the time at least, as being beyond further exploration does not imply I am being dishonest. It might simply mean that I am exhausted or unable to go over it or delve into it again. If I have suffered a terrible misfortune, then it may be that for some time I am unable to face revisiting it, that I will need to regain energy and some kind of balance before contemplating making sense of what has happened. Part of the point here is that I may never be able to make sense of something, it may defy all attempts. Honesty in this context is, then, an orientation to my life, even if I am sometimes weak before something which persists in it.

There is much more that can be written about narrative. My purpose here has been primarily to show the central role that narrative plays in personal identity. Having done this, I highlighted other features of narrative: that it is interpretive, responsive to the agent whose narrative it is and yet it is open to outside influences. My narrative is not only constitutive of me, but also of my reality, phenomenologically construed as the realm of meaning in which I live. Finally, my narrative is open-ended. So far I have spent these chapters emphasising the interpretive aspect of agency and its connection to who the individual is. With these considerations in mind, I shall now turn to explore two strands of thought in current debates in moral philosophy, as represented by the works of Christine Korsgaard and Jonathan Dancy respectively, before returning to show how K*ritik* is still possible despite what I have argued.

# 4. Excursus on Korsgaard

With the idea of an interpretive self now introduced, this chapter and the next provide an opportunity not only to develop that conception, but to show its ramifications for contemporary pictures of the resources we draw on in moral deliberation. They are excursuses because, rather than advancing the argument as a whole, they fill it out and place it in contemporary debates.

In both excursuses I look at the role of laws in moral deliberation. While arguing a broadly particularist position, I show how Dancy's particularism and Korsgaard's picture of morality as law need to attend to the fact that our identity is interpretive. This not only limits the universal in morality but means that situations are not as individuated or particular as Dancy claims. I begin with Korsgaard.

In *The Sources of Normativity* Korsgaard sets out to answer the normative question: what justifies the claims that morality makes on us?[121] In this chapter I will not be exploring her response to see whether she successfully answers the question, for justifying normativity is not my primary interest. Instead, what interests me here is the picture of moral agency which Korsgaard draws in the course of answering the normative question. It is one that overlaps rewardingly with my own, and yet runs counter to the tenor of almost everything I have written. Drawing extensively on Kant, Korsgaard persuasively argues that the freedom of the will means that we can only act for reasons which we endorse and make our own. Korsgaard argues that the will is not to be understood as operating in the abstract: our reasons are our own because of our practical identity. However, her picture of endorsement and of practical identity misrepresent our moral agency.

I shall begin this chapter with a summary of Korsgaard's picture of human agency and the part that personal identity plays in it. From there, I shall look at the role of law in her conception, questioning first of all its usefulness before arguing that it

[121] Korsgaard 1996: 9-10

distorts her picture. I then turn to the main theme, arguing that Korsgaard's conception and use of human identity is flawed at a number of points because she does not attend properly to the hermeneutic or interpretive aspect of identity. These problems illuminate the persistent problem of Korsgaard's overly reflective conception of identity, namely the demand on us constantly to hold our identity at arm's length.

**Korsgaard on Agency and Identity**

For Korsgaard, human agency is characterised by its reflective structure. The reflective mind needs reasons before it can act. Having a desire gives me an impulse to act, however it does not of itself give me a reason to act. Only reasons are normative. To be a reason, an impulse must first pass a test of normativity, and the test is whether the impulse receives reflective endorsement.[122] 'Reason' for Korsgaard means a kind of reflective success.[123] Korsgaard redescribes this point in terms of freedom: we can only act under the idea of freedom of the will – we can only act with the idea that we could have chosen otherwise. This is a first-person point: it may be true that someone else can accurately predict what I shall choose, but *I* can only act believing I could have done otherwise. Nor can I act on a bidding from outside; I can only act on the basis of a bidding I reflectively endorse. That is, I can only act for my own reasons. By now, the reader is familiar with this last point.

The question remains for Korsgaard, how can I decide to endorse a desire? How can something come to be a reason for me? The answer is taken from Kant.[124] To act under the idea of freedom is to have a free will. A free will is 'a rational causality which is effective without being determined by any alien cause.'[125] The will is practical reason, and so must act and choose for some reason. 'Since reasons are derived from principles, the free will must have a principle.'[126] However, because the will is free, that principle cannot come from outside. In other words, being a causality, the will must act according to a law; but being free will, it cannot be an alien law. The law must come from the will itself. However, since the will needs a principle to have a reason, what reason can it have for choosing one thing as a law

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[122] Korsgaard 1996: 91, 93
[123] Korsgaard 1996: 93, 97
[124] Korsgaard 1996: §3.2.3
[125] Korsgaard 1996: 97
[126] Korsgaard 1996: 98

and not another? At this point, the only constraint is that the principle the will endorses has the form of a law.

Korsgaard has adopted the Formula of Universal Law of Kant's categorical imperative. However, adapting Kant, Korsgaard asserts that the categorical imperative is simply the requirement on the will to choose a maxim which can be willed as law. All law is universal. On this picture, the moral law does not tumble out of the categorical imperative. Instead, the moral law is a particular variety of law, namely that which can be willed as law by all rational beings. 'The moral law tells us to act only on maxims that all rational beings could agree to act on together in a workable cooperative system.'[127] The categorical imperative does not have any necessary content as Korsgaard conceives it. What content the moral law has is unclear – a theme to which I shall return later.

What does give the law content is that the agent is situated. Real people have desires, which we can construe broadly. Some desires, then, emerge from our way of life and are not simply natural responses. I may desire to go to the football, or to church; I may desire to settle down in a big house, or to chase an impressive career no matter where it takes me. Korsgaard recognises the multiplicity of people's interests and what gives rise to them. The law we choose will be one which we see as expressive of who we are. Korsgaard continues the first-person, or phenomenological, approach:

> When you deliberate, it is as if there were something over and above all of your desires, something which is *you*, and which *chooses* which desire to act on. This means that the principle or law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of *yourself*. To identify with such a principle or way of choosing is to be…a law to yourself.[128]

Personal identity stabilises our law-making and gives it content. But who is this 'I'? First of all, it is nothing metaphysical. Korsgaard is serious in her first-person approach – our agency may depend upon this sense of self, but it does not follow that it has a metaphysic. When I identify myself, I do so through description: as a Citizen

[127] Korsgaard 1996: 99
[128] Korsgaard 1996: 100

of the Kingdom of Ends, a student, a man and so on. Clearly, these can aggregate and overlap – at times messily. Korsgaard calls this one's practical identity, 'It is better understood as a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.'[129] On Korsgaard's account, identity's power is its role in normativity: we act to preserve it. Acting in a way which threatens your identity threatens your sense of self, it is to risk no longer being able to see yourself in terms which you value and therefore to risk no longer seeing your life as valuable. Threats to your identity generate obligations – if you do not do what you are obliged to, then you are not meeting the standards you have set for yourself, you consequently cannot see yourself in the way you would wish and your identity is threatened. Meeting your obligations preserves your identity. 'If reasons arise from reflective endorsement, then obligation arises from reflective *rejection*.'[130]

**On Agents as Law-makers**

It is worth pausing Korsgaard's argument here to reflect on her arguments so far. I shall begin by briefly exploring Korsgaard's emphasis on law-making, which distorts agency at the outset. Looking at the place of law in her approach will in turn lead us into a more sustained examination of Korsgaard's understanding of practical identity, which is more seriously flawed.

Korsgaard's phenomenological introduction of the free will is one with which I clearly sympathise. It does seem as if we can only act with the thought that, in principle at least, we could have chosen otherwise – this can be what is unsettling even when we claim moral necessity as discussed in 'Reaching My Limit'. However, no sooner does she argue that we can only act for reasons which are our own than Korsgaard moves into a picture of reasons and endorsement which is stultified by law and law-making. What she does show is that it is possible to conceive of human agency in these terms; what she is unable to show is the plausibility of the account which thereby emerges.

The claim that the free will must have principles because reasons derive from principles will be a red rag to any particularist bull. To continue that all law is

[129] Korsgaard 1996: 101
[130] Korsgaard 1996: 102

universal can only aggravate matters. I shall explore particularism at length in the next chapter. However, Korsgaard seems accidentally to run afoul of one strand of particularist argument at the outset when she defines the categorical imperative only as the need to choose as law only those maxims which can be willed as law: these laws are so universal they seem empty.[131] They are indeed empty until they are instantiated, except that it is unclear just what such a law will look like in the real world of practical action. Of course, Korsgaard makes clear that not all laws are moral laws and that the moral law is only one domain of law. Furthermore, since it specifically ranges over all rational beings, it is not without content, even if it does not give us the entire content of morality. However, the question still remains, exactly what shape is such a law to take?

Korsgaard gives some more detail about what a law might look like when, drawing on Aristotle, she argues that it is form and not content which makes a good maxim. 'A good maxim is good in virtue of its internal structure. Its internal structure, its form, makes it fit to be willed as a law.'[132] However, this can only go a small way towards addressing the issues of the content and shape of law.

Korsgaard is insistent that law is universal, even though it is meant to be responsive primarily to the individual agent doing the willing. Korsgaard is careful to connect the law to the individual and the law acted on is one which the individual wills as the person she or he is. Content is primarily given by the person doing the willing – their identity determines the domain over which the law ranges.[133] Someone who identifies as a citizen of the Kingdom of Ends will make laws which range over all rational beings; a wanton's law will range only over their immediate desire, relentlessly endorsing it. But the latter cannot seriously qualify as law; and Korsgaard essentially agrees with this when she argues that such a person would fail to have a self at all.[134] The universality of the law of a practical will is conceived in terms of regularity: since the will is a causality it has to be able to determine that its actions are the result of its own agency. To do this the will requires the possibility of

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[131] Korsgaard 1996: 99. In a footnote on the same page she clarifies that the moral law is not an empty formalism – she is curiously silent on whether she agrees the categorical imperative is.
[132] Korsgaard 1996: 108
[133] Korsgaard 1996: 99
[134] Korsgaard 1996: 228

my actions and their effects being produced in some regular way;[135] not only this, but when 'I endorse acting a certain way now, I must at the same time endorse acting the same way on every relevantly similar occasion.'[136]

So the universality at issue here is one of regularity and remains the universality of an individual, unless the agent chooses to expand it to include what others would choose, as the citizen of the Kingdom of Ends will. The question remains, just how specific do these laws get in order to remain plausibly rendered as universal? Just what is going to be a relevantly similar occasion? If they become too specific, then we may wonder just why we call them laws at all, let alone describe them as universal.

Exactly what is universal here? If we end up with an infinite number of fine-grained laws, then the idea of acting on the basis of principle seems to have fallen by the wayside. The point of introducing law in the first place was to give the will, as a cause, the kind of regularity we find in other causes. Korsgaard clearly does not lump the will together with the natural causal phenomena studied in the physical sciences – that is the point of distinguishing the free will from other causes in the first place. However, importing this kind of causal story into her theory of agency comes at the expense of making unclear just what the real scope of any law is meant to be. Making the scope large renders the law implausible; making it fine-grained makes it useless as law. For instance, 'do not intentionally tell falsehoods' is too universal. Beginning the task of refining this becomes hopeless. One can introduce qualifications such as, 'except if it will save a life, or is a social custom which otherwise will not cause harm….', however an indefinite number of further qualifications will end up being called for.

Korsgaard's picture of agency in terms of law is extended to the point where our agency is divided into two parts – a legislator and a citizen.[137] This description arises

[135] Korsgaard 1996: 227

[136] Korsgaard 1996: 228. Compare this to Winch's example of using a bookmark (Winch 1990: 50) which I draw on in a later chapter. Winch argues that using a slip of paper as a bookmark commits a person to future action (namely, intending to use the slip to open the book at page again). If this is regularity (drawing on Wittgenstein's rule-following as he does, it seems at least akin to it) it seems very different to Korsgaard's. Korsgaard emphasises the relation between regularity on the one hand and law and causality on the other. But it seems absurd to claim that having endorsed the use of this slip of paper to mark a page, I must endorse doing this on all similar occasions. In contrast to law and causality, Winch is interested in meaning and shows only that it cannot be given in isolation from others, he does not bind people to regularity in the way Korsgaard does, who wants the rigidity of law.

in a later section, when Korsgaard argues that we are compelled to treat others' humanity as a reason. I shall shortly look at this argument more closely. My current concern is to note this description and the strangeness of the picture it draws. In fact, it is unclear just how earnest Korsgaard is about this metaphor. The division of the self begins harmlessly enough as a useful lesson about the place of identity in her account. As was mentioned, identity obliges because embedded in it are the standards you set yourself – if you do not meet them, then you jeopardise your self-conception. Korsgaard notes the common thought when contemplating some actions, 'I couldn't live with myself'. In light of this expression she splits the self into two, 'me and the one I must live with and so must not fail.'[138] At this point, the division seems only illustrative. However, soon this point is used to incorporate the strengths of voluntarism as she finds them in the work of Hobbes and Pufendorf. These two thinkers make clear the role of a legislator: law is made by a legislator who thereby makes obligation possible.[139] As it turns out, these voluntarists are right on Korsgaard's account because of our twofold agency: as a law-maker self and citizen-self who acts, if not always obediently.[140]

The metaphor is reinforced when Korsgaard applies Wittgenstein's private language argument to reasons for action. For a language to be meaningful there must be the possibility of making a mistake in it, and this means that someone else must agree with the rule (or law) which is being applied. On Korsgaard's reading, there is a legislator (in the realm of meaning) establishing a law, and a citizen who acknowledges it. The analogy is extended to the case of reasons: there is a legislative self – the reflecting or thinking self – and a citizen self – the acting self.[141] But this makes things seem bizarre, for I am not a citizen obedient to my own legislator – if a kind of phenomenology can get us into this, then it surely ought to check us when we find ourselves deviating badly from it. That we make our own law should not lead us into reifying the metaphor of government in agency. The complication need not arise if Korsgaard did not become so involved in the notion of law-making in the first place. It seems especially odd to continue emphasising this dual self when her approach pivots on us acting to preserve our identity – integrity matters precisely

[137] Korsgaard 1996: 137-8
[138] Korsgaard 1996: 101
[139] Korsgaard 1996: §§1.3.1-4. See esp. pp. 24, 27
[140] Korsgaard 1996: 104
[141] Korsgaard 1996: 137-8, 101

because it represents a unified agency. If preserving our identity and thereby a unified agency matters so much, why cleave it in two?

What began as a useful illustration ends up out of control. As it turns out, even the illustration was unnecessary, since there is a better way of looking at identity which might be seen as a refinement on Korsgaard's own, but has serious implications once it is taken seriously.

**Practical identity and self-conceptions**

Korsgaard introduces identity first in terms of our conception of ourself, and then as the description under which you value yourself and find your life worth living.[142] The first point to note is that this description is no straightforward matter. Korsgaard understandably provides examples which are readily intelligible, such as our valuing ourselves as a student with a particular sex and ethnicity and so on. However, these identifications have no content intrinsic to them – while they might fill out the horizon within which someone acts in the world, they at the same time depend for their significance upon that horizon and the person's way of life. That is, these roles and self-understandings are interpretively understood. We might feel it is uncomplicated on the whole to identify ourselves as a man or a woman by 'pointing to' our sex-chromosomes, but this does not really adequately address the issue of our identification. The plethora of feminist debates around the 'question of woman' are testimony to how complicated this kind of personal identity is even when the categories used in it are treated as uncomplicated (and this cannot be assumed at the outset).

Another example is of someone who identifies himself as a student.[143] What the person understands when identifying himself as a student is unclear. Certainly there are limits to what a person might intelligibly mean, since there will have to be some relationship to learning. When identifying himself as a student, the person is in fact locating himself in the world: with respect to institutions and social roles which are external to him, as well as within the arc of his own life, since his identification as a student will be filled out by what he thinks is involved in being a student. That is, he may just think it is a process of attending the required classes and passing the

[142] Korsgaard 1996: 100-1
[143] See Korsgaard 1996: 26-7, §3.3.4

required assessment tasks. Of course, others may think such a person is only the empty shell of a student – they claim the student is not concerned enough with learning to think or enquire or take an interest in the world around himself, but only to do the things required of him – he only 'wants a piece of paper'.[144] The other students who think this clearly have quite a different self-conception insofar as their practical identity as 'student' goes. We discover the difference in what the students say about themselves: they may locate themselves identically in external terms, as someone who left high-school last year and is now enrolled at the University of Melbourne, but the activity they see themselves to be engaged in as students, and the self-understanding which comes with that, will be quite different. That is to say, their practical identity will in fact be given in their personal narrative, and we are thereby returned to the issues arising from narrative identity. What is worth noting here is how this returns us to the interpretive aspect of identity – a more hermeneutic understanding.

It is important to be clear that Korsgaard is not concerned about the description under which we *understand* ourselves, she is concerned about the description under which we *value* ourselves. Korsgaard is interested in the role identity plays in answering the normative question, and describing ourselves in narrative does not seem to address that. Korsgaard's contention is that what does go toward addressing it is not how we understand ourselves, but how we value ourselves. Indeed, this is what motivates her to talk of two selves in the first place, since my descriptive identity will usually deviate from my normative identity (how I would like to see myself).

Nonetheless, even the description under which I value myself is going to contain a strong interpretive dimension to it. Narrative identity incorporates the 'two selves' of self-understanding, and while doing so it retains the unity of the agent – the agent is now someone who would like to be this kind of a person, or a person who embodies these ideals, but in fact recognises how they are in jeopardy of falling away from them. That is, the narrative brings the normative and descriptive together. More than

[144] Korsgaard in fact seems impressed by such a student insofar as his orientation to attending class goes (Korsgaard 1996: §3.3.4). There is no sign that Korsgaard is impressed by the reason for him being a student in the first place – 'to get a piece of paper' – but it is interesting how each lends itself to the other so well. Law-giving once again does not seem to be a helpful way of approaching the issue of identity.

this, as Taylor notes, it not only gives me my position with respect to what I find valuable, it gives me my trajectory – whether I am getting closer or slipping away.

As was just mentioned, even though the description under which I value myself might be different to that under which I understand myself, the interpretive aspect of identity re-emerges within it. This means that an ineliminable element of identity is the horizon of meaning which goes toward constituting it. This arises in particular in relation to those aspects from which reasons are said to emanate. If my being a student is said to create reasons for me, then the reasons which it actually does create are going to depend upon my conception of studentship. It therefore remains open as to what actually follows from my being a student. This point has important implications for Korsgaard's argument for the necessity of identifying with (and therefore valuing) our humanity. I shall now turn to consider this argument and show how it falls prey to the same kind of problems.

*Identifying with my humanity*

I have already introduced Korsgaard's argument for seeing our agency as that of a free-will which must make its own laws, and how she connects this to practical identity. If it is our identity which stabilises laws by establishing the sort of laws we might choose, then the question remains, is there any identity I must have or am obliged to find compelling? This is an important question for Korsgaard, since it is the necessity of acting in the light of our human identity on which her answer to the normative question finally turns. Her argument for this necessity runs thus:

> …[U]nless you are committed to some conception of your practical identity, you will lose your grip on yourself as having any reason to do one thing rather than another – and with it your grip on yourself as having any reason to live and act at all. But *this* reason for conforming to your particular practical identities is not a reason that *springs from* one of those particular practical identities. It is a reason that springs from your humanity itself, from your identity simply as a *human being*…And so it is a reason you have only if you treat your humanity as a practical, normative form of identity…

> But to value yourself just as a human being is to have moral identity, as the Enlightenment understood it.[145]

There is a big gap in this argument. Recognising that I depend on my commitment to a conception of my practical identity[146] because without it I become rudderless seems enough in its own right to make me avoid jeopardising my self-conception. Why do I need to go and hunt the reason which makes possible this reason and value it? Nothing seems to follow necessarily from my recognition that it is my being human which is the source of my need to be committed to my conception of practical identity. As a further thing to value it seems redundant, since I already have a very powerful reason to conform to my conception of practical identity: without it, I will lose my way, lose my self and be miserable. Therefore, there already seems to be very good reason to value my practical identity well before wondering what the source of this reason might be. Upon finding this source, I might find it interesting, but still need not be moved to build it into my practical identity. In a similar vein, I can recognise the role my DNA plays in cell production in my body without having to go so far as incorporate it into my self-conception. True enough, it identifies me and I would act to preserve its function if I felt it was jeopardised, but it seems an additional stretch to say I must therefore identify myself with it. If we are emphasising the practical in practical identity, then this does not seem a necessary part of my identity even if, on reflection, I recognise its importance for my wellbeing.

Korsgaard has moved too fast from recognising that human agency is characterised by our need to identify ourselves in various ways, to thinking that we must therefore identify with our humanity and value it.

> Most of the time, our reasons for action spring from our more contingent and local identities. But part of the normative force of those reasons springs

[145] Korsgaard 1996: 120-1

[146] It should be noted that this is a tendentious way of putting things, because it is from my practical identity that reasons emerge, not from my conception of it, as I show at greater length later this chapter, in the section ‘Action and Identity’.

> from the value we place on ourselves as human beings who need such identities. In this way all value depends on the value of humanity…'[147]

While it is true that our practical identities depend in some sense on our being human, it does not follow that all our value depends on the value of humanity. We do not need to value our humanity *per se* to value our manifestation of it. This point might seem only formal, as if I am claiming that Korsgaard does not establish her case simply because one inference in her argument is not necessarily true. Construed this way, the formal point might well seem trivial, since it does look like people value their humanity: people talk about human dignity all the time - even racists. But that is an important part of my point – the racist is clearly meaning something different to Korsgaard when he talks about the value of our humanity. Korsgaard seems to recognise this point when she connects our valuing our humanity to Enlightenment moral identity. It may be true that the members of a society which inherits the ideals of the Enlightenment identify themselves as human in a way which gives them a universalist moral identity. However, this only seems one possible way of valuing humanity. What we mean by human and wherein we think lies its value has to be filled out – the Enlightenment ideal, laudable as it is, remains only one possibility.

This point only returns us once again to the basic point about the interpretive nature of identity and that what we mean by 'human' and what we think humanity's value is will have to be filled out and made manifest in our way of life.

**The Interpretive Aspect of Recognition**

My argument might seem to be unfair since on one reading it may be thought implicitly to confuse two moments of argument which Korsgaard wants to keep separate – valuing our own humanity, and valuing that of others. When she first argues for the necessity of valuing our own humanity, Korsgaard is quite clear that at this point she is assuming that to value your own humanity is to value others'. Her argument for the legitimacy of this comes later. By analogy with Wittgenstein's private language argument Korsgaard argues that reasons are also public and shared. Language is essentially public, and, understanding it, we cannot hear it just as noise;

[147] Korsgaard 1996: 121

I am able to intrude on your consciousness just by talking to you. By asking you to do something I give you a reason to do it. 'We do not seem to need a reason to take the reasons of others into account. We seem to need a reason not to.'[148]

To argue that moral obligations emerge from others' reasons Korsgaard builds on this and writes:

> Suppose that we are strangers and that you are tormenting me, and suppose that I call upon you to *stop*. I say: 'How would you like it if someone did that to you?' And now you cannot proceed as you did before. Oh, you can proceed all right, but not just as you did before. For I have obligated you to stop.
>
> How does the obligation come about?...I invite you to consider how you would like it if someone did that to you…You would think that the other has a reason to stop, more, that he has an obligation to stop. And that obligation would spring from your own objection to what he does to you…[Y]ou make yourself a law to them. But if you are a law to others in so far as you are just human…then the humanity of others is also a law to you.[149]

Korsgaard is not in the first instance trying to run her argument by appealing to consistency, as if you are in the first instance obligated to stop via consideration of how you would feel if you were tormented (though she seems to think this *as well*). Her point is meant to derive its force from the publicity of reasons and not from requirements stemming from consistency: others have the power to intrude on me with their reasons because of the structure of reason-giving, which is public. The difficulty remains, however, that what this strategy depends upon is the two parties actually recognising each other as the kind of entity which demands this consideration in the first place. All I need to do is deny the person's humanity. This can clearly be done inauthentically, just to win a point or so that my actions retain the

[148] Korsgaard 1996: 140-1. Korsgaard says that this is obligation – asking you to stop not only gives you a reason to stop, I have obligated you. This conception of obligation contrasts interestingly with that given earlier in terms of a threat to identity – however, I will not be able to explore this further here.

[149] Korsgaard 1996: 142-3

form of reasonableness even when what I am doing is terrible. But if I have to insist through clenched teeth that you are not human, then Korsgaard's point still seems good, since it looks as though you have obligated me and I have had to find reasons to deny you. The more troubling occasions are those in which the person's humanity is not even brushed aside as irrelevant, it is simply not recognised at all. Gaita makes this clearer when he talks of the need to recognise someone's *common* humanity[150] - that they hold their humanity in common with us in the first place. For we might admit that a black person is human insofar as they are a member of the species *Homo sapien* and still deny their humanity. The chilling thing about attitudes such as racism is that people do not always recognise others as a limit to their will – they do not see others' humanity to be in common with their own. When the other cries 'stop' their words have meaning, but they carry no weight.

Korsgaard's points are not without their force: commonly the racist is called to attention by other people – they may have a warm home life and be attentive parents. So, on Korsgaard's account, the racist still lives in a world of shared reasons, and her arguments may therefore carry weight with such a person. Korsgaard is clear that it is not the power of language which obligates us, it is the power of others to intrude on me with their reasons. I have to recognise the speaker as much as I must recognise their language. The issue remains, which others? The interpretive problem returns: who do we consider human, what kind of human are they, and what weight should this carry?

**Identity and Action**

I want to return now to Korsgaard's use of personal identity in her answer to the normative question. In particular, I shall explore her suggestion that we act to preserve our identity. Seeing the weaknesses in this will illuminate the more basic problems in how Korsgaard models the relation between action and identity, for the strength of identity as an explanatory tool is that it emerges in a social horizon of meanings which come to form an assumed background of meanings. That is, we act from our identity, not in the light of it.

[150] Gaita 1999

Korsgaard argues that I act to preserve my integrity – that is, I act so as not to jeopardise my practical identity. She also recognises that we can knowingly do wrong and not jeopardise our practical identity – as long as we don't let things get out of hand. This description of the matter is fine as far as it goes. However, Korsgaard makes the risk of a loss of identity omnipresent. Obligation arises as a threatened loss of identity. That is, the description under which I value myself would no longer be available to me. One question might be, when was this description ever really available to me? People who think that such a description is accurate are usually kidding themselves. Any lucid person will recognise the various ways in which they fall short of what they ought to be. Of course, it is common for people to slide too far the other way, and descend into depression or anxiety about their manifold failings. What we do not lose is our identity, and this is displayed in our personal narrative – *I* am the person who is failing here. The challenge as Korsgaard sees it is to avoid this getting out of hand. There is a point where the gap between my actions and the values I espouse will become too big. What I am then seeing is that I can no longer plausibly suggest I embody the values I espouse. In Korsgaard's terms, the description under which I value myself is lost to me, and I lose my practical identity.

Except, of course, that I probably won't. There is a range of complex issues here touching on clinical psychology which I am not in a position to explore. However, letting this gap get out of hand can manifest itself in a range of ways, but need not see me lose my practical identity. It might be that I learn my expectations were unrealistic so that I would always be miserable in their light. It may reawaken in me the need to improve myself – which in Korsgaard's terms may mean I never lost that identity. Whatever the case, when things get out of hand in the way Korsgaard suggests, the threat does not seem to be a loss of identity and consequent existential malaise. Instead, it seems more likely to manifest in either some kind of self-hatred or depression.[151] Of course, no one wants to suffer these either, so the threat still seems immanent in our identity, even if we quibble over what kind of threat it is.

On Korsgaard's account, letting the gap get out of hand will see me lose my practical identity – see me lose the description of myself under which I value myself. The loss

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[151] This is similar to Cohen's point, see (Cohen 1996: 177).

of practical identity is meant to see us losing any reason to choose one thing over another or even to live at all. What in fact seems to be the case is that this identity is not lost – I still value this description, it is just that I no longer value myself. The values which my Korsgaardian practical identity embodies remain in place, it is just that I now recognise the myriad ways I fail to live it. There are a number of identities which are unlikely (if ever) to be lost or threatened – the question for the agent is not whether the identity is threatened but, 'What sort of X am I?' An example is that of a father. As long as his child is alive, and likely even after, he will see himself as a father, even if he is a terrible one. The identity can be unshakable and still guide a person's actions. But now we must be careful not to confuse ourselves about what we mean by identity and its role. The temptation here might be to reintroduce the split self - the self I am and that which I value. The guiding assumption would then be that I recognise my descriptive self – my acting self – and hold up before myself another self, that of an ideal, the description of self under which I would value myself if I were not so base. But this only makes clear an artificiality which has been present throughout Korsgaard's account, an artificiality stemming from her overly reflective conception of identity.

*Acting* Out Of *My Identity*

What our narrative identity brings out is the way in which we see the world and our place in it – it shows our orientation in the world. In bringing this out, it will locate me socially, including such things as social roles, personal relationships and so on. It will also bring to the fore the values I have - standard orientations I have toward various issues, actions, ambitions and so on. Once again, it brings out my horizon of significance. My narrative may assist in self-understanding, but it should not ossify my self-conception. It is not something I hold before myself and use to justify my actions. The narrative delineates the self out of which I act. I normally act *out of* my personal identity, not in the light of it. Of course, it is sometimes reasonable to reflect on my practical identity and act in the light of this. It is plausible to do so at some moments in my life: being an accountant, I have a fiduciary duty to my clients; being a student, I must submit to assessment. What's more, these identities are such that they can be threatened as well – the accountant can be barred from the profession and a student expelled from their institution. In general, however, I do not hold myself before myself. Instead, my identity forms the backdrop against which questions are

asked. It is usually a very thin kind of reasoning to suggest that because I have this identity, I should see things thus and so, and therefore choose this course of action. All too often this looks like rationalisation and an unwillingness to undertake the often painful activity of self-criticism.

I have already made clear the openness of reasons; earlier in this chapter I also made clear the openness of my identifications: understanding myself as a student remains an interpretive issue – without elucidation it need not tell us anything beyond the fact I am involved in some kind of learning activity. What my narrative reveals is what I in fact think it is to be a student, and at the same time how I see myself with respect to this. In bringing out what I think it is to be a student, the narrative need not represent an ideal student, even though it will offer an account which enables self-criticism to take place.

I shall now develop in more detail what I mean by acting *out of* my identity. This is when I deliberate *out of* who I am – when my identity sets the horizon within which things gain their sense. Winch makes clear what this might be in his article 'Moral Integrity' when he uses the example of Tolstoy's Father Sergius.[152] Being a hermit can be a role or a vocation: it can be something in the light of which one acts, as just described ('a true hermit would remain celibate'); or it can be a way of life out of which (from which) one simply acts – the decision not to sleep with a woman when the opportunity is presented needs no real contemplation for someone inhabiting the vocation of a hermit. Winch emphasises this distinction when he uses the example of Tolstoy's Father Sergius, who has devoted himself to a monastic hermit life. On one occasion early in his vocation he does not succumb to a woman's attempt to seduce him, but does succumb to another woman later in his life. Winch reads this as being because Sergius' perspective has changed. Earlier he viewed the woman's attempt to seduce him through the eyes of a man committed to religion; the second time he was no longer certain and saw the fulfilment of his religious duties as an *object* to be achieved – that is, the desire for religious perfection was set beside lust and a choice was made between the two. Earlier this would not have been possible because Sergius had seen lust *through the eyes of* a religious person. Acting in the light of an identity he aspires to has made his decision-making thinner. The early Sergius - who

[152] Winch 1968: 187-9

we might say inhabited the role of monk as a way of life - simply acted out of that way of life. This is perhaps what a vocation is.

I mentioned that sometimes aspects of our identity will feature in our deliberations, and that this is most obviously the case in professional roles. In the first instance it remains an open question as to how we conceive this role – as I have shown in previous chapters, this will in fact emerge from how I inhabit that role. We are also now in a better place to see how it might feature. In this connection I shall once again use the example of Captain Vere in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, since being a captain of a warship is a clearly delineated role and Vere is a man who clearly identifies himself in terms of his naval life. How being captain of a warship features in Vere's deliberation is clearly not the same as saying, 'I am this kind of captain, and so I will be right to execute Budd.' Nor is he asking, 'What would a good captain do now?' Instead, we can see Vere as acting out of his captaincy, just as Sergius acted out of his being a hermit. While it is because *he* is the captain of this ship that he must make this decision (and he cannot be unaware of this), he identifies with his role in such a way that he also deliberates from within it. Just as Sergius' being a monk is not accidental to his seeing things as he did the first time a woman tried to seduce him, similarly Vere's being a captain is not accidental to how he sees things and acts – especially important is that his own embodiment of this role is not what Vere appeals to, rather his decision just is him embodying it.

The usefulness of identity in these discussions is the way in which we by and large act out of it unreflectively. It emerges in relation to other people – some close and others distant. We take on and share a way of life with others and in the process come to develop a set of background understandings. These are essential for us in getting about in the world, and we largely draw on them unreflectively. The way our actions emerge from our self-understandings is largely implicit – ask me why I did something and I can give you a reason. Ask me why I have this reason and I may be able to give you a further reason. Was all of this running through my head when I willed my action? No. Personal identity's power lies in its ability to make sense of people's having the reasons they do: the fact that these reasons are only intelligible against the background of their life and this in turn against the background of the world in which they move. From a third-person perspective, it makes sense of the

reasons people can have, especially when they seem remote to us – it is the recognition that they are operating within a different horizon of meaning in which the sense of our actions and possibilities is different.

None of this should be taken to nullify Korsgaard's important point that we are able to reflect on all of this – who I am and the kind of role that I should let various matters play in my life. Often we wish that someone would reflect a little more often or more deeply. For while my invocation of an unreflective identity makes possible the 'honest peasant' who does not need moral theory to understand the right thing to do, it is also a feature of the unthinking bigot. Korsgaard's analysis of communitarianism points to the fact that just because we develop against a cultural background which gives depth to our lives, this does not stop us from reflecting on this and considering the kind of role we want our community to play. Of course, it is equally important to note that such reflection will not take place from nowhere – we can only think about ourselves from within ourselves.

Of course, identity can be used reflectively. I can be brought to a point where I recognise what an awful person I have become – how my actions are those of a person who is debased in some way. Reaching this point, I may gain a better understanding of what is involved in being a better person. Identity can also be used as a prophylactic in a way analogous to Korsgaard's conception, for instance when I consider an action and realise what I would become in performing it – a murderer or traitor, for example. Understanding the nature of the action, I recognise the kind of person who would perform it and thereby who I would become. However, this is not the standard practice. Indeed if it were to become so, moral concern would only be a kind of narcissistic self-regard.

Moral concern will usually be outwardly directed – our life with others is what brings it into focus. Living with others, we (hopefully) recognise them as a limit to our will. Korsgaard has attempted to demonstrate how we are rationally committed doing this. My interest has had less to do with the adequacy of her response than with elements of it which overlap with my own project. I have drawn on my conception of narrative identity to show the limitations of her use of practical identity. I have also argued her use of law unnecessarily complicates her argument. In the next chapter, rather than continuing with the Kantian tradition and its use of universal law, I

continue with this theme by turning to look at moral particularism and Jonathan Dancy's development of it in particular.

# 5. Excursus on Dancy

While Korsgaard is the bearer of an established tradition seeing morality in terms of universal law, a school of thought has recently emerged which argues principles have no place in morality. One of the more radical proponents of this view is Jonathan Dancy. Dancy emphasises the particularity of all cases in moral life. No rules or principles are able to cover all cases, and reasons for action are not stable – what is a reason for an action in one case may be a reason against in another. These are views I largely endorse, and in this chapter I develop them by analysing features of Dancy's work.

I have thus far argued for a variety of moral pluralism which takes seriously the idea that there are many reasonable ways of living a life, and later I shall explore the resources available for *Kritik*. But if this is the case and I also believe there are no rules covering all cases, then what do I say to, for instance, the religious person who thinks that all cases are covered by rules backed by divine authority? I begin by briefly outlining Dancy's particularism and its connection to what I have argued so far, noting in passing that while cultural life can sometimes be taken to be expressive of absolute rules (for instance those emanating from religious texts), what is often informative is how these rules are taken up, rather than how they read on paper. From there I turn to look at thick concepts, such as courage, kindness, racism and so on. Thick concepts are often taken to have the same valence for or against an action in all situations. Dancy argues persuasively against this view, but reaches an impasse when he acknowledges some thick concepts are invariant, always counting for or against actions in the same way.

Since principles cannot help us in ethics, the particularist places a premium on correct judgement and a sensitivity to what is at issue in each case. However, this sensitivity is developed through experience and our life amongst others – key features of our interpretive agency. My identity is developed in narrative and against the background of the life I have amongst others. This means that reasons do not

simply emerge from situations, they are connected with who we are as agents. Situations are not quite as particular as the particularist wishes. The point in some ways anticipates what I argue about *Kritik* in later chapters. Experience brings with it resources which go well beyond the situation at hand. I finish the chapter with a brief look at Dancy's analysis of moral conflict. While largely endorsing what he writes, its limits will prepare us for the closer analysis I give of conflict and consistency in the next chapter.

**Outlining Particularism**

Dancy succinctly summarises his understanding of particularism thus: 'The leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behaviour of a reason (or of a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere.'[153] His Particularism is comprised of two parts: a particularism that denies that morality can be described in a set of principles; and a holism which claims a 'feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another.'[154] The result is that there is no way of determining in advance of a situation just how any reason should operate – this is an outcome of each situation taken as a whole. There is no general set of principles to draw on in our deliberation, nor is there any way of being sure how a reason will operate on different occasions. This has a special significance for theories of ethics which seek to establish concrete notions of right action.

It might at first appear that what I have written so far need not entail anything in particular in the debate around particularism. To see this it is important to be clear that Dancy's holism operates on a different axis from the open understanding of reasons for which I argued in 'The Openness of Reasons'. Holism concerns how features of the world will stand as reasons from case to case: namely, the same feature in different cases can be a different reason in each case. In 'The Openness of Reasons' I was connecting reasons to our interpretive agency to show how an accurate understanding of a reason will be connected to who was instantiating the reason. What is entailed by a reason depends in the first place upon the world view of the person acting. What gives reasons their direction is nothing internal to them,

[153] Dancy 1993: 60
[154] Dancy 2004: 7

rather it is how they stand for the person acting. However, it may be thought that this claim need not entail anything about the domain of the considerations which serve as the basis for people's decision-making. That is, it might be argued that it can be left to the contingencies of how cultures and societies unfold as to how moral injunctions are conceived – as functions of a situation only, or of more general moral rules which need to be applied. In the first chapter I argued that people differ as to how they might answer the question, 'what ought I to do?', and that this connects to how things stand for them insofar as this reflects who they are. This is why I have emphasised the place of personal identity in morality throughout this work. It might therefore seem possible to be neutral on the question of how people ought to conceive the basis of their answer. Must they really also answer the question whether it is reasonable to think, 'and I ought to do this because one ought always….'?

However, Dancy dismisses the question of variation between people, believing that it does not go to the root of the problem, which is the status of reasons themselves and how they function in different situations.[155] Dancy's position suggests that there are in fact two axes: one plotting how matters ought to stand between people and the other between situations. The particularist challenge aims deep, wanting to suggest that a morality based on rules or the thought that some considerations always speak in favour of (or against) an action ultimately cannot be recognised as a moral system at all since it will inevitably lead to the wrong conclusions. Dancy argues that it simply is the case that for any reason there are situations where we can imagine it speaking in favour of a particular action, and others where it would not. He gives the example of my having borrowed a book from you, only to learn that you had stolen it. Normally, having borrowed a book is a reason to return it to the person from whom I borrowed it; this time it is not.[156] There is no room for the neutrality at first suggested above which sought to slip around the question of what sort of ethical system a person might have. Certainly there is variation between people as regards their ethical outlook, but if it is one that is based on reasons always acting in the same way (eg. being a lie always being a reason against an action) then for Dancy it is not to be countenanced as a proper ethical system. Even talking of 'ethical

[155] Dancy 1993: 87

[156] Dancy is clear in *Moral* Reasons there is no reason to return the book. In fact, it may remain a 'defeated' reason for returning it. Dancy's later defence of 'contributory reasons' is intended to allow for just this thought. I explore these later.

systems' here might go too far, if by that we mean a totality of ethical propositions which might enable us to work out what the right thing to do is on any occasion.

The first question might be, just who might feel themselves to be targeted by the particularist? How many people think it is always wrong to lie (- as usual in moral philosophy, the Nazis are knocking on the door and we are hiding a Jew)? Or that lying always speaks against our performing an action? (Lying seems the only way of saving the Jew, it therefore seems to be a positively good idea). Any theory of morality worth its salt will allow that particular natural properties can change their 'valence' depending on the situation, so that something being a lie will make it wrong on some occasions and right on others; what they also claim to be able to do is account for this. It is the last claim to which a particularist would object. The particularist's claim is that even though (non-natural) moral properties supervene on natural properties, the relation between the two levels cannot be cashed out in propositional terms. While a grammar book saves us from learning all the possible sentences of a language off by heart – its usefulness being that it is just one book which needs to be learnt, and not an infinite number of them – in ethics there is no such book available. McDowell and Little both draw on Wittgensteinian arguments about rule-following to make the point that in ethics our understanding of the rule we are following can only ever be based on a finite number of instances, providing the possibility that we might learn through some future occurrence that what we took to be our rule was mistaken.[157] 'I once thought it was always wrong to lie, but then found myself in a position where it would be cruel and absurd to think I should not.' The moral theorist might agree with this person and go on to point out that their insight reflects something deeper about determining moral principles and their complexity. The particularist says it should teach them a lesson about all moral rules: rules do not help because the insight they offer is never the right one, and trying to make them ever more complex only nullifies their usefulness, since the grammar is no longer useful and the tome would need to be of infinite size.

So, what of cultures who do put rules at the centre of their outlook? Examples are the ten commandments, prohibitions on eating certain foods and so on. From a religious viewpoint there is no question of these injunctions being correct, since they are

[157] Little 2000: 283 & McDowell 1981

dictated by gods. It may be pointed out that these rules are not claimed to cover all moral action. What's more, judgement is still required in knowing when some of these rules apply. However, it does seem difficult in this instance to reconcile particularism with pluralism. The particularist seems to be at risk of claiming religions which set down rules are mistaken in their conception of morality. While this is an argument many would be happy with, it is not one that makes sense for a pluralist who wishes to treat other outlooks seriously.

There is no definitive response to this which can be given here. However, it seems possible to make some point about rule-following in the same vein as McDowell and Little above. It is worth observing that it is rare for anyone to demand the rules be followed literally in all situations. The cultural life which is taken to be expressive of these rules falls away from a scrupulous interpretation of them. Fundamentalists lament this as a fall from purity, and try to follow the rules to the letter. How a rule is to be taken up is not given in advance, and the complexity and variety of cultural expressions of these rules shows this. The Wittgensteinian point is that how a rule is taken up shows us what the rule is in the first place – the fundamentalist's assertion of their own purity pre-judges the issue, and shows that the rule itself is not clear-cut. This point connects with larger questions concerning consistency in moral life, which I return to in a moment and develop in more detail at the end of the next chapter.

### Thick ethical concepts

If straightforward rules do not adequately describe moral life, then what of the place of thick ethical concepts? Maybe thick ethical concepts always carry the same valence. Thick ethical concepts are those which carry both an empirical and evaluative component, such as courage, cruelty, loyalty and so on. Dancy's holism means he believes that we cannot extrapolate from how a reason operates in one situation to how it will operate in another. The place of thick ethical ideas in particularism is interesting for how they test its boundaries. His exploration of them brings us to an impasse about the place of those reasons which in fact never do change their valence. Dancy agrees that thick properties span the empirical and evaluative domains,[158] and sets about fitting them to the architecture he has developed for understanding 'thin' concepts like rightness and wrongness. These he

[158] Dancy 1993: 126n

believes are 'resultant properties', since they result from (non-moral) features of a situation without being found amongst those features. The features of it which are *salient* to an action being right or wrong go to make the 'shape' of the situation.[159] The shape of a situation is therefore different to the set of all its features. For instance, the brand of the convenience store is not salient to the wrongness of its being held up and therefore does not feature in the 'shape' of the hold-up.

On Dancy's account thin properties are not distinct from the shape of the thick, since these constitute the thin properties.[160] When an employee of a company tendering for a large project leaks details of the tender to its competitor, the salient features of the employee's conduct may be said to have the 'shape' of treachery (a thick ethical property). By virtue of its being treacherous, combined with the fact there are no other salient features (the process was not already grossly corrupt, for instance), the employee's actions are wrong. The question now is whether the thick property, treachery, is a feature like others. Dancy might well call it an evaluative property, and therefore distinguish it from deontic properties such as rightness and wrongness.[161] For Dancy, deontic properties are not reasons for performing or refusing an action, it is ordinary reasons which go to determine rightness or wrongness. As a holist, he is clear that any non-deontic property can be a reason for an action being wrong or right – it all depends on the particularities of the situation. This extends to thick properties as well: any thick property can in principle be a reason for an action being right or wrong.[162] Not only may treachery not always be wrong, it may actually be right. For instance, police undercover operations will involve a certain amount of treachery and this may not always be a regrettable thing. Such operations may not only be necessary in order to uncover information about organised crime, but the treachery involved may be actively developed since it engenders distrust in crime syndicates and thereby hampers their effectiveness.

However, does this apply to all thick concepts? Little disagrees with Dancy about thick moral ideas. She believes that something being cruel or unjust will always speak against it. [163] Dancy's defence of his position is ambivalent. He acknowledges

[159] Dancy 1993: 112
[160] Dancy 1993: 116
[161] Dancy 1993: 127 and Dancy 2004: 16
[162] Dancy 1995
[163] Little 2000: 289 & 289n

that injustice and cruelty always speak against an action.[164] He then responds that in many ordinary situations such as family life the question whether something is just or unjust often does not arise. The comparison between how we should approach family life and public institutions shows that the role of justice varies with context.[165] However, this obviously does not get us very far. Little agrees with this, writing, 'How justice weighs up with other duties is context-dependent, but that it is good-making is not.'[166] If the question of justice does not arise, then it is not an issue. If it does, there is no reason to think it will trump everything, only that being just will always count in favour of something. Hedging on this point, Dancy allows that there will be some 'invariant reasons' such as justice. An invariant reason is one that has a certain valence whenever it arises. However their invariance is contingent in all cases, it is just that there are no cases where being just would speak against something. What remains primary is that we judge each case in its particularity. The world just happens to be such that justice always counts in something's favour.[167]

The argument reaches an impasse at this point. Dancy might be accused of having squibbed: admitting there are thick concepts which always carry the same valence, but then contending that this is just contingently the case, and we in fact rediscover their valence in each particular situation. A generalist may wonder why, if we acknowledge a reason is invariant, we cannot simply allow ourselves to say in advance, 'an action's being unjust will always count against it?' Whenever we hear that something is unjust, cruel or racist, why not acknowledge that this will count against it, even if we acknowledge there may be other considerations which mean it is still the one we choose. Why bridle at the last jump? Dancy's response suggests that the chosen action will be the same in any case, it is just the form of our thinking which will differ – the generalist's of course being wrong. This is because when the generalist judges an action to be unjust, they will say that this counts against it simply in virtue of its being unjust. However, the holist of Dancy's stripe may also judge an action to be unjust, but will then judge what significance this has in the present situation and, inevitably, find it counts against the action. Either way, being unjust counts against the action. The only way to break this impasse would be to

[164] Dancy 2004: 121 & 77 respectively
[165] Dancy 2004: 121
[166] Little 2000: 289
[167] Dancy 2004: 77-8, see also Dancy 2000: 135-7

develop the argument in terms of a more complex conception of practical reason which could adjudicate the order of things. This is not something I am in a position to do here and am in any case not convinced that it is possible. We will see something akin to this point being made shortly when we look at rules of thumb.

What is interesting is that even a holist like Dancy acknowledges some concepts will carry the same valence in all situations. He is right that this cannot form the basis for codifying morality. Nor does it eliminate the problem of what is to count as injustice. This cannot be given in advance, especially for the particularist. We can say something about the domain over which it ranges, but that is all.[168] Injustice will be discovered anew in each case. This approach affects how we can think of consistency between cases. I shall now turn to look at Dancy on consistency in ethics, which in its turn will lead to me showing how the resources we draw on in deliberation involve more than the situation at hand, which in turn has consequences for Dancy's holism.

## Reasons in decision-making

It is a platitude to say that we must pay attention to the details of the particular situation in thinking about what we should do. The emphasis on particular situations should not obscure the point that reasons must be adduced for making different decisions on different occasions.[169] What's more, these reasons will be open to scrutiny. What this means is that if two situations really do seem the same, or, in Dancy's terms, their shape (as determined by the salient features) is the same, then we would be obliged to act in the same way. Dancy describes this as the requirement for coherence. Particularists seem temperamentally disposed to emphasising the particularity of situations; they are inclined to feel that no two situations every really are the same as far salient features are concerned. However, the point remains that if they were the same, then the same requirements would follow.

To this extent at least, consistency remains a requirement for the particularist. Otherwise Dancy is correct to suggest that the requirement for consistency is less demanding for a particularist of his stripe. For Dancy's particularist, the only duty is to look at the case before one and adjudicate on it. The particular case is emphasised

[168] Dancy 1995: 277
[169] Little 2000: 280 & Dancy 1993: 63-4

without reference to other situations or history, except to the extent to which other situations or history are in fact salient (but then one might in any case say they are then brought back to being part of the particular situation being considered). There is no need to do the same thing as one did in other situations precisely because they are other situations and we cannot read anything from them. To this extent, consistency is indeed less demanding for the particularist. However aspiring to be a particularist begins to look more forbidding when Dancy describes the ideal particularist as the person 'who gets it right case by case.' Their especial talent is a wide range of sensitivities ensuring that neither the relevant features escape them, nor the relevance of those features. Dauntingly, he states, 'To have the relevant sensitivities just is to be able to get things right case by case…' Asking how we might achieve this condition, he offers, 'for us it is probably too late…[F]or those who are past educating, there is no real remedy.'[170]

Very little else is said by Dancy about how a particularist might come to decide what to do in any situation. Injunctions to treat each case separately in its particularity provide very little help when one is actually trying to make a decision. It is readily apparent that Dancy is unable to offer any further guidance precisely because he is trying to argue there are no features of a situation which should always incline us to any particular course of action whenever they are instantiated. Nor are we to be guided by what we have found in other situations - to do so is to risk missing what is particular about each situation and therefore make the wrong decision. But then what are we to make of our experience? Surely it is possible to learn through moral experience. Indeed, if it is possible for us to be educated through role-modelling, then it would seem possible for us to learn from situations and from others' conduct. Dancy writes that it would be surprising if we did not, noting that, 'a comparison with other cases may help us to decide how things are here, just as a long experience of car engines may help us to diagnose the fault at this time.'[171] However, the analogy reveals that Dancy is being disingenuous, as Little makes clear. The mechanic is dealing with a machine in which learning general principles does in fact assist with determining what is going on. Knowing the mechanical process by which a car runs is valuable for a mechanic when thinking about what might be wrong with

[170] Dancy 1993: 64
[171] Dancy 1993: 63

a car. The mechanic is ready to admit before carrying out a repair that she may be wrong, and that some further consideration of which she is unaware may be in play, however her choice of repair is still guided by a principled understanding of the mechanical system. It is also true, as Dancy suggests, that experience will add to her knowledge of the factors that come into play. The analogy between mechanical systems and moral situations is clearly limited, which ironically is part of the point that a particularist would wish to make. For moral situations, we do draw on our experience:[172] sometimes it reveals the particularity of our situation, however, often it is because we have learnt rules of thumb that can guide us. We know that the particularity of a situation must trump them when it presents itself, but this does not stop us from drawing on them. This is part of what seems stubborn in Dancy's use of invariant reasons. Moral experience is helpful, and it cannot work except by making reference to other occasions. What are we doing when we draw on past experiences if we are not drawing on other situations? Experience not only shows us the range of possibilities, it also helps us triangulate what is salient in any situation.

Little makes a similar point when she states that rules of thumb are just statements suggesting that there is presumptively reason for thinking that, for instance, stabbing is cruel.[173] She argues that this kind of presumption is reasonable and common-place and has some 'epistemic warrant' as a result of its connection with the contexts in which it is anticipated to be needed. We make a judgement as to what we might anticipate our world to be like throughout our life and these generalisations emerge from this. Presuming that occasions of stabbing will be cruel does not mean that we think all occasions will be cruel. What's more, it takes 'epistemic skills' to be able to judge whether these presumptions are justified in general and, more especially, whether they apply to the particular situation. The skill is necessary precisely because the judgement itself does not rely upon generalisations which are codifiable, nor can it codify the occasions when it applies. It remains the particular situation which has precedence, but we no longer come to it empty-handed.

This last thought carries a greater importance than might at first be obvious: we do not come to situations empty-handed. We come to situations with developed skills in

[172] As implied earlier, I am willing to include education and observation of others as an 'experience' here.
[173] Little 2000: §V

assessing and dealing with them. The assessment does not take place in a vacuum, it can only take place against a background of things mattering to us, and, as the existence of thick-concepts suggest, mattering to us in a variety of ways, some deep, some not. There are things which matter to me and which in some ways make sense of my life: it may be my family, my professional, political or other sundry commitments. These guide me not only in how I adjudicate a matter, but also how I see it in the first place. You may see the development of your career in terms of how you can go on and undertake larger projects which can have more effect and do more good, while I may see my career in terms of how it enables or obstructs my family. (The two perspectives of course do not exclude one another.) These commitments and the values they usually embody do not spring forth just in the moment a situation presents itself. I come to the situation with these interests and apprehend it in the first place through them.

Dancy's emphasis on a developed sensitivity combined with his rejection of all generalities risks missing the broader temporal structure of valuing and the way in which situations do not simply present themselves as given, but must be understood in the first place. Understanding here is an activity which begins with things mattering to us. The way in which things matter is expressive of our way of life – experience plays a role at this level as well. Why should we think there is only one way of reading a situation? If judgement is at issue, and this in turn depends upon our being sensitive to a situation, then we should keep in mind just what it is to be sensitive to a situation. The call for sensitivity here represents the need for a refined interpretive capacity. However, we interpret the world against a background of understanding. Features are not simply given and uncontested – they appear within a network of meaning. That people differ in their reading of a situation is perhaps no surprise, that this is as things ought to be might be more controversial.

Now if the interpretive aspect of our agency is to play a central role in how we approach situations, then we must not forget that our interpretive framework will reflect the world we inhabit. I am pitching things at an abstract level, however 'the world we inhabit' is intended to denote the way the world has meaning for us in terms not only of our endeavours and interests, but also in terms of concepts which are socially and culturally mediated through such things as language, shared

practices, and ways of seeing things. These are enculturated from birth by others.[174] (Indeed, this last aspect is central to Dancy's and McDowell's understanding of a moral education.) These differences are usually most pronounced at the cultural level, however, as I have argued in earlier chapters, there is plenty of room for differences at the level of the individual also: cultures are not homogeneous, and interpretation and moral judgement take place at the level of the individual, albeit an individual who cannot be understood atomistically.

**Narrative**

That Dancy ignores the historical aspect of agency is surprising, since he suggests that narrative has a central role in intersubjective rationality and moral justification.

> To justify one's choice is to give the reasons one sees for making it, and to give those reasons is just to lay out how one sees the situation, starting in the right place and going on to display the various salient features in the right way; to do this is to fill in the moral horizon.[175]

Nor does one *argue* for one's way of seeing things, so much as set it out as persuasively as one can. The persuasiveness of one's way of seeing a situation is therefore the persuasiveness of narrative: 'an internal coherence in the account which compels assent.'[176] Moral justification therefore remains tied to vision, only no longer simply in the sense of a perceptual capacity, but also as representing an outlook on the world. Persuasiveness is understood as the persuasiveness of narrative because it is through narrative that a situation is best described. However, Dancy feels this to be the case only because the shape of the situation, having to do primarily with its salient features, is not the same as all the features of a situation taken together. That is, the description of a situation is best when it is selective, just as a narrative is. Dancy's narrative is one that is guided toward persuading us to see the matter aright and act accordingly.

Suggesting that one does not argue for one's way of seeing things deserves some more attention. In a later chapter, drawing on Taylor I will set out how argument

[174] I develop this more in chapter 9 '*Kritik* in Dialogue'
[175] Dancy 1993: 113
[176] Dancy 1993: 113

might proceed on such a model. For now, I shall confine myself to elaborating its impact on Dancy's particularism. It is readily apparent that people do argue for their way of seeing things. What's more, argument will not stop when people all take up Dancy's vision. The contention here is that it is easy to conceive rationality too narrowly in this domain and to make the mistake of thinking that formal inferences or principles of practical rationality can do the work. Dancy presents his book as a model (or, at least, an instantiation) of the type of rationality he is advocating: one not based on principles of practical rationality, and instead intended to develop as persuasive an account as possible. The account clearly develops arguments, as it ought, having to do with reasons and reasoning. However, Dancy appreciates the limits of such an endeavour and intends to persuade through the cogency of the 'story' he tells. Argumentation is like story-telling for Dancy because its cogency rests not on inferential structures (though these clearly play an important role) but on how it weighs with people. Logical inferences cannot go all the way down to the ground in this domain, and the need for an argument finally to weigh with its audience requires that more than inference be in play. How features might play as reasons, and how reasons might sit together, will depend upon a discursive background which in turn provides the conceptual space for these reasons to be seen as applying in the first place. This discursive background in which concepts take shape is a feature of a way of life. Against the background of a way of life events and actions take on meaning, and it is these meanings which are often contested, sometimes as to their overall significance and definition, other times as to when they might apply.

As I showed in chapter 3, narrative is central to understanding an action. However, narrative ought not be understood as describing moments only, rather it connects the various threads of our lives. Narrative places a situation and brings to it a sense of history. Much of that history is our own. It is not just situations which arise from historical circumstance, it is also ourselves as agents. Narrative not only describes a situation, it connects it to our historical agency – to the commitments and values that we have which go well beyond the moment, and through which we interpret the world in the first place. This means that the particularity of a situation is not hermetic. Any moral philosopher would agree we need to be sensitive to the features of a particular situation. The point here is that how it stands for us is not isolated

from history, nor is our understanding of it. We come to situations with a raft of interests, concerns and commitments, and it is obviously in the light of these that we decide what we shall do. Some of those commitments are ethical, and go toward determining what we ought to do. These take moral deliberation well beyond the particular moment and refer it to overarching and action-guiding concerns. Dancy is no doubt right to think that these cannot be cashed out propositionally in a way that spells out what to do in each and every situation, what's more, as I argued in chapter 1, 'The Openness of Reasons', it is not clear what will be entailed by people's moral commitments, even when they are articulated in the same way.

Dancy need not be seen as hostile to any of these suggestions; the difficulty is that his concentration on the particular suggests that, for him, reasons simply emerge from situations. They don't. They also depend upon an agency that is historical and looks beyond a situation in its deliberations. Our commitments which overarch any particular situation - whether they are to a conception of justice, family, religion or something else - bring with them rules of thumb about what is entailed by our understandings of honesty, lying, fair-dealing, the suffering of others and so on. These might be in the form of exemplificatory stories in a culture, or moments in childhood when things are spelled out very clearly. Experience plays an important role in developing judgement in ethics and the way it does so takes us well beyond the particular. Dancy is right to argue that the particular situation should have priority over such rules, however it is important to keep in mind that they are inferred from these values. A concern for others is often taken to imply that one not lie to them. The inference is of course weak, and it is in the light of the values themselves which we act, and how they interact with each other and might play out cannot be assumed in advance of the particular situation.

**Narrative and Conflict**

Emphasising narrative's place gives our agency a history and also serves to emphasise the interpretive element of how situations strike us. This means that features of a situation strike us as having a kind of significance – we are alerted to features not only as being salient, or reasons for an action, but also as mattering in some kind of way. Evaluative language goes well beyond reasons for or against an action, as Dancy seems to note. Situations in which we find ourselves are often

complex, and an all too common complexity is that they can demand conflicting things from us. I largely endorse what Dancy has to say about the possibility of conflict between requirements on us. The reservations I have are minor and intended mainly to prepare the ground for what I argue in the next chapter when I give a more concentrated examination of moral conflict. I begin by looking at what Dancy writes on the issue in *Moral Reasons*. More recently in *Ethics Without Principles* he has had more to say on conflict, in particular showing that arguments suggesting that there are no real conflicts when morality is properly understood must fail. However, his arguments in the later work are couched in terms of his defence of 'contributory reasons' – that is, the idea that multiple reasons contribute to determine the overall rightness (or wrongness) of an action. While I largely agree with what he writes on conflict, it also shows the limits of a certain kind of language which he employs.

In *Ethics Without Principles*, Dancy writes that reasons are normative, while oughts are normative and deontic.[177] The distinction between the deontic and the normative suggests a recurrence of the distinction between the moral and the non-moral – a distinction he endorses, but does not want to lean on too heavily.[178] Dancy's notion of a 'contributory reason' is intended to show how reasons can combine, sometimes strengthening the case for acting one way, sometimes conflicting. '[A] contributory reason on one side is not necessarily destroyed by the presence of a reason on the other side.'[179] He thereby leaves open the possibility that regret is perfectly reasonable even when we have done the right thing. The defeated reasons – the ones which impelled me to act contrary to what I ended up doing – can still give rise to residual duties or to regret that I could not act on them. What's more, they will shape what I finally choose to do. In *Moral Reasons* he gives the example of having to inform his sister of some bad news. 'The distress I shall cause her is not sufficient reason for me to keep silent; as a reason against, it is defeated. But it still makes a difference to how I should break the news to her…It is not a reason for doing [the action I choose], but it is a reason for doing it this way rather than that.'[180] A residual duty is presumably a duty which is ongoing – such as the duty to ameliorate the negative aspect of my action. Breaking bad news will not necessarily generate a

[177] Dancy 2004: 24
[178] Dancy 2004: 3
[179] Dancy 2004: 15
[180] Dancy 1993: 116-7

residual duty, since it may only require that I be tactful and nothing else. On the other hand, when a government minister chooses to buy out the commercial fishing licenses of an area, the impact this will have on a fishing community generates residual duties – duties to provide ongoing employment programs, assistance packages for businesses in the area which will be affected and so on.

The picture becomes more puzzling when he introduces the notion of 'contributory oughts'.[181] The thought seems to be that a situation may generate 'oughts' – reasons which are deontic. These oughts, however, are not final in their own right. The 'overall ought' is simply a function of these contributory oughts.[182] Just as we do not *have* to act on a reason (it only gives *a* reason to act – there may be other and better reasons to do something else), moral requirements also need not be acted upon, since there may be other and more important moral requirements to meet. In a curious footnote, Dancy observes that one difficulty with this position is how it can make sense of tragic dilemmas.[183] It is not at first clear why this should be. To understand why it is we should first note the distinction between ordinary and tragic dilemmas. In cases of ordinary conflict between reasons or oughts, I can choose one of the available actions action while incorporating features of the alternative (for instance, the minister can buy up fishing licenses and offer an assistance package). However, tragic dilemmas refuse the possibility of amelioration. 'In tragic dilemmas,…whichever choice one makes one does a wrong.'[184] In tragic dilemmas, there is presumably no overall ought, for if one is always going to be doing wrong, then it is not clear that either ought can be put to the side in favour of the other. The oughts for Dancy really are deontic and require action, except that they call for mutually exclusive actions.

The difficulty here, however, has to do with seeing tragic dilemmas in terms of right and wrong alone. There is something to be said for this view, inasmuch as it captures the enormity of what is sometimes at stake. Dancy is clearly concerned to retain the force of conflicting requirements. If there is a problem here, it is the quick move from saying that an 'ought' has not been acted on to saying that wrong has been done. There are occasions where it is unhelpful to bandy around the word 'wrong':

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[181] Dancy 2004: 32-3
[182] Dancy 2004: 34
[183] Dancy 2004: 35
[184] Dancy 1993: 123

the terribleness of the situation is clear enough, but what else could the person do? Furthermore, what do we expect by way of response from the person caught in this situation? Must they suffer remorse? What I argue in the course of the next chapter shows the limits of this kind of language. The notion of the contributory is intended to attenuate the idea that oughts are absolute. Tragic dilemmas show that these contributory oughts do not always in fact contribute to an overall ought, since there may not be such a thing. While talking of 'oughts' helps get clear Dancy's stance on some debates, it hampers his approach to dilemmas, in which a greater emphasis on the nature and significance of the alternatives is called for. Sometimes the best description will not involve terms like, 'right', 'wrong', 'ought' and so on, but will stick to other evaluative features of the situation. One thing we can take from Williams' discussion of impartial morality, and to which I shall return, is the danger of adopting an approach which encourages the apportionment of blame in situations which are simply awful. There is no reason to think Dancy's approach needs to suffer from this, it only depends upon why he thinks tragic dilemmas might cause difficulty for his notion of contributory oughts. As someone who is already weary of the moral/non-moral distinction even when he endorses it, Dancy need not be trapped in a conception of morality that demands unmodulated assessments of rightness in all cases. Leaving Dancy, I will show the importance of this in general in the next chapter.

Exploring Dancy's work has not only provided the opportunity to elucidate further my own thinking on the relation between reasons, rules and ethics. It has also brought into relief how my arguments for narrative identity and the openness of reasons feed into further questions about practical reason and the resources available to us in moral deliberation. It therefore marks the half-way point, from developing the connection between reasons and agency, to now going on and exploring our resources for *Kritik.* I begin this by looking at conflict and consistency in ethics, before turning to explore ethical disagreement and *Kritik.*

# 6. Conflict and Consistency in Ethics

A number of the examples I have given in this work have been of moral conflicts: Sue Bridehead must choose between Jude and Phillotson; Vere must choose whether or not to hang Budd; and a father must choose whether or not to acquire a kidney from the black market to save his daughter. Latent in my use of these examples has been the conviction that the conflicts are real and that they in a sense persist even after the agent decides what to do. In what follows I explore these convictions more fully. I begin by looking at Williams' argument that moral conflict is distinguished from other types of conflict by our inability to develop strategies for overcoming it in general. Acknowledging the significance of a moral conflict is to acknowledge that strategies which apply for other conflicts (such as conflicts of desire or belief) are ruled out. In arguing for this, I shall also draw extensively on Nussbaum's study of *Agamemnon*, observing that in some conflicts the necessity of acting for the best nevertheless results in us having to acknowledge the significance of not acting on the excluded imperative. The third part of this chapter will turn on what form this acknowledgement might take. It is best seen through the lens of remorse, however I argue that the variety of conflicts which are possible in moral life is such as to open up what we might mean by remorse.

Having explored moral conflict as Williams conceives it - as contingently bringing my values into conflict - in the last section I turn to look at the place of inconsistency in moral argument. Attempts to dissolve conflict often pitch it as a failure in thought. What's more, the accusation of inconsistency is often wielded as a weapon in debates in ethics. I show that such accusations are less robust than is commonly thought, since what is to count as inconsistency is going to depend in the first place on whose life we are critiquing and how things stand within in it.

Before embarking on these arguments, I shall quickly turn to a matter of terminology. In the course of this chapter I will use the words ethics and morality interchangeably. Furthermore, what I mean by the ethical or moral is not rigorously

demarcated from the non-ethical or non-moral. In this I follow Nussbaum. While also endorsing Williams' analysis of conflict in his paper, 'Ethical Consistency', she argues that, 'in everyday life we find…a complex spectrum of cases, interrelated and overlapping in ways not captured by any dichotomous taxonomy.'[185] Given the array of practical concerns which shape our lives, Nussbaum argues it is more in keeping with her and Williams' overall aim to work with a network of informal distinctions which accurately register the considerations which messy cases bring to light.[186] However, as I briefly argue later in the piece, depending as it does on remorse, Nussbaum's argument for her basic position (that moral conflict cannot always be dissolved) implies some kind of distinction between moral and non-moral considerations.

### Williams on Consistency in Ethics

In his article, 'Ethical Consistency', Williams notes a distinction between conflict and inconsistency in beliefs[187]. The former, he feels, involves an element of contingency that the latter does not. Inconsistent beliefs involve a logical contradiction, whereas beliefs which conflict only do so because of some empirical, and therefore contingent, feature of the world. Without the addition of this contingent feature, conflicting beliefs are not in and of themselves incompatible. So, I might believe that a certain cathedral in Germany is Gothic and believe that it was built in the ninth century, not knowing that no gothic cathedrals were built in Germany so early.

Williams contrasts conflicts in belief with conflicts of desire. Looking first at desires, Williams notes that conflicting desires also involve contingency. Where conflicts in desires differ from conflicts in beliefs is what can result from such a conflict. In the case of beliefs, the result of a conflict is that one or both of my beliefs is weakened. When I learn that no gothic cathedrals were built in Germany in the ninth century, I will no longer be able to believe that the cathedral in question is gothic *and* is in Germany *and* was built in the ninth century. A conflict in belief results in my belief being weakened and needing at least one of its elements to be altered or rejected. On the other hand, desires which conflict can still exist side by side. So, I may desire to

[185] Nussbaum 2001: 29
[186] Nussbaum 2001: 29-30
[187] Williams 1965: 166-7

see a particular play and also a concert performance, both of which are scheduled at the same time. Choosing to see the play I can still be said to retain the desire to have seen the concert, even though it is unfulfilled and I made a choice which meant I could never fulfil it. It is for this reason that Williams believes moral conflicts resemble more closely conflicts of desire than of belief.[188] Even though when faced with a conflict between two conflicting moral requirements we can only act on one requirement, this does not nullify the alternative – both the requirements seem to hold and neither is weakened by my finding I must choose only one. What's more, when I must choose between seeing a particular play and a concert, since my desire for the one not chosen need not be lessened, I may regret not having been able to attend it. A similar thought seems to apply to cases of moral conflict: regret ought also attend the inability to perform an acknowledged moral requirement. Williams argues that I cannot regret giving up a conflicted belief in the same way.

However, Williams later goes on to note that moral conflicts are not the same as conflicts between desires, because we cannot repress or deny a moral conflict in the same way we can a conflict between desires.[189] When I must choose between rushing into a movie for which I am running late, or stopping and grabbing a pastry on the way in, I can forego the pastry and suppress my desire for it without doing so in bad faith. Ignoring my desire for a pastry, or turning my back on it, does not snub my desire in the way that ignoring an acknowledged moral obligation would. Whereas a kind of indifference to desires can be cultivated without loss, cultivating indifference to moral concerns which have a genuine basis is hopeless and self-defeating.[190]

Williams has connected moral conflict with regret in light of how moral obligations hold us. In what follows I shall explore these connections more fully. Drawing on Nussbaum, I shall argue that moral conflict is real and that attempts to dissolve it are often unsuccessful because of what they require us to give up. The argument which Nussbaum deploys depends upon a kind of phenomenology of value and not on any

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[188] Williams 1965: 171
[189] Williams 1965: 178
[190] Nussbaum makes the point that the whole non-/moral distinction is unhelpful here, that what should be retained is a set of informal distinctions. She is impressed with his later view that conceiving moral around notions of obligation and right is too rigid, and that what matters is some conception of ethics, which is broad, inclusive and not rigidly demarcated. (Nussbaum 1986: 29-30, 427, ftn 12).

fundamental metaphysical truths. What's more, it suggests a complex view of responsibility and remorse, which I explore after looking at Nussbaum's argument.

## Contingency and Conflict in Moral Life

Williams believes that conflict between moral values is possible and sometimes ineliminable. The thought can sometimes seem to defy our sense of proper order – surely there must be some way of solving problems in life which sees us, if not happy, at least comfortable in the acknowledgment that what we did was right and that our hands are therefore clean. However, it should be clear enough that the world is not ordered so as to prevent us from having to make difficult and sometimes painful decisions between conflicting demands. Situations can arise which confound even the best plans. In the course of the previous chapters I have already provided a number of examples of people having to make conflicted choices. The examples are usually tragic or even taken from tragedy, since tragedy highlights the possible depths and seriousness of conflicts in moral life. However we should not slide into an assumption that moral conflicts must always be tragic in nature, nor must the alternatives have to be evenly balanced.

However, if it can be clear what my choice will have to be when demands compete, in what sense can I say there was really a conflict? Much moral philosophy has aimed at divining rules or strategies for determining what one should do in any given situation - utilitarianism and the categorical imperative are obvious examples. If we can determine the right action in a situation, why think there was a conflict? On this argument, moral conflict is only apparent - with the proper approach it quickly dissolves and we find not only the right action, but that its being right leaves no remainder. If doing the right thing involves performing an action usually understood to be wrong, then on this occasion its wrongness is, as it were, swallowed by the overall rightness – the rightness of the course of action cleanses the situation of its wrongness or even its stickiness. The world may not be properly ordered, but morality is, and this means that there is no moral conflict, only a proper understanding of morality's requirements in any situation.

Nussbaum gives three examples of philosophers trying to dissolve conflict.[191] The first is Sartre, who gives the example of a man having to choose between joining the French Resistance or looking after his ageing mother. Sartre dissolves the conflict by arguing the best course is to freely choose his course without regret, to embrace his self-making and leave the conflict behind. Hare suggests we reformulate our principles in the light of the situation's demands: 'don't lie' becomes 'don't lie unless you are in wartime and speaking to the enemy.' Finally, Kant argues that when we find two grounds for duty, we should determine which is the stronger. In doing so, we have found the real duty and the other disappears.

While agreeing that it does not always seems as straightforward as these philosophers suggest, Nussbaum nevertheless acknowledges that this is not enough on its own. These thinkers would all agree that the feeling of deep conflict is real and that these situations do not feel like puzzles to be solved. However, what they aim to show is that these feelings are unjustified because conflict can in fact be resolved. To argue the contrary, she contends we must do two things:

> First,…explore this 'intuitive position' [that conflict is real] in considerably more detail than is available within many philosophical discussions of the problem, describing the cases as precisely as possible and showing us what about them gives rise to our intuitive sense of their force. ….Second,…show that, and how, the intuitive picture of the cases is connected with other valuable elements of human ethical life – that we would risk giving up something of real importance if we adjusted our intuitions in accordance with one of these philosophical solutions.[192]

The thought underlying Nussbaum's approach in fact resembles Williams'. At first, Williams observes that moral conflicts resemble conflicts of desire inasmuch as after I have acted it is possible to regret that I could not act so as to satisfy the alternative consideration as well. However, later he observes how the case of moral conflicts

[191] Nussbaum 2001: Ch.1 §§II, V. For my purposes here, I shall treat Nussbaum's examples as accurate. Whether or not scholars of Kant, Hare or Sartre would agree with them, they can at least be treated as emblematic of conventional strategies to dissolve conflict.
[192] Nussbaum 2001: 32

differs from those of desires and beliefs because of the kinds of strategies for avoiding them which are available to the agent. In the case of desires, one way of avoiding conflict is to abandon desires which may lead to frustration, even trying to reduce all desire to a minimum. To reduce conflicting beliefs to a minimum, I could make my primary aim the avoidance of falsity in my beliefs, and to this end avoid belief as far as possible by cultivating scepticism or ignorance.[193] Clearly such enterprises can be overdone and impoverish a life, but we are at least free in principle to pursue these strategies. However, the strategy of cultivating a kind of indifference is not possible in the case of moral conflict; I cannot just give up my commitments in the same way. Having pursued indifference I can acknowledge that the conflicts of desire I felt or beliefs I had were just as they seemed, it is just that I no longer have them. In the case of moral conflicts, I cannot acknowledge that they were moral conflicts at all; to admit they were moral claims just means that I cannot honestly adopt indifference to them.[194] Williams is arguing that the nature of moral considerations is such that they endure even when they are not acted on; what's more, we cannot just give them up or be indifferent to them.

Although sceptical about the moral/non-moral distinction Williams is drawing, Nussbaum builds on Williams' account by arguing that denying such conflict or thinking it can be dissolved involves more than giving up only the conflict, it also involves giving up other 'valuable elements of human ethical life'. This is her second argument in the quote above, that the attempt to dissolve all conflict jeopardises other intuitions we do not want to give up – 'we would risk giving up something of real importance.' To do this, she needs to capture a fuller sense of an ethical life. This cannot be done simply by describing its general features, such as values, commitments, relationships, cultural context, language horizon and so on. Instead, it is best captured in literature – it is in depictions of whole lives that sense and shape is best given to their ethical dimensions. This is the background to the need for the first argument – the desire to render adequately the force of cases of conflict. In pursuit of these twin aims Nussbaum provides a careful and detailed reading of two tragedies by Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* and *Seven Against Thebes*.

[193] Williams 1965: 177
[194] Williams 1965: 178

While Nussbaum precedes her argument with the acknowledgement that our initial sense of the matter is not enough when we agree that moral conflicts cannot be dissolved through an exercise of the intellect, her argument nonetheless rests on a kind of phenomenological strategy, and not any metaphysical and incontestable fact about the matter. To give up our intuitions would be to 'risk giving up something of real importance.' I call this argument 'phenomenological' because it works by arguing that what we say about this matter must be adequate to the phenomenology of value. The correctness of our initial intuition is guaranteed by other beliefs we have which connect to this question and emerge most clearly in the course of thinking about examples our intuitions would suggest are conflicted. So, a study of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* will show how conflict can be inescapable by showing the inadequacy of the response of someone who in the end blinds themselves to the full significance of their actions.[195] Pivoting as it does on our sense that some features of our intuitions run too deeply in us – are of 'real importance' – Nussbaum's strategy in developing her argument in fact resembles Williams' to the extent of coming remarkably close to drawing a distinction between the moral and non-moral. While she herself eschews such a distinction, rightly noting the complexity and variety of considerations which shape our lives and decisions, the thrust of her strategy is toward it. Otherwise, should we never give up the commitments that we would rather not give up? Her strategy cannot work for all commitments and intuitions and implies that some kind of distinction will have to be drawn between those commitments we must keep and those we are prepared to give up. Having gone this far, the task at hand prevents a closer analysis of Nussbaum to learn the extent of her commitment to such a distinction, and the question of the need for a such a distinction more generally would expand the work still further, though I touch on it again below.

I shall only look at Nussbaum's analysis of *Agamemnon* (and too briefly even then) since her analysis of Eteocles' choice in *Seven Against Thebes* parallels this. Nussbaum first explicates Agamemnon's dilemma in Aeschylus' play and then analyses carefully the Chorus' response to his choice. Agamemnon is caught

[195] It is worth noting in passing that Nussbaum's strategy is remarkably similar to the one Taylor proposes and I explore later (see 'Taylor on Practical Reason'), since it first of all uses and aims at the best account of our lives and then pivots the argument on what we find we will not give up in life for fear of diminishing it – what Taylor would call our strong evaluations.

between conflicting requirements of the gods when he learns the only way to free his fleet for the war demanded by Zeus is to sacrifice his daughter, a requirement of Artemis.[196] His position is such that Agamemnon will be doing a wrong no matter what he does – guilty of a great impiety on the one hand, and guilty of killing his daughter on the other. Nussbaum contends that the Chorus displays a much clearer grasp of the connections between freedom, necessity, responsibility, guilt and blame than do philosophers who seek to skirt conflict. The Chorus sees that Agamemnon is not free to do as he pleases, indeed it is suggested by Nussbaum that his choice is clear and he must kill his daughter.[197] The necessity Agamemnon is following diminishes his guilt, and the Chorus shows this; what they blame him for is his response to his situation. Even when constrained by necessity there are some actions which can never be cleansed by the necessity to perform them in order to do right - killing an innocent is such an action.[198] The appropriate response to guilt is remorse and a sober sense of what has been done.[199] In contrast to this, having decided what he must do, Agamemnon drives himself to want to kill his daughter.[200] His thought seems to be that if the action is right then the agent must be willing – the result is that Agamemnon fails to register the significance of what he has done and displays neither repulsion nor remorse for what he is driven to do. These are not the feelings and responses appropriate to a good person caught in such a situation.[201]

Interestingly, Williams objects to Nussbaum's reading of *Agamemnon*, suggesting the play has been, 'defended from one moralistic distortion only to attract another.'[202] He argues her reading of the text is forced when it suggests the chorus blames Agamemnon for his response to his situation. While she correctly sees that Agamemnon's fury results from his decision to sacrifice his daughter, there is no reason to think that Aeschylus intends us to blame him for this – blame is not the issue, rather we should perhaps learn from what it took for Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter. He concludes his point by observing,

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[196] Nussbaum 2001: 33-4
[197] Nussbaum 2001: 34
[198] Nussbaum 2001: 41-2
[199] Nussbaum 2001: 42-3
[200] Nussbaum 2001: 36
[201] Nussbaum 2001: 43
[202] Williams 1993b: 134

> It is, probably, hard to apply the sacrificial knife to one's daughter while wringing one's hands, and if we do not think that Agamemnon just made a mistake about what he had to do on that bad day at Aulis, it is better that, rather than telling him what he should have felt, we should be prepared to learn what was involved in getting through it.[203]

I am not in a position to offer any thoughts on the reading of the Greek text. However, we should keep in mind that Williams cannot be challenging Nussbaum's overall argument that some conflicts are not soluble without remainder. This is clear enough from what he writes in *Ethical Consistency*, and is reinforced throughout the work in which this attack features. What is clearly being challenged is the idea that any particular response can be demanded of Agamemnon in light of what he has done, and relatedly, whether he can be blamed for his response. We may sometimes have to learn from what people experience in terrible situations and modify our expectations and judgements accordingly, and this is something I will explore in the next section.

What interests me at this point is how Nussbaum's argument functions. For even if her reading of *Agamemnon* is controversial amongst classicists, it seems reasonable to think that other examples would be available. What is likely to remain the same is the structure of argument. In the course of her analysis Nussbaum has not argued her point quite as it first seemed she intended. She approached her argument through an analysis of *Agamemnon* because the phenomenology of conflict could not stand by itself – our sense that some situations do not look like puzzles to be solved by intellectual effort alone is not enough. However, by the end of her argument we find that a phenomenology is all that we are left with – this time a phenomenology of tragic conflict. This is because the strength of her point stands or falls on the reader's agreeing that Agamemnon's case shows that the horns of some dilemmas are such that some wrong will result whatever we choose. The reader must agree, first, that Agamemnon's killing of his daughter was required in the circumstance, and, second,

[203] Williams 1993b: 135

that it also remains the kind of action calling for something 'more like remorse'[204] after it is done.

The force of the second assumption is brought out well by this kind of tragedy, since the killing of an innocent does seem to call out for some kind of response such as remorse. It remains the case that some kind of phenomenology is latent in this approach, since we are meant to find in the situation of Agamemnon and the Chorus something that is not out of reach of our own experience. Clearly the detail will not apply to our lives, and Agamemnon is hardly an 'everyman'. What is meant to come alive for us is not only the possibility of tragic conflict - which seems apparent enough when we read the day's news – but more importantly the sense that in some situations what is required is so awful that nothing can wipe away the stain. We can see that while the irreducibility of conflict applies most obviously in tragic cases, it applies elsewhere as well. The difficulty which follows for us is also the strength of Nussbaum's position: a more complex understanding of guilt, responsibility, blame and remorse is needed. The understanding that thereby emerges is infinitely richer than a philosophy which wishes to keep moral life neat, and moral agents unblemished. A place is provided for ambivalence towards agents and actions which we recognise as right and intended for the best but cannot be described imply as good. These are occasions where doing the right thing is not enough for the person to be judged well, they must be seen to recognise the significance of what is being done. Sometimes it will not be clear just what this would involve, instead it will only be apparent that the person's behaviour jars, as it does in the case of Agamemnon.

With its emphasis on a phenomenology, Nussbaum's argumentative strategy contrasts with three thinkers she is responding to. Sartre's argument is developed as a logical outcome of the human existential condition – of our nature as an entity which exists *for itself*; Kant's position is inferred from the structure of the will and the nature of law; while Hare's position follows from his conviction that moral requirements must be universal. It is by drawing on a phenomenology of value that Nussbaum argues that each of the strategies to dissolve conflict fail. Sartre's ends up demanding the agent commit the sin that Agamemnon did, willing his action to be good to the exclusion of everything else. Hare strategy fails because we recognise

[204] Nussbaum 2001: 43

that modifying principles is hopeless for some situations – they are just too serious. Kant's fails because if we are to treat a moral imperative seriously as law, it should stand in all circumstances and not fall away in some.[205] There is no deeper structure used to support Nussbaum's arguments, instead the good judgement of the reader is relied upon. The phenomenology is made vivid through literature, and with it she *shows* (for she cannot argue it from the ground up) just what we would lose if we thought that conflict could always be dissolved by adopting the strategies of a Sartre, Hare or Kant. This is how she satisfies the second part of her strategy. If we think that conflict between moral imperatives is illusory, we would lose any ground for the need to acknowledge the terribleness or enormity of our action, even when they are necessary. We would lose a basis for feeling that some reactions to terrible actions can themselves be a travesty and undermine the action in the first place. An example is the humiliation of a corpse. Killing in war may be necessary and despoiling of corpses common, but the sense is it corrupts whatever has been achieved – turning to sources as diverse as the *Iliad* or the Geneva Convention shows this. Finally, we would lose any justification for feeling regret or remorse after we have chosen the best alternative, as well as the possibility of seeing these as responses which themselves reveal something about the situation and the agent's choices.[206] What we would lose is a modulated understanding of responsibility, guilt, blame and remorse. It was the place of regret which distinguished moral conflict for Williams, and now we find it is a key to Nussbaum's argument as well. In view of this, it will be worthwhile to turn to an exploration of it.

## Responses to Conflict

So it is possible for conflict to be irreducible. The significance of the elements of some situations is such that it cannot be avoided – we are forced to acknowledge the seriousness of what we do. In this section I shall examine what form this acknowledgement might take. While sympathetic to the suggestion that something 'more like remorse' is called for, I argue for the need to calibrate the response to what is done. Remorse will not look the same across all situations. While doing this, I shall draw on both Nussbaum and Gaita. I argue that Gaita's open characterisation

[205] Nussbaum 2001: 47-9
[206] Nussbaum 2001: 45-6

of remorse as 'a disciplined remembrance of the moral significance of what we did'[207] is illuminating when considering our response to moral conflict.

What Nussbaum has been able to introduce is a richer connection between guilt, responsibility, blame and remorse. Doing the right or best thing does not always mean that we can be free to shrug off whatever else our actions have entailed. Central to an ethical life is a vivid lived response to what we have done, which itself depends upon, and is often coeval with and constitutive of, a clear understanding of its significance. The Chorus is careful not to blame Agamemnon for what he has done, but it does hold him responsible for it, calling for him not to evade the significance of what he has done. Importantly it also judges harshly how he has undertaken and understood his action. This contrasts with a theory of ethics which sets out to determine the right thing to do *simpliciter*. having found what the right thing to do is, what more is there to say, and why should we expect someone to feel terrible for doing the right thing, especially if no more could be asked of them? If as a consequence of the right action somebody has suffered, then the right thing to do is minimise this suffering (this will be part of our assessment of what the right thing is) and where possible make reparations. Clearly, Agamemnon cannot compensate Iphigenia for killing her, nor can he do less than kill her if he must sacrifice her.

Nussbaum's response to Hare applies more clearly here: surely if he has killed an innocent he must feel something. His response to this killing shows his understanding and will reveal something about Agamemnon himself. The point can be made even clearer by considering reactions that would have been even more inappropriate: what if he had danced on her grave? However, it is important to be clear that his response is not a token of his understanding, nor is it simply an outward display of a separate inner feeling. Indeed, he may be silent in remorse. The point is that if he understands the significance of what he has done his response will match this understanding. Indeed, his response will be part of his understanding.

But what sort of response are we expecting? The response must register the person's role in what has happened – what brought them to this circumstance and what the actions meant. One good place to start is with the concept of responsibility, with what it is to hold someone responsible for their actions. To do so, I shall draw on

[207] Gaita 2004: 59

what Gaita writes about remorse, at the same time continuing to work through Nussbaum's analysis of *Agamemnon*. The two approaches overlap untidily, and so I shall digress briefly to explain my approach and explore how the two relate to my concerns here.

*Remorse: A note on approach*

Gaita's detailed discussion of remorse and responsibility in *Good and Evil* takes a different tack from mine, reflecting his interest as much as his approach. Gaita begins with the example of a Dutch woman who sees herself as having been made a murderess in World War 2, when she judged she had to ask three Jews to leave whom she had been sheltering. Shortly afterwards, the Jews were captured and killed. [208] Gaita is struck by the Dutch woman's description of herself as a murderess, and argues this is not to be criticised.[209] In the course of his argument he is then able to explore the terrain of remorse in fine detail. The Dutch woman shows us possibilities in remorse. Nussbaum's exploration of Agamemnon is, as much as anything, an exploration of the Chorus' judgement of him – she is implicitly asking what we might expect of Agamemnon in this situation such that we could judge him as the Chorus does. She finds that he should show that he understands the significance of what he is doing – his emotion should be 'more like remorse'. Gaita reads back from the Dutch woman's remorse; Nussbaum raises the question of what response we might expect of someone in conflict.

I have steered closer to Nussbaum's approach. My discussion of remorse is not intended to be as concentrated as Gaita's, since it is an outcome of my interest in moral conflict. I share Nussbaum's conviction regarding the irreducibility of some moral conflict: there are cases in which you are forced to do something terrible or wrong because of a competing moral demand. In choosing not to meet one of the demands on me, I might be said to be doing wrong, however, as we shall see in a moment, the word 'wrong' is clumsy here. The necessity of this choice does not absolve me of responsibility for what I have done, nor ought I refuse to see its significance. The question which emerges from this approach is just what can we expect from people who act for the best in such situations?

[208] Gaita 2004: 43
[209] Gaita 2004: Ch.4, esp. 46-49

*To hold responsible*

Gaita writes that,

> To hold someone responsible…means to hold them, to fix them, in a lucid response to the significance of what they did. It means that the moral significance of what they did must not be evaded, neither by them nor by us, but it does not, thereby, mean that we find fault with them, that we can accuse them, or that we find them culpable. Those are all specific and different human acts (different kinds of holding responsible)…They are species of the genus 'to hold responsible', but there is no act which is merely that.[210]

The example that Gaita is working through at this point does not neatly fit Nussbaum's example of the Chorus' judgement of Agamemnon, which does indeed seem to find fault with Agamemnon, since something about his character is revealed in his response to the killing of his daughter. The interesting point in Gaita's analysis is how it argues for a variegated understanding of moral responsibility – it notes that we use a complex vocabulary which can be modulated according to the person's situation. If necessity drove Agamemnon to his action, then our understanding of his action must be modulated accordingly. Even Oedipus, who commits the crime of incest unknowingly, is held responsible for his actions - but again, as Gaita argues, this is in the accent of pity. Moral responsibility is complex and not to be equated with blame. The Chorus holds Agamemnon responsible for killing his daughter and also holds him responsible for how he sees his action - he has not seen the full moral significance of his action and he is held responsible for this. This is because the sacrifice of his innocent daughter is a terrible thing to do, no matter why it was done – to avoid the terribleness by seeing only the action's necessity is to miss a crucial dimension of the action. It is, so to speak, to ignore the elephant in the ballroom.

Nussbaum writes that the emotion of a good person who has been in Agamemnon's situation will not simply be regret, it will be 'more like remorse'.[211] Her equivocation

[210] Gaita 2004: 44
[211] Nussbaum 2001: 43

at this point is understandable inasmuch as remorse is often understood in relation to the narrow understanding of guilt against which Nussbaum is arguing. Remorse is the appropriate response to my own guilt. Indeed, it can be argued that it is internal to a proper recognition of my wrongdoing; if I understand what I have done, then I will feel remorse. The remorse is internal to the understanding. Remorse is commonly associated with moral wrongdoing, and this in turn is often pictured straightforwardly as applying in cases in which I do not do the right thing.

However, in the cases I am concerned with in this chapter, the agent has in fact done the right thing – or at least done what they are constrained to do. The wrongdoing – if we want to call it that - was unavoidable. Should the person who has acted for the best and been forced to do terrible things feel the same as a person who was in a position to choose only the good and avoid the wrongdoing altogether? Clearly not; their understanding of what they have done will have to include the circumstances of their doing it – and this applies in both cases. If remorse is part of recognising the wrong I have done, then the remorse will respond to what must be recognised. We may observe that remorse will always be painful or anguished, but that should not lead us to think it must be the same in every case, especially if we treat it as part of a proper understanding. 'More like remorse' is an understandable elision, since, if Nussbaum were to leave the word 'remorse' unadorned, she would be using it in a way quite different from the traditional understanding which binds it closely to guilt and wrongdoing.

Gaita writes, 'Remorse is, amongst other things, a disciplined remembrance of the moral significance of what we did.'[212] It is important to emphasise two aspects of this: remorse focuses on what has actually been done - in particular, its significance. The significance clearly varies. The significance varies not just because the acts and their effects vary, but also because of how the agent is related to them. This connects with Gaita's point when he spells out the different ways in which we can hold someone responsible for what they have done. We hold people responsible for the acts they freely choose and those they are constrained to do; we hold them responsible for those they intend and those they do not. The point is, how we hold

[212] Gaita 2004: 59

them responsible varies in all these cases. Just as how we hold them responsible varies, so too should their own understanding of their actions.

The significance of one's actions is particular to their circumstances. Consequently, the remorse we feel will also vary. This is important to understand since the scope of remorse has expanded to include situations where it is unclear if we want to talk of remorse, even though we will continue to emphasise the need to have a 'disciplined remembrance of the moral significance of what we did.' The exemplars of remorse are those in which it is easy to be clear that evil has been done without even any mitigation. However, as has already been made clear, plenty of situations do not match the exemplar. Some situations are tragic and still seem to call for remorse: Vere must choose between martial law and hanging the innocent Budd; Agamemnon must choose between impiety and killing his innocent daughter. Other situations are murkier: the Dutch woman in Gaita's example feels remorse for her 'murder'. Is this really what we can *expect* from someone who was already taking a considerable risk sheltering the Jews? Only if we keep the more open formulation of remorse, as a response to the significance of what has been done.

An additional benefit of this terminology is that it allows for a more natural and less forced understanding of situations such as Agamemnon's – he is not doing the right thing and doing wrong at the same time. It is that while he is constrained to do as he does, he must remain aware of the significance of what he has done. Another example which might show this better is the doctor or other medical worker in a developing country. The hospital is overcrowded, there are too many patients, too few staff, not enough medicines and inadequate equipment. A triage system is used to sort the treatable patients from the untreatable. However, what is meant by treatable is different here from elsewhere. We do not need to idealise our counterfactual to see this – we do not need to observe that if this under-resourced hospital were to have the facilities of Bethesda in Maryland then more patients would be treated. With few resources, those available must be put to best use. Some people could be treated with the medicines which are to hand, however, the judgement may still be made that they could be better used on other patients. At its grimmest, this will see a patient being left in the room for the dying – perhaps tended by a helper,

but otherwise left to die. The doctor is leaving a treatable patient to die, and also acting for the best. It seems absurd to level an accusation of 'wrongdoing' at her.

Remorse blurs into regret here – but if this is regret, then it is moral in character, for the significance which is to be registered just is the terribleness of the patient's plight. It cannot be regret that the doctor got caught up in this situation; nor can it simply be a desire that things had turned out differently for the other person. The regret will be interdependent with an 'awakened sense of the reality of another'[213] – in this case, the reality of what they have been reduced to, and the significance of withholding treatment from the person. An 'awakened sense of the reality of another' is another way Gaita describes remorse. If we only expect regret in this situation, then it is going to look awfully like remorse. That being said, if it is remorse we expect, then it cannot be the same as we would wish to see from a penitent Nazi. If it is remorse, then it cannot be one which emphasises 'wrongdoing'. Who would become a health-worker in such circumstances? Who would not emigrate and leave behind those in need? Who would volunteer to work in such regions? If we require anguished self-admonishment in every such situation, then we will end up sliding into a conception of moral life which becomes self-regarding to the exclusion of a proper concern for others.

If the doctor is doing something awful, it seems heavy-handed to talk here of 'wrongdoing'. It is with this in mind that we see the strength in Nussbaum's avoidance of the moral/non-moral distinction which she notes that Williams was driving at. If there are cases which are too messy to allow the distinction in the domain of practical reason, then there are also cases which are too messy to permit it to be the determinant in distinguishing remorse from regret.

On the other hand, the role of remorse in Nussbaum's argument and also in my own is clearly interdependent with some conception of the moral or ethical which will have to be distinguished from other kinds of consideration. It is unclear if Nussbaum actually thinks there is no distinction, or only that it cannot always be neatly made. The latter seems more plausible, since, as she observes, there is a considerable variety of considerations – too many to distinguish neatly. However, while this is the case, the central role given to remorse in her phenomenological argument for the

[213] Gaita 2004: 51

irreducibility of some moral conflicts implies that the moral and non-moral will distinguish themselves at either end of the spectrum.

I am content to talk of an expectation that the doctor will feel remorse, but this will mean something different to what we might expect of someone who has murdered his daughter. Whatever we call it, we would hope for a 'disciplined remembrance of the significance of what she had done' from the doctor. To drive this point home, we need only think of the flip-side of this: what we would think of someone who displayed only glibness or flippancy in such a situation. Putting to the side the possibility that the flippancy might be a sign of an understandable exhaustion, it would otherwise display that a person did not understand their situation properly. I am happy to call the doctor's reaction remorse where others would only want to talk of regret. Either way, what we would demand of the doctor is, 'a disciplined remembrance of the moral significance of what [he or she] did.'[214]

What I have argued is a qualification of the association between remorse and wrongdoing. The association is a good one inasmuch as wrongdoing calls for remorse. What I have shown is that there are other situations which, on the one hand call for the kind of response remorse involves – namely, a disciplined remembrance of the significance of what I have done – and yet on the other show talk of wrongdoing to be wrongheaded. 'Significance', while suffering from vagueness, at least allows space for the recognition of the terribleness of the situation and what is being done to others, without sliding into heavy-handed judgements.

**On Moral Inconsistency**

So far, I have dealt with moral conflicts, showing that they not only exist, but cannot always be avoided or willed away. However, it is clearly not true that whenever we encounter a conflict we must leave it there, acknowledge that things are about to get messy, and proceed to dirty our hands. When faced with a conflict, there is the tendency to try and think our way through it. Just as when I find that two desires conflict I explore ways of having my cake and of eating it, when faced with conflicts in our ethical life there is a natural tendency to try and think of ways to overcome the conflict. This can be confused with the thought that Reason can solve moral

[214] Gaita 2004: 59

conflicts. It is this idea that leads to moral theorisation that contends all moral conflicts are apparent only; thinking properly about a matter, no matter how difficult the matter and the thinking required, will bring us to a perspicuous understanding of the matter and the solution of the dilemma.

To conclude this chapter I shall show how what counts as inconsistency is more open in ethics than is usually assumed, with a concomitant reduction in the scope of inconsistency. The charge of inconsistency in ethics depends on more than abstract logical relations and has to do with the way of life in which the various values at play feature. Although what I argue may well have implications for conceptions of rationality more generally, I do not pursue them further, instead limiting myself to deliberation in ethics.

Thinking does not stop when I find myself in conflict. It is important to think through a conflict. It may indeed only be apparent. Furthermore, a vibrant moral imagination is an important asset, for it can stop us from thinking that our situation is deadlocked and that a wrong must be done. Confronting a harsh necessity and dealing resolutely with it is important, however there is no way of being sure that we are confronting a genuine conflict unless we think through it properly. Cutting thought short can therefore result in a premature assessment that wrong must be done no matter what. It is then that people suffer needlessly. What's more, by thinking through a matter we can see limitations in our previous thinking and attitude, and acknowledge a new approach is required. To this extent there is some merit in the strategies for dissolving conflict which people have suggested. The point I have made above is that there is no reason to think this can be generalised, and that very often the conflict cannot be dissolved or avoided. One failing of strategies such as Hare's is the implication that conflict only remains if we don't think properly. This is just one point at which a connection to inconsistency looms on the horizon, for not thinking properly is, on some views, not to engage reason properly – and the classic way of committing this last sin is to fall into inconsistency.

Now, 'to be inconsistent' can mean a number of things. It can mean to act differently on like occasions or over time: 'you gave her a chocolate, why not me?' It can (not unconnectedly) also mean that a rule has not been followed properly. I have already addressed the issue of change over time when discussing narrative identity, noting

that change is going to be an inevitable feature of our moral life, and because of this attacks of inconsistency over time need not carry the weight they are often thought to. Similarly, I have already addressed rule-following when I explored particularism, endorsing Dancy's insight that moral action is best not thought of in terms of obedience to rules. As regards consistency between cases, the particularist tacitly accedes to this requirement, but thinks that this is much rarer than people think – when this consideration is leveraged in argument, it is usually by analogy from other cases, not identity between them.

What of rational consistency? What if I think, 'it is right to lie' and 'it is not right to lie'? Such a thought need not be a case of inconsistency in moral life. The particularist's insight is that we must treat each case separately, with an eye for what is actually salient in the situation. Judgements about 'rightness' or 'wrongness' cannot be made abstracted from particular cases. The possibility of being able to assert truthfully an apparent contradiction can arise by virtue of the vagaries of circumstance. The situation may just be such as to leave us of two minds. Indeed, the purpose of what I argued in the first two parts of this chapter was to show just how conflict can leave us torn between incompatible requirements.[215]

What we learn from experience, and in particular from experience of conflict, is how our values or reasons for action sit with one another. More especially, we learn how they can be brought into conflict with one another in ways hitherto unimagined. They can be brought into conflict because of chance occurrence in the world. As just mentioned, this will often force us to reflect on our values and see if we have somehow misunderstood them, or now find a limit to them – does the situation I am now in show me something about the nature of the values themselves? Perhaps it is not chance that has brought me to this point, but something intrinsic to the values themselves – not something metaphysical, clearly, but something intrinsic to their content. What if I believe that capital punishment is the only punishment adequate

[215] In passing, I note that this may seem to conflict with my earlier argument that conflict can be irreducible, most notably when I endorsed Nussbaum's observation that Hare's strategy of amending rules to dissolve conflict cannot help, since ' "Don't kill"…admits of no such exceptions.' (Nussbaum 2001: 48) If the there are no exceptions to 'Don't kill' - and this looks awfully like a rule – then surely it is unreasonable now to claim there are no universal rules. However, what I have argued is that a proper assessment of a situation will involve an appreciation of the significance of its features. Rather than being concerned with a finessed version of the rule, 'don't kill', what is important is that the agent understands the significance of what he will be doing. Such an understanding can only be made in the mode of remorse – that is, understanding things aright will see me experiencing remorse.

for murder and also believe in the sanctity of life? It probably isn't going to take the raising of an executioner's axe to tell me that these two beliefs can be brought into conflict. But the common claim is stronger than that chance might bring them into conflict. One of the prime arguments against capital punishment is precisely that it is *inconsistent* with an appreciation of life's sanctity. The drive here is to show that the two thoughts are incompatible, because what gives capital sentences their legitimacy as punishment is what also entails their wrongness.[216]

In later chapters I shall explore how argument and critique can get their bite. In what follows, I am concerned to show that the accusation of inconsistency in ethics is a difficult one to make stick because what counts as consistency cannot be given in advance of how it is taken up in a life. At the outset I showed that reasons are open; now I will show that how they stand with respect to one another is similarly open. While the chance exigencies of the world might bring our values into conflict, there is not the same impetus for believing that thought or logic alone must do likewise.

In the case of capital punishment and the sanctity of life, the thinking might be that the latter encompasses the former: capital punishment is a case of humans taking the life of others, and this runs counter to a belief in the sanctity of life. This is one very general approach, there are clearly many others, and this is part of my larger point: how the issue is approached in the first place will determine what kind of conflicts are possible. In 'Darwin, *Genesis* and Contradiction', Winch takes up Wittgenstein's denial of what may be called a germ theory of argument in ethics.[217] Quoting Wittgenstein, Winch writes, ' "A contradiction is only a contradiction *when it arises*", he said, we shouldn't think of it as of a germ concealed in an organism, so that "a man doesn't suspect anything and then one day he's dead" '.[218] Winch then goes on to explore contradiction through the example of the reactions to Darwin's theory of natural selection. The issue for many people was how to juxtapose the accounts of creation given in the book of *Genesis* and *On the Origin of Species*.

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[216] It is just strategies like this which keep *Kritik* in play. Concepts in ethics are not altogether without entailments even though just what these are remains open, as will be shown in a moment, and also argued in the later chapter, '*Kritik* in Dialogue'.
[217] Winch 1976a: 133-4
[218] Winch 1976a: 133. Emphasis in the Winch quotation.

Winch speculates that the inclination to ask what was the ‘right’ response to this problem is a manifestation of something akin to germ thinking, as if Darwinism and *Genesis* are rival accounts of the same thing (namely, the origins of humans and the world), and the system of thinking which led to the acceptance of *Genesis* contained within it ‘a determinate relation to a yet unformulated Darwinism.’[219] It is certainly possible to see things this way. However, Winch is determined to say that there is in fact nothing inevitable about seeing the two accounts as contradicting one another. Looked at one way they do, looked at another they do not.[220] There is no need to think that the two are accounts of the same thing, inasmuch as they both have quite different backgrounds of practice and belief.

> The difference between the backgrounds of practice and belief which respectively underlie *Genesis* and *On the Origin of Species* are mirrored in striking differences in the forms of language used in the two books. ‘And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.’ What would Darwin’s scientifically minded readers have made of it if *he* had said – *or denied*, and I emphasize this – any such thing?...It’s not that Darwin’s account denies these things: such a denial would be as much out of place there as the contradictory assertion.[221]

The question of where living creatures come from can be seen as very different for the believer in *Genesis* and the scientifically minded person. What Winch observes about the striking differences in the language of the answers can be taken to reflect back on the question: it need not be seen as one question at all, since the answers show it can be understood in such different ways. There is therefore nothing inevitable about seeing the two accounts as contradictory, since we could see them as answers to quite different questions. Winch is at pains to say that this is not how we *should* see them, only that there is nothing final in the matter.

Winch, characteristically, sees these differences of practice and belief in terms of Wittgensteinian language games. They are not simply different questions, they exist

[219] Winch 1976a: 135
[220] Winch 1976a: 137
[221] Winch 1976a: 134

in different language games. The meaning of the questions is therefore quite different. On this account the story of *Genesis* and the theory of natural selection are two language games coming together uncomfortably. The larger issues surrounding language games and the fact I cannot explore them here are such as to make me loath to take on the metaphor. A natural question is, when are two thoughts or values part of the same language game and when are they not? There is no final answer to this question. What Winch's argument makes clear is that good argument will be responsive to a person's way of life or outlook on the world. That is, what is to count as consistency and inconsistency will depend up on personal identity – upon who the person is.

What matters in what Winch has shown is that the two beliefs in *Genesis* and evolution may be underwritten by quite different interests. More importantly, these interests may be such as to in no way force on us a sense of their being in contradiction. So, just as, in one sense, we can see external events bringing into conflict the demands of piety for Agamemnon, and for Captain Vere the demands emanating from martial law and natural justice, we can see that contingencies in our narrative self-understanding – contingencies in who we are – might bring our values into conflict. That is, what counts as inconsistency has a strongly contingent element to it and to this extent resembles moral conflict as Williams pictured it.

What I am wanting to draw out is inconsistency's place in ethical thought and life. I am not denying the existence of inconsistency; I am arguing that in ethics inconsistency remains an open question until its elements are checked against the way of life which gives substance to the offending ideals. In formal logic it is clear what is A and what is not-A. In ethics, even when we know what A is, what is not-A can remain unclear. What is interesting to note in the present example is that a person can say, 'Yes of course, if I were to read the bible in that way, I could not believe both it and Darwin to be right', and this might itself then be a reason to reject reading it this way, or the person might simply continue, 'But I never have read it this way…' Similarly, a supporter of capital punishment may hold their view to be an expression of the same thing which underpins their belief in the sanctity of life – a covenant with God or the integrity of a community – saying that if life is sacrosanct, then so is justice. 'If I thought that life was the only thing that was sacrosanct, or the

highest, then of course that would be inconsistent.' What is to count as inconsistency in ethical life and thought is going to depend on the way of life within which it emerges; inconsistency is therefore going to depend to some extent on who is speaking. This does not stop disagreement or argument, but it does show how good thinking is still responsive to who the thinker is and how the world stands for them. There is nothing immutable in this standing – people can be persuaded to see things otherwise.[222]

Indeed, the inability to specify in advance what counts as the same language game opens up possibilities in argument. We can seek to persuade others to see a series of questions as all being linked. Some argue that *Genesis* and the theory of evolution are incompatible because they address the same question in contradictory ways; others don't. Regarding capital punishment, a common approach is to show that the sanctity of life, justice and capital punishment are all linked. Capital punishment is a response in justice to breaches against life's sanctity – but it is a response that breaches that same sanctity. Argument in ethics is therefore not about formal logical relations or rules of inference. We may look to show that the concepts in question are related in the right way. Part of argument in ethics is to show that inconsistency is possible in this case through the persuasiveness of the picture of life I draw on in the argument showing this. Inconsistency is therefore not altogether ruled out, and entailment remains in arguments in ethics – 'because', 'therefore' and their ilk still have content on my picture.

Since there is nothing inevitable about how we come to see the relation between our different ethical beliefs, how we do understand their relation is revealing. The resolution a person comes to can reveal the shape of the belief – sometimes bringing it into sharper relief, other times refashioning it. Someone may reject Darwin's account because it conflicts with the story of *Genesis*. This shows that for this person there was indeed an inconsistency between the two, it also shows something about the nature of their faith and how it stands in relation to other parts of their life. Someone else might see no incompatibility between the two accounts, never having read the bible literally; or they may be struck by issues in *Genesis* which had never

[222] This picture of argument resembles Dancy's claim that argument is in fact the presentation of competing narratives, with the aim being to show one as most persuasive (Dancy 1993: 113). Taylor's emphasis on the place of the Best Account Principle in our lives builds on this with its more explicit incorporation of phenomenology (see my later chapter on this).

occurred to them before. Such a person may recognise that if they were to read *Genesis* in this way, then it would contradict the theory of natural selection, and this will provide a reason not to read it this way. A common feature of biblical scholarship throughout history is to show that what is in scripture does not fly in the face of what is actually happening, even though the reading is to serve a normative function in life.

My argument seems to make inconsistency recessive to a person's recognition of it. Yet surely people can be inconsistent without them having to recognise it – it is common enough for people to be inconsistent in a number of ways. Indeed, people can seemingly will themselves into inconsistency. Self-deception does this. What I have been arguing so far only goes to show that these are harder to pick than might at first seem to be the case. For instance, the simple statement that someone believes the bible and the theory of natural selection does not by itself show them to be involved in a contradiction. The remarkable thing about a way of life is just how it can bring quite diverse beliefs and values together. We can find in someone else's way of life possibilities for bringing together disparate values that we had always thought were incompatible. There is no reason to think that our view of the matter is the final one, especially if someone is clearly living a rich life combining these elements.[223]

The possibility of 'bringing together' disparate ideas does not mean that life is straightforward. Just because we do not acknowledge that there is an inconsistency in our values, does not mean they are not in tension. For my purposes here, tension might mean two things, Firstly, it can refer to ideas whose relation is not one of logical inconsistency and yet it is clear that they will in reality frequently pull in opposite directions. Liberty and equality are two such ideas. Conceptually, they do not oppose one another and it is in principle possible for them not to be brought in to conflict. However, in reality we regularly find they demand contradictory policies. To ensure equality, we find we must curtail liberty; to protect liberty, we find we lessen equality. Alternatively, concepts can seem to be in tension because it is difficult to disentangle them. When understood one way, they do not need to fall into inconsistency; when understood slightly differently, they may negate one another.

[223] How and whether we can live with inconsistency is another question which I do not have space to address here. See for instance, Marshall 1988

Again, liberty and equality are regular features in our contemporary political vocabulary, and yet there is often a feeling that we must balance them, as if they pull in opposite directions. We can lead our lives with the background sense that it would be easy for us to bring key parts of our life into conflict; or that if we are not careful, we will lead ourselves into a dead end. Part of the art of living can seem to be a talent for squaring the circle, yet we cannot afford to slide into casuistry; it is at this point that self-deception takes hold and actions belie the claims made for them. It can happen when we try to re-describe events so that we do not need to face up to what they demand of us.

I began this chapter arguing that conflict can be irreducible and ended it seemingly arguing that conflict can be avoided simply by narrating away the problem – just redescribe what our commitments were. For instance we can be crude in our understanding and idealise what is possible and therefore what we should achieve, only later coming to recognise that our expectations could only ever blight our life. Changing them to make them realisable might pull us out of self-loathing for constant failure. The strategy is feasible and reasonable sometimes, other times it is not. There are limits to how far we can take this without leaving our selves behind in the process, with a nasty whiplash when we realise how far our license took us. While inconsistency is not inevitable, this does not mean it can always be avoided. Being lucid about my situation, I may be able to see that others are not troubled by it as I am, and yet still recognise that its force is inescapable for me. Reasons may be open, and how they sit together likewise, however the world can so contrive it that our lives are brought into internal conflict. Conflict can remain irreducible just because we find we cannot avoid it – intellectual solutions and redescriptions prove no solution at all, seeming only to be clever ways of ducking an issue.[224] While conflict may be more of a blight than is commonly recognised, and we will sometimes want others to acknowledge the gravity of their situation, we are not always in a position to insist on this. Yet sometimes we will want others to acknowledge what we see, we will want them to agree with us – although this inclination itself can be moralistic or an expression of arrogance. The fact that someone believes something sincerely is not always enough, and it does not stop

[224] Redescribing our view of things this way returns us to the issue of constancy, and change in self understanding, which I dealt with in chapter 3, 'Narrative Identity'.

critical thought – even a self-consistent view of the world can be impoverished. I shall now turn to explore where disagreement leaves us in the light of what I have argued.

# 7. Disagreement & Dialogue

Thus far, I have primarily argued to open the space of the recognisably ethical. I have done so by placing the particular agent at the centre of moral deliberation and by taking seriously the way in which things will stand for someone. What a state of affairs will mean to someone is not simply given and involves a large measure of interpretation. It is not that a given state of affairs is to be filled out with evaluative terminology, rather it is understood in the first place through the kinds of meaning it has for the agent, and this will depend upon the conceptual resources available to the agent. Who the agent is, is therefore central to what we can say about their moral deliberation. Reasons do not have internal compasses which should always move different people in the same direction; and what we take to follow from a reason or consideration in ethics is not given. This will depend upon how things stand for the agent caught in the situation – in other words it will depend upon who the person is. The identity of the person enters not only because it is the individual agent who must act, but also because they will act within the horizon of their conceptual framework, which in part consists of the values through which they view the world, and the narrative through which they understand their situation.

This emphasis on the identity of the agent can easily atomise moral deliberation. There is the risk that the person's identity comes to be seen as more precious than anything else, with a consequent egocentricity and preciousness that defeats the purpose of what I have been arguing thus far. I have argued to open the space of the ethical in order to show the place it has in people's lives and to highlight the way in which we can do others an injustice by presuming our outlook to be the absolute best or the only one which is rationally defensible.[225] By focussing on the individual to this extent, we can also lose sight of the ways in which an individual depends upon the others around her[226] – how she is given depth by her situation. Finally, we run the risk of collapsing into an empty subjectivism, in which a person is right in all he

[225] I return to this at the end of the next chapter
[226] For more on this see, '*Kritik* in Dialogue'

holds to be morally valid simply because he is sincere and this goes to constitute his identity. Disagreement then becomes empty, and argument – a common response to disagreement – becomes pointless. I have touched on these matters throughout this work, but shall concentrate on all of them in more detail in this chapter.

In this chapter, and the two following, I address the charge of empty relativism. In the later chapters I deal more directly with how critical debate and *Kritik* in general might proceed. I begin this chapter with a brief look at the phenomenology of value to show that this already prevents any relativism in my work from being empty. The values we use to orientate ourselves and which give depth to our lives cannot be idly chosen and dismissed. When we recognise them, they play a serious role in our lives. However, the fact that people might be sincere in their attachment to their way of life does not mean they are impervious to criticism, nor that they cannot be mistaken.

A key problem with empty relativism is its inability to deal meaningfully with disagreement. I therefore turn to explore features of disagreement more generally. Disagreement is always disagreement with some*one*. This in turn introduces dialogue – a natural result of disagreement. Dialogue can take many forms, and although these might have a considerable effect on the possibilities for dialogue in any instance, I do not explore these differences. Consequently, with all its limitations, dialogue is generally thought of here in terms of a conversation between people, and throughout this chapter dialogue and conversation are used interchangeably. Nor do I explore the issue of what differences follow from a dialogue between, for instance, cultures, societies, groups rather than two people. These topics would be rewarding, however they go well beyond the matter at hand. In exploring disagreement and the possibilities of dialogue, I look at Gadamer's argument for the priority of the question in hermeneutics and in light of this argue for a recognition of the need for openness to the questions posed in disagreement. This brings to light the issue of what it is that dialogue should be oriented toward. I argue this need not be agreement, since in the end we might only come to understand better the nature of our disagreement. Dialogue cannot be a panacea of all disagreement. Indeed, if we are serious about pluralism, we have to acknowledge that disagreement will be endemic and not always possible to resolve.

To conclude the chapter, I draw on Gaita and Gadamer to explore briefly what dialogue involves for its participants, touching on issues such as trust and authority and thereby introduce the importance of who the participants are to what can be achieved in any dialogue.

**Subjectivism**

In the first chapter, following Rhees, I emphasised that it is the agent who must act and she can only do so for reasons which weigh with her. Reasons are open and have no internal compass – reasons only get direction from how they stand in someone's life and weigh with them. Later, I extended this to the relation between reasons or values – how they stand in relation to one another is also not simply given: the fact that there is tension need not speak against them, and the scope for claiming real rational inconsistency between them is more limited than is usually thought. Both of these arguments were motivated by the need to see how reasons and values actually feature in a person's life, give it meaning and filling it out. It is only within the context of an actual way of life that values can be properly understood. These arguments place the individual agent in the centre of moral evaluation, though they do so in such a way that it may seem the individual is atomistically conceived – isolated from others' claims unless she or he wishes to acknowledge them. All moral evaluation then becomes a matter of opinion only. Furthermore, it is so bound to an individual's own opinion that it is open to their caprice as well – if they refuse to acknowledge something, then they may be seen as justified simply by virtue of their making it a feature of their 'way of life' and claiming it matters deeply to them.

However, the point of focusing on identity has been to draw on the way in which matters of moral concern do in fact weigh with us. They go to make up who we are and, doing this – whether consciously or not – they matter to us. There is a kind of phenomenology of ethical concern – to claim something as ethical or moral is to acknowledge a particular kind of importance that it has for us; it is to acknowledge that how it matters is not shallow. Describing the ethical as deep or shallow in a person's life risks being tendentious – for while it is true that acting against it can torment us, it is also true that at other times we can act against our convictions without undue discomfort (though this itself might disconcert us). However, whether on any occasion we act on its claims or not, the ethical does not recede just because it

did not spur us to action. Furthermore, when we feel claimed by an ethical concern, we do not see it as just our opinion. It does matter, and its so mattering seems unshakable. If it were mere opinion then acting against our ethical convictions would not matter the way it does, and this contrasts with other matters of opinion: compare Sue deciding what she ought to do in *Jude the Obscure* to me choosing between science-fiction and romance novels. In matters of taste I can acknowledge my preferences and leave it at that; it is not so straightforward with the ethical.

Winch draws out another feature of this phenomenology in his discussions of relativism, when he notes that the content of our beliefs and moral judgements is not "*p* is true-for-me" and "*p* is not-true-for-you".[227] This is, as Winch contends, a misleading way of saying "I believe that *p*", that is, I think that *p* is *true*.[228] Part of the problem is the way in which the verb 'to believe' conjugates – its grammar is regular, however its possibilities change depending on whether or not the subject of the sentence is first-person singular: I can quite properly finish the sentence, "David believes the Earth is flat", with, "But he is wrong"; however, I cannot say, "I believe the Earth is flat, but I am wrong", or clearly I would not believe the is Earth flat.[229] While the 'true-for-A' kind of relativism has the merit of making clear that every judgement is *somebody's* judgement, it comes at the cost of distorting the content of those judgements. Similarly, matters of ethics strike us in such a way that we cannot say their claim is emptied by acknowledging the fact I hold them, even if at the same time I am aware they need not be shared by others.

The phenomenology of the ethical by no means resolves all the problems of subjectivism, but it does head off some of the concerns, in particular the feeling that people can just tell themselves that something matters to them ethically and therefore expect it to trump others' claims. Of course people can do this dishonestly and for rhetorical effect, but then they are not being in any way authentic or sincere. They are just using a word – but even then it is not a matter of mere opinion, it is a matter of self-interest, tactics and effect. My point in drawing attention to the phenomenology is to show how the ethical is not a matter of mere opinion: it matters in a way that forbids it being mere opinion for the agent. What matters ethically goes

[227] Winch 1987: 181-3; 1965: 164-5
[228] Winch 1965: 164
[229] Winch 1987: 182

to who the person is – it constitutes their identity. It therefore forms the horizon within which we understand the world. We cannot simply pick and choose this.

Another expression of the conviction that ethical concerns are not matters of opinion alone is the kind of reasons we give for holding them. We are willing to explain our thinking and to justify why we hold the views that we do. We do not just stop with the recognition that we differ with someone else in our views, but hold on to the sense that we are justified (or not unjustified) in what we believe. We also often think about the grounds for our beliefs. Of course, our practice is not always luminous and often falls short of the ideal – we can deceive ourselves about our reasons for holding a view, rationalise them and descend into empty cant defending them. However, this does not characterise our entire practice in this domain and we should not lose sight of this when people use our worst practices as a lever for scepticism about our best.

An additional feature of reason-giving is that it demonstrates that conversation need not end with, and is not emptied by, the registering of difference of opinion alone. This is in contrast to the retreat into 'true-for-me' and 'not-true-for-you', which empties much of the point from further conversation. We debate not only to register difference, but also to explore the adequacy, strengths and weaknesses of our own and others' views. Retreating into saying 'it's true-for-me' adds nothing of substance which might enable an interlocutor to gain a real perspective on how the matter stands – this can only be achieved if, after asserting my position, I am prepared to continue and answer the natural question, 'why?'.

A source of dissatisfaction for many will be the limits of the reasons we adduce in debate, which previous chapters have already identified. What the reasons are reasons for will depend upon the life in which they are a part. Nor will there be a single logic governing the relations between reasons, since the sense of these relations will also depend upon their instantiation. What we find is that reasons depend upon a constellation of mutually reinforcing and buttressing values and outlooks that go to make up a life. Explore the reasons someone has for holding an ethical position and we will find there is no ultimate and firm ground upon which the edifice rests, instead we will often find that, after some time, we return to the original point in question. Indeed, sometimes there may not be any clearly distinguishable

reasons at all, but a person's stance may depend upon their outlook. The reasons provided would then no longer be premises supporting inferences, but would go to draw a picture, to make an outlook vivid and thereby make their stance clear. This can be infuriating if we expect all argument to begin with firmly grounded premises, however it only results from the fact that the only ground on which our values can rest is the life we lead. The way in which we adduce reasons in debates in ethics shows at once both the limits of subjectivism and the limits of what can be expected from these debates in ethics.

The ideas at play in ethical debate are often interwoven with a sense of people's place in the world and if care is not taken the two can be difficult to separate in argument. The possibilities for harm in this domain have been well demonstrated in the debates that have swirled around multiculturalism and minority rights. Often these debates, and more especially the debates around particular cases, have emerged as the legacy of a disrespect (conscious or otherwise) for various groups in society, and the debates have often been conducted with a sense that the disrespect is continuing within the debate itself. It is sometimes said that the spirit of enquiry demands that we treat all ideas equally and seriously, but this seems to miss the point of much ethical debate. What must have priority is the person (or group) who holds the idea – the idea demands serious attention insofar as the interlocutor does just because the idea is often expressive of a sense of who the person is. Rubbishing the idea can therefore rubbish the person. Similarly, demeaning a culture can demean a person. I am subordinating the importance of cultures to their members and ideas to the people who hold them. This is because each seems to derive its value from the place it has in people's lives and how it nourishes them. The demand that marginalised groups in our society be treated in ways others are not stems in the first place from a sense of the harm done to their members when they are forced to struggle for their existence, especially if this is expressive of a basic disrespect or even antipathy toward them. Habermas summarises the thought nicely when he writes, 'For in the last analysis the protection of forms of life and traditions in which identities are formed is supposed to serve the recognition of their members; it does not represent a kind of preservation of species by administrative means.'[230]

[230] Habermas 1994: 131

Of course some people do behave monstrously and their outlook can reflect this. However, on encountering the espousal of an idea which seems worthless, there is still a requirement to engage the person seriously about it. This can be a pragmatic restraint – it may be that they have been misunderstood or we have not properly appreciated the role this idea in fact plays. However the demand to treat the person seriously no matter what they say is based on the more fundamental requirement not to lose sight of another person's humanity. By 'humanity' I do not mean their membership of the species *homo sapien*. The task of elaborating just what is involved in treating someone seriously is too large to be dealt with here, although, as Gaita observes, talking of others' humanity only invites elaboration.[231] Gaita attempts throughout his works to provide a sense of what is involved.[232] Hegel, Honneth, Habermas and Levinas (to name only a few) have also attempted to spell out what might be involved in recognising others' otherness – this is clearly a task which lies beyond the scope of my present work. What is to be noted is that seriousness can operate at two (overlapping) levels. The first is the basic level of their humanity, which moves Gaita to warn against treating anyone as though they were vermin. The second level is that at which we acknowledge that what someone is saying cannot be taken seriously – even if this means dismissing who they have become. An example of the latter would be the virulent racist, making wild claims about the others' status, history, habits and being. They cannot be taken seriously, so long as we mean we should view what they say as being in some way worthwhile. However, while finding none of their views redeemable, they are not to be treated as sub-human, as they might wish us to see their targets.

When exploring what we might make of people who have knowingly participated in racist programs and yet acted for 'good' motives (such as the forced removal of aboriginal children of mixed blood for adoption by white families) Gaita writes, 'We call "good" only those intentions that express values we can take seriously, even if we do not hold them.'[233] An example might be the bureaucrat who plans and implements a policy to forcibly remove an ethnic group while seeing himself as benevolent. Exploring the assumptions underlying the policy being enacted shows them to be racist – the actions of those implementing the policy therefore are

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[231] Gaita 2004: 5
[232] Gaita 2004, 1999
[233] Gaita 1999: 120

expressive not only of 'good' intentions (thinking he is helping the ethnic group), but also of values which are racist. The racism inherent in the policy the actions support pollutes not only the actions but also the intention to carry them out. What seemed like good intentions are thereby shown to be racist – we cannot seriously believe that they are 'good' because we cannot believe that the policy they were aimed at supporting was in any way good.[234]

This kind of disagreement shows that there has to be room for criticism which is not intended merely to register a difference of opinion. Debates in ethics still have teeth because of the significance of their subject-matter– and this is reflected in our sensitivity to criticism of our moral perspective.

**Disagreement**

Thinking about criticism takes us into an exploration of disagreement more generally. Given what I have thus far argued, what are we to make of disagreement and what resources are there for meaningfully tackling it and engaging with those with whom we disagree?

The first thing to notice about disagreement is that it is disagreement with someone.[235] This immediately suggests a central place for dialogue, since disagreement can best be explored in dialogue. There are however three possible complications with this view, to which I will briefly respond before continuing with an exploration of dialogue.

The first is that, in response to the suggestion that I must disagree with some*one* it might be contended that I can in fact disagree with some*thing* – when reading a book, or viewing an artwork (for instance, a piece of nationalist sculpture), I might disagree with what the work stands for or suggests. It might be true that in a sense I really disagree with the author of the work, however this sense is often very limited.

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[234] This use of the idea of 'seriousness' is perhaps at one end of the form of *Kritik* which is located in the agent's way of life. I develop this idea of *Kritik* more directly in the next two chapters. It marks the point at which the interlocutor's claims are so wild as to refuse the possibility of being sensibly addressed. My use of this idea is not uncritical – it is evident that people can be mistaken in their judgement of what can be taken seriously and what cannot. The issue, however, lies at the margins of my main interest here, which is to show the possibilities and resources for *Kritik* given what I have argued so far.

[235] This is similar to something Taylor observes, Taylor 1991: 31. I shall explore Taylor's conception of practical reason in the next chapter.

What I often find myself responding to is the work itself. Gadamer argues cogently that the work of hermeneutics is a conversation with a text.[236] The connection between reading a text and conversing with a person (or culture) is not something that I will be able to explore any further here since I am wishing to explore what might be described as active dialogue between people. Whether or not we can be said to disagree with a text or artwork, dialogue is only possible between people. In this sense, active disagreement must be between people.

Gadamer's work is fundamentally concerned with what it is to approach a text with a view to understanding. What is interesting is that for Gadamer the connection between conversation and approaching a text lies in the need on both occasions for openness, which in turn brings out the priority of the question in relation to a text or conversation. The need for openness when approaching a text emerges from a consideration of the need for openness in conversations: central to our relationship with someone (with a 'Thou') is the need for openness.[237] However, consideration of the need for openness itself reveals for Gadamer that its logical structure depends upon 'the question', that is, openness depends on being open to being struck by a question. In summary, Gadamer traces the need for openness back to experience. The openness of experience depends upon us first of all having *asked* whether one object is different from another, of having asked a question. The priority of the question in experience leads Gadamer to draw on Plato's account of Socrates and emphasise the need for proper questioning: a questioning in which the sense of the question allows for a meaningful answer. For a question to be open, the answer must be undetermined.[238]

This introduces the second problem, since Gadamer's arguments on the need for openness and the priority of the question might be thought to run counter to my emphasis on disagreement. For Gadamer, it is openness which enables the right questions to be asked, because it is openness that is required for us to ask genuine questions which we do not presume already to have answered. For questions to have any force or purpose, they depend upon an acknowledgement that we do not know something – the answer has not been settled. He distinguishes between genuine and

[236] Gadamer 1979: 331
[237] Gadamer 1979: 321-5
[238] Gadamer 1979: 325-6

false discourse by the orientation toward questioning, noting that someone who thinks they know better than someone else and asks questions to prove themselves right will not ask the right question.[239]

Gadamer's point seems a good one, however my emphasis on disagreement seems to run counter to it since, the thought might go, if I enter a conversation because I disagree with someone, then I must think I know the answer to the question at hand. How can disagreement ever result in openness? We might observe that someone who enters a conversation because of disagreement may never have thought of the alternative to their own view – that is, having never thought there was room for a question, upon finding one they are now drawn into conversation. Of course, if we think that dialogue can be a critical practice, and, as Gadamer himself stresses, that we might find our deficiencies in it, then conversely we must also acknowledge that at the end of it we might find ourselves vindicated. Disagreement is a natural way to enter a conversation: this is descriptively true since our disagreements often do lead us into conversations; it also makes sense since we do enter conversations because, as I argued earlier, the matters at hand cannot be understood as matters of mere opinion. Gadamer admires the Platonic dialogues because,

> …what is said is continually transformed into the uttermost possibilities of its rightness and truth… Here, again, it is not simply a matter of leaving the subject undecided. Whoever wants to know something cannot just leave it a matter of mere opinion, which is to say that he should not hold himself aloof from the opinions that are in question.[240]

Our readiness to enter into conversation because of disagreement shows that questioning is indeed a 'passion.'[241] Gadamer is right to emphasise that just because what is being explored matters deeply to us, this should not obscure from us that our disagreement reveals a question for us and that if we are genuine we must leave the question open. That is, we must be open to the possibility that the answer we arrive at will conflict with what we first thought. We must also be open about the position

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[239] Gadamer 1979: 326
[240] Gadamer 1979: 331
[241] Gadamer 1979: 330

of our partner in conversation, oriented not simply to finding their weaknesses, but also their strengths.

Trying simply to prove a point risks missing the opportunities that dialogue provides in the first place, and one of these is a deepened understanding of others' stance, as well as one's own. Of course, we will be concerned to ensure that our own view is put as strongly as possible. It is natural to want to ensure that one's views are put as cogently as possible; when they are not, others' response to what we put forward seems to miss the point and not involve an adequate recognition of what we actually think. Once again, the issue of recognition arises, since it matters to us in conversation that our view be rightly understood by our interlocutor. The process of enquiry must be structured so as to ensure that the views put forward are given their strongest aspect. This need therefore arises pragmatically and ethically. Pragmatically, because if our desire is to get the best possible answer to a question about how we should live, then we must ensure the alternatives are put as strongly as possible so as to give a sense of the richness they offer. Ethically, since this dialogue involves the need to recognise someone's otherness as possibly enriching.

We close down possibilities in a conversation when we assume at the outset we know what is right, and this sees us asking the wrong questions, since we are no longer prepared for an answer that surprises. This leads us into the third possible objection to the suggestion that disagreement is disagreement with someone. Surely that someone can be myself? I can indeed hold a dialogue with myself, but this reflects only ambivalence and not disagreement. While it is possible to disagree with myself over time – 'I have come to see what I did was foolish' – it is not possible to see how one can actively disagree with oneself at any one time. Seeing two sides at once or being of two minds, undecided, unsure, divided or torn is not the same as disagreeing with oneself. Nor is the internal dialogue the same as that to be found in disagreement between two people, inasmuch as this involves someone who is genuinely 'other'. It is the possibility of surprise in dialogue that Gaita, drawing on Buber, observes to be central to dialogue.[242] We cannot be a surprise to ourselves as we can be to others, for surprise with an interlocutor can register just how much an 'other' they are to us. It is the possibility of this surprise combined with a recognition

[242] Gaita 2004: 277

of the richness of what surprises that has motivated many of the key arguments in this thesis. It is through an openness to others' sense of things that we are surprised, rather than either an assumption that they are wrong, or a reflex desire to defend the superiority of our own view. It is, as Gadamer might say, a recognition of another question about our life that is open, and consequently another possibility for understanding and living.

However, Gadamer also seems to suggest that humility is required in approaching a question. Acknowledging a question is also to acknowledge we do not know its answer. When the question has to do with how we should lead our lives, then we are acknowledging that there is something we might not know about the matter, and therefore something that we could learn. If humility, openness and a desire to make another's position as strong as possible are features of dialogue, then we are also required to be honest about the difficulties in our stance. As has been suggested throughout this thesis, there are no lives led without some kind of tension arising within them. Holding to one value usually strains our commitment to another. To be aware that the need to see others' views in their strongest aspect does not require that we be blind to their difficulties.

**Dialogue's Orientation**

One outcome of disagreement is dialogue. But to what should the dialogue be oriented? Is it to be oriented toward consensus? That is, is our task in dialogue to overcome disagreement and find agreement? Realistically speaking, it is too much to expect that we will always find agreement through dialogue. There are the obvious reasons to do with things never matching the ideal: we will not be as open as we might, and are liable to defensiveness, bias, bone-headedness and so on.

There are other more complex reasons why we might not reach consensus, and this has to do with what might be discovered at the end of a conversation: we might simply learn what gives depth to practices we had hitherto thought shallow or unintelligible. In doing so we might also learn that what gives a practice depth depends upon its place in life more broadly, and consequently we may not be drawn any closer to the practice. For instance, an atheist seeing people fall to their knees and begin asking for (a non-existent) god's intervention in a whole range of matters might think that prayer only displays the kind of weak intellect which believes prayer

could change anything. However, in the course of conversation with a believer, the atheist might learn that prayer only has something to do with causality to the small extent that matters are now acknowledged to be beyond the believer's control.[243] The atheist might learn that what prayer represents is humility before a loved god, an acknowledgement of finitude, and a deepening of their relationship through an acknowledgement to their (already knowing) god of what is important to them. The practice might then make more sense to the atheist, who might even be impressed by the depth that the practice can in fact give to a life, and how a life might be felt to be shallow without it. Nonetheless, what the atheist might also come to think is that, all this being the case, she is still not moved to incorporate it into her life because prayer as a meaningful practice still depends upon its place in a life in which faith already plays a part. A consensus of a kind might be reached, since the atheist and the believer might now agree that prayer can in fact be a practice that gives depth to a life and displays its richness. However, this is not a thoroughgoing consensus since they clearly do not agree as to whether a life involving prayer (and faith) is one that ought to be led by all. How can dialogue persuade anyone of this, since it will require the atheist not only to see the value of a life in faith but also involve the atheist agreeing that this is one that she ought also take up. This is of course not impossible, but it is not the kind of agreement toward which a conversation *must* be aiming.

What this example also illustrates is that even if we are oriented to consensus, this need not mean that both people must 'meet in the middle'. If there has been agreement in the example of the atheist learning about prayer, then it is not one of convergence of belief. The atheist may have learnt something and has moved in their esteem of prayer; the believer may have learnt what sustains the atheist in responding to many of these issues – as well as issues which never arise for the atheist. However, there is no sign that the two met in the middle and agreed on how one *should* see the world. Indeed, if, as will be discussed later, it is possible to make a mistake, then there is no reason to think that consensus must involve meeting in the middle after making the same journey from different directions.

[243] This example builds on the one Winch gives in Winch 1964: 320-1.

## Dialogue's Situation

What the example of the atheist also illustrates is that dialogue occurs between real people in a real situation – it is because of this that a discussion can have any sense at all. This might be thought only to imply limitations which represent departures from an ideal epistemology, however it turns out to be dialogue's strength, for it enables dialogue to become a critical practice. The details of how this is so will be argued in the next two chapters. I shall begin this process by looking at the participants in dialogue. That is, who the interlocutors are and how they are placed with regard to each other. I shall explore this in light of remarks by Gaita. In the course of this I shall show the need for the interlocutors to be present in what they say, and go on to explore the role of trust in dialogue. This will in its turn lead to an analysis of the impact on the dialogue of *who* is in dialogue. The second level of dialogue's situation is that of its context.[244]

Gaita writes,

> To have something to say is to be 'present' in what we say and to those to whom we are speaking, and that means that what we say must, at the crux, be taken on trust. It must be taken on trust, not because, contingently, there are no means of checking it, but because what is said is not extractable from the manner of its disclosure.[245]

This bears on dialogue's situation in a number of ways. The first is what Gaita means by 'having something to say'. It is not merely the ability to speak, or to chip in during a conversation. Gaita is here concerned with having something to say in discussions about morality, and the quote comes at the end of an argument about the place of wisdom in moral life, namely that it necessarily takes time to acquire, and that this is why morality is not an expertise in which one could cram lots of information and quickly come to know all one needs. That morality is not a domain of expertise and instead has to do with wisdom therefore changes the sort of person from whom we might seek advice on moral matters – they need not be a person who is well studied, but one whose experience and demeanour qualifies them in others'

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[244] I look at this in detail in the chapter '*Kritik* in Dialogue'

[245] Gaita 2004: 268

eyes for these matters. A depth is required which means that intellect alone is not enough. This is something that Gadamer draws out in his discussion of Plato's representation of Socrates in the *Lysis*, when he seeks a harmony between *logos* (the account we give of ourselves) and *ergon* (our deeds, or how we conduct ourselves).[246] As we shall shortly see, it conditions not only whether we have something to say, but what we can say in the first place.

To have something to say we must be present in dialogue. 'Presence' here means at least two things: present in my own life, and present with my interlocutor. Clearly, since having something to say depends upon wisdom, which depends upon our experience, we must draw on this experience. This does not mean to draw on our experience in the sense of a set of stories we can tell to illustrate a point. If it were this alone, we would no doubt simply bore, and finish each conversation by saying, 'Trust me, I've seen it all before'. Instead it is to draw on our experience by drawing on the wisdom it has enabled. In what we say, we must therefore be true to our experience. As Gadamer might put it, what we say (our *logos*) must be true to our *ergon*, our deeds. In dialogue I must therefore be present in my life.

If, in dialogue, we must be present in our own life, we must also be present with our interlocutor. *Miteinanderreden ist auch nicht primär Aneinandervorbeireden*.[247] To discuss with one another is not to talk at and past one another. If the dialogue is to be genuine, then, as mentioned earlier, its outcome cannot be predetermined and we cannot be set on proving our position. Gadamer's emphasis on '*Miteinanderreden*' (discussion *with* one another) is connected to the openness of the question, since it is with one another in discussion that we follow the question. We must be with the other person in the discussion – we must be present to them. If dialogue is the outcome of disagreement, then the question has in a sense been posed by (and with) the other, and the question can only retain its openness so long as we are open to the other and their stance, and are at least in this sense present to them.

'Trust' in the quote from Gaita plays an interesting role because it unravels, and at first appears obscure. Immediately after suggesting that what is said in moral dialogue must be taken on trust he qualifies by noting that this has nothing to do with

[246] Gadamer 1980: 2-3
[247] Gadamer 1970: 98

our ability to corroborate what has been said. Clearly, in dialogue thought does not absent itself and we will use it throughout. The point for Gaita is that moral dialogue involves a richer, if more amorphous, kind of thought than that commonly commended to us as Practical Reason. Reason has traditionally been conceived of in such a way as to remove the personal from the space of deliberation. While someone has to deliberate, the Reason they draw upon is such as to stop their own personality and self-interest entering the picture (except to the extent they are weighing their interests). This has gone for conceptions of reason in practical deliberation as much as it has in scientific.[248]

In any case, rational reflection is possible and essential in dialogue, so trust cannot be at issue as regards the contents of what is spoken. Trust enters in the first place because we must trust that our partner in discussion is also present with us in all the ways just mentioned. This is why Plato often has Socrates enquiring whether his interlocutor is being serious and genuine: if his interlocutor is no longer serious or genuine, then he is no longer *with* Socrates – he is no longer present in conversation. The sophist will readily take a line which seems plausible, whose content seems reasonable. The point for Gaita and Gadamer is that the sophist is not present in the discussion in the way a partner in conversation will be. This is what distinguishes sophists from Plato's Socrates (himself otherwise prone to sophistic arguments). Of course, there is no way of being certain that someone is being genuine in dialogue (or that they are not), and to this extent we need to trust them.

However, this trust need not be baseless. This is because someone's authenticity is at least open to scrutiny at the level of how they go about their life, and this is just why Socrates enquires as he does, and why Gadamer emphasises the need to keep in view both *logos* and *ergon* in Socratic dialogues. Gaita does not draw on the Greek word 'ergon', but writes of 'manner of "presence"', 'demeanour' and 'style'. It is not simply the person's deeds (as *ergon* is often translated) that matter, it is how their life has given shape to these deeds. This is why Gaita talks of 'style', it is not just what the person has done in their life that gives them weight, but the sense that these deeds have been unified through a style of living that gives them depth and demonstrates wisdom. Obviously the question of whether a person's 'style' or demeanour along

[248] Taylor's conception of practical reason puts the particular interlocutors at its centre. I explore the implications of this in the next chapter.

with their deeds confer wisdom cannot be answered relative to any set of criteria. Judgement is called for, and, ultimately, a trust in the person is as well: trust that what they say of and from themselves is indeed enmeshed in their life and that this has substance. This is why, just as for Gadamer, it is *logos* and *ergon* that matter in a dialogue; for Gaita it is the content of what they say as well as the 'style' of the person – their demeanour. Deeds are important insofar as they are expressive of character (which perhaps is what Gadamer has in mind when he persists with the Greek *ergon*).

This emphasis on style and demeanour should alert us to a risk implicit in dialogue – it does not guarantee correctness. If trust plays a role, we must remember that trust can be misplaced. What's more, it is a trust based on the demeanour and 'style' of the interlocutor. I am in the process of arguing that dialogue is situated and that this is a positive feature, enabling a particular kind of *Kritik*. However, this should not blind us to the fact that trust also exists in an ethical space – we can trust and distrust the wrong people for the wrong reasons. It is possible for whole groups in a society to be excluded simply because they are not seen as the sort to be trusted – this can occur at the level of institutional arrangements in a society, but, just as importantly for my purposes here, it can also occur at the interpersonal level. A person's place in a dialogue may be too easily dismissed, and another's inflated, without a clear sense of who someone really is, or what they might (not) have to offer. It is obviously not uncommon to look down on what someone says because our sense of them is already diminished. In making the points I do about dialogue I am not blind to these possibilities (and nor are Gaita and Gadamer). Instead I would note that it is precisely because of the extent of difference that it behoves us to give space to learning how others' differences might give depth when we are surprised in our encounters. Dialogue is always going to depend upon our entering it seriously. To this extent dialogue is like any other branch of moral endeavour – it requires people being serious for it simply to get off the ground.

It is the central place of the individuality of the interlocutor in debate that gives sense to Gaita's more radical claim shortly after that what is learnt in dialogue is conditioned by an understanding of who it was we learnt from. Imagining that in the

*Gorgias* Polus was convinced by Socrates that to suffer evil is better than to do it, Gaita writes:

> I do not deny that Polus could change in a way that would be a result of his having understood what Socrates meant when he said that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. However, if he did, it would be because *Socrates* changed him….If Polus came across such an argument written on a blackboard, studied it out of curiosity and was convinced…, then he would not understand what Socrates understood. I do not mean that only Socrates could teach him what it is to do evil as Socrates understood it, but if Socrates did, then it would be internal to Polus' understanding of it…that his teacher was the kind of man he was.[249]

This is a radicalisation of the argument, because what I have thus far argued is that who the person is enters into what we are prepared to take from them. What Gaita is arguing here is not only that what someone says has to be backed up by the kind of person they are, as if this buttresses their argument, it is rather that *who* it is we learn from is internal to what we learn. Gaita is arguing that if Polus had come to be convinced by Socrates, internal to the understanding he had gained would be the sense of Socrates' having taught it. By 'sense' here I mean that the understanding gained would have been given its sense – its place in life – by its being attached to Socrates. It is not merely that we would observe Socrates, see how he embodied this understanding in his life and incorporate it into our own. Rather, it is that the understanding gained is already conditioned by its being given its sense by Socrates having taught it. Socrates gives the understanding its sense through his life; knowing this, Polus would know 'where he was coming from'. This displays a deeper level at which we can be 'with' someone in conversation. We are with them not only in trying to learn or explore something together with them, but also in the sense that they give sense to what it is that the discussion brings us to.

The interlocutor not only gives the sense to what is learnt, they also place a limit on it. Gadamer shows this in the course of his study of Plato's *Lysis*, in which Socrates

[249] Gaita 2004: 276

explores friendship with a range of interlocutors.[250] Socrates explores friendship with two boys, Lysis and Menexenos, but the dialogue ends in an *aporia*: according to Gadamer, the discussion seems to veer around, leaving the boys perplexed. Gadamer observes that by the end of the text, 'One suddenly recognizes that any discussion which Socrates conducts about friendship with two young boys *must* end in an *aporia*, for children do not yet know what friendship is…'[251] The boys are present and genuine, however their life has not been such as to enable them to explore the subject in the way Socrates is able. As Gaita argues, they do not yet have the experience which can allow wisdom to develop. The boys' own lives and position – who they are – places limits on what can take place in the discussion. This limit shapes the course of discussion according to the peculiarities of its participants, however it also carries the advantage of being the natural outcome of the lucid sobriety Gaita seeks (and argues Socrates sought) in discussion. The resulting explorations track what the interlocutors imagine to be possible and serious, and can carry a depth which conversations oriented to vague and impossible imaginings proving small points usually cannot (for instance, think of all the trolleys filled with moral philosophers deciding if they may throw one amongst their number under the wheels to save the rest). What we should make of what people feel to be morally possible for them has also been discussed at length in earlier chapters; while it is important to note the risks of people mistaking their limits, we must also take note of the place these necessarily have in our lives.

I began this chapter by looking at the phenomenology of value, seeing this as one response to the thought that I have hitherto argued for an empty subjectivism. What followed has established the background for the next two chapters in which I provide a further account of *Kritik* and resources available to engage in it. Looking at the phenomenology of value highlighted the place of recognition of the other in disagreement. Exploring disagreement also highlighted the role of dialogue and its conditions: we must be open to others and the questions they pose, either directly, or by how they live; and in dialogue, we may not find agreement and need not always be oriented to it. Finally, I looked at the participants in dialogue themselves, and

[250] Gadamer 1980
[251] Gadamer 1980: , 6 – italics in original.

what is involved for them. This is particularly relevant for the account of argumentation given in the next chapter, structured as it is around the interlocutors.

# 8. Taylor On Practical Reason

In this chapter I will focus on Charles Taylor's conception of practical reason. Taylor takes seriously the idea that moral disagreements are between actual people and that any conception of practical reason must have this at its centre. An outcome of this is that final pronouncements are not to be sought, but only relational judgements of superiority and so forth. Taylor shifts the focus away from the merit of the final belief to the transition from one belief to another. What matters is to determine whether there is an asymmetry in how we can describe the transitions between beliefs X and Y: can the transition from X to Y be cast as a gain, while the same somehow not be true of the reverse transition? As I argue later, Taylor's shift in emphasis away from a search for final truths in ethics is an important one, however he unwittingly retains too much of the tradition he is trying to shed. Trying to reform the project of *practical reason* he continues to aim for certainties of a kind he otherwise could not endorse. With the Best Account Principle a cornerstone of his conception, narrative re-emerges as central to argumentation in ethics. This means that such debate will not reach finality, inasmuch as there will always be possibilities for clarification, improvement and development (and, the world being as it is, obfuscation and descent). At the end, in light of criticisms by Rosa, I briefly look at the issue of radical disagreement between people inhabiting very different world-views. Once again there will be nothing final about what can be concluded in such debate, however there are pragmatic reasons not to despair of this. Apart from how rare radical difference is, it is first of all unusual to compare whole cultures – or at least it is usually pointless. It is usually aspects of a culture that interest us, insofar as this has manifested in a way that sees us disagree. This at least can contain the scope of a debate. In any case, wishing for a final resolution to radical difference will not avoid the need for ongoing and tentative or provisional understandings in disagreement. Acknowledging that people do not properly understand each other will not prevent disagreement, just as understanding does not necessarily resolve it. Although we cannot find the finality that has traditionally been sought, we should not

ignore the critical tools at our disposal. This chapter introduces the power of narratives, and in the next chapter I shall explore resources for *Kritik* further.

Our history, culture and situation locate us and provide an horizon within which meaning takes shape. They thereby set limits as to what can be intelligibly claimed – disagreement between people need not, then, simply be the registering of two different positions. When we disagree with someone, we often have reasons for doing so – even if we cannot find reasons, we usually find our interlocutor has reasons for their view. That is, when disagreement is explored in dialogue, we engage in an activity of reason-giving. We may find ourselves exploring our own views for the first time, altering them as we elaborate them; nevertheless, we inevitably find ourselves claiming that holding a value implies having certain outlooks on various topics, or that it implies certain reasons for action in certain kinds of situation. 'Life is sacred, and so…..', 'Everyone is to be treated equally, this means….' and so on. When we disagree with someone we will often want to argue our case. We present arguments and thereby suggest that implicature holds in debates in ethics. We seem to be involved in reasoning because we are exploring how reasons can sit together. However, exploring how reasons can sit together is not reasoning as many understand it. Reasoning is commonly understood to be closely connected with Reason or Practical Reason. The point of this enterprise is to adjudicate authoritatively between the various claims made by us or on us. Where disagreement arises, Reason is brought to bear for us to decide where the truth of the matter lies. Of course, these claims are sometimes made in principle only, or go along with an acknowledgement that perfection cannot be achieved: humans' powers may fall short of what is needed, or available information may always be incomplete and so on. What Reason is will also be contested as will its place in our life – the distinction between pure and practical reason reflects one perspective on this: the world of action necessarily involves elements which mean Reason alone cannot decide a matter, rather its half-brother Practical Reason must be used.

However, what I have argued so far in this thesis suggests that there is not one way of putting ideas together. I showed at the beginning that reasons are open – they have no internal vector until instantiated. Later I argued that how reasons can be thought to sit together is largely open as well because what counts as inconsistency in ethics

is open in a way not commonly recognised. This openness is closely connected to our interpretive agency: we are constituted in part by our narrative, or how we understand ourselves and this in turn is ‘told’ using the terms available to us – in whatever language we speak which in turn reflects the social and cultural situation we develop in. In ethics there is not one over-arching guarantor of a good argument, since the space in which practical reason must do its work is so irregular as to make argumentation unrecognisable when described in its terms. From what I have thus far argued (and am about to argue), it should be clear that reason cannot have the traction that is traditionally sought. Argument has no Archimedean point, nor any absolute shape. How an argument develops will vary according to who is present in it.

However, this does not make argument redundant, it just shows that we must come to a different understanding about the resources at hand in debates in ethics, and also be more modest in what we think we can achieve in argument. This is not because other people can be pig-headed. The modesty I am enjoining is not a pragmatic function of other people’s pigheadedness. I have discussed at length the need for sincerity, openness and trust in argument, and this is because we must be open to being moved in argument. We must be open to finding someone else’s view of a matter superior to our own or that it sheds a light on our situation which we could not find alone. It is simply that at the end of the day there may be no requirement for the other person to change. All that will be registered is disagreement because there is no absolute position from which to suggest they are wrong. In the course of this thesis I have argued for pluralism in moral life. What comes with this is the acknowledgement that others need not be wrong just because I think I am right. Disagreement can properly remain as disagreement. Nor is there any requirement on me to convince everyone of my position, and no requirement on them to be convinced. To think there is, is delusory; at the extreme it is arrogant, totalitarian and destructive.

Charles Taylor attempts to bridge the gap between the project of practical reason and a kind of pluralism based on narrative identity. The possibility is first raised when he discusses narrative agency and introduces the ‘Best Account Principle’ in *The Sources of the Self*. His argument is developed most fully in his article, *Explanation and Practical Reason*. His project is ambitious but struggles at points perhaps

because it accedes too much to the project of Reason. The challenge for the pluralist is to show why it is not true that 'anything goes'. The inclination is to show that pluralism is 'as good as' reason demands because it can be just as clear cut about what is right and wrong. I agree it can be clear cut, but not in the terms that someone steeped in the project of Reason would want. Taylor's project contains all the seeds for thinking this, but it is not clear that they are brought to fruition. Taylor also wishes to show that argument is not exhausted when we encounter an opinion different from our own. He sees himself to be outlining a conception of practical reason, and consequently writes in these terms. In keeping with my argument, I shall reconstrue Taylor, avoiding references to practical reason.

Taylor observes that in debates around ethics the task is not to prove anything from the ground up - dialogue will begin from premises which both sides accept.[252] Of course, the agreement may only be tentative or provisional, since it may not be clear exactly what one's interlocutor means by an idea. Gadamer's hermeneutic point remains relevant here, that what we understand by someone's use of a term will be shaped by our own interests in our engagement with the person. This understanding will change through that engagement. If we come to understand that our interlocutor meant something different when we agreed to a premise, it will not be surprising if this alters our view of what followed the agreement. It is perfectly common in the middle of a discussion to learn that someone has meant something entirely different from us by a term, and thereby to find that what had seemed solidly shared opinions has broken into disagreement. However, at the core of the hermeneutic point remains the one from which Taylor sets out – dialogue must begin somewhere, and it can only proceed if there is some kind of agreement, however tentative. This is why Taylor describes his conception of critical argument as *ad hominem*, since it is foremost addressed *to the person*. Debate is between particular interlocutors and how it will proceed depends upon their standpoints or outlooks. As I observed earlier, disagreement is always disagreement with someone, and it is with this person that dialogue will proceed. It will proceed from where we find ourselves and in light of the particular disagreement we have. It will therefore not be from the ground up.

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[252] Taylor 1993: 36

Taylor's variety of *ad hominem* argument is between people who are present in the debate and present as themselves. For Taylor, this means they are present as people for whom strong-evaluation is essential. Strong-evaluations are second order desires using the language of worth, of higher, lower, right, wrong, deep, shallow and so forth.[253] My smoking habit (a first-order desire) may not only jeopardise my health (a reason for my disapproving of it - a second-order desire), I may also find it slavish (a strong evaluation). Finding it slavish is a strong-evaluation because it is a judgment made in terms of (moral) worth. Our reality cannot be accurately rendered without using the language of strong-evaluation. Strong-evaluation is the pivot on which Taylor hinges his conception of *Kritik*. '[A] strongly evaluated goal is one such that, were we to cease desiring it, *we* would be shown up as insensitive or brutish or morally perverse.'[254] We cannot lightly set aside the commitments we make in the light of our strong evaluations. Our commitments are not on all fours with one another and some have a place in our lives deeper than others. Showing that a commitment is inescapable for a person ,because their strong evaluations presuppose it, is essential to Taylor's *ad hominem* argumentation, since it involves showing a person that part of what gives their life depth and meaning depends upon this commitment. Indeed, they are already committed to it in how they go about their life. Hence the place of genealogy in Taylor's works. Much of *The Ethics of Authenticity* is an exercise in just this type of argument. Observing the rise of a culture of self-fulfillment, he laments that this often gives rise to an empty relativism in people's thinking, in which all ways of life are equal in meaning so long as they are freely chosen. Taylor sees this emphasis on self-fulfillment as emanating out of a concern for authenticity in our life. Authenticity is an idea with a rich history, which he explores, and he goes to show how it requires a background horizon of significance which can give meaning to our choices.[255] For instance valuing myself for the number of hairs on my head is meaningless unless it can be attached to some bigger picture (think of medieval monks shaving their heads).[256] Taylor's strategy is to show that our deeper commitment to authenticity is jeopardised when we exclusively focus on what follows from it, a concern for free-choice. To focus on free-choice is to risk kinds of depth in our lives which we would not want to be without.

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[253] Taylor 1992: 57-8
[254] Taylor 1993: 37
[255] Taylor 1991: 35-9
[256] Taylor 1991: 36-7

A second feature of Taylor's thought which plays an important role in his *ad hominem* argument is that of the Best Account Principle (BA-Principle), which I have already explored in its connection with narrative identity. The Best Account must include strong evaluation – it is the best account of my life not only as a minimal description of my situation, but must also register the background values and interests which give it meaning. The best account can be improved not only by being more accurate, it can also be improved when I am able to clarify issues or come to altogether new understandings about my place. That is, not only do I need to be clear sighted about myself, I have to think about the terms in which I see myself in the first place. I can deceive myself about my motives and I can lack insights which might enable me to live my life more deeply. For instance, I might recklessly pursue a high-powered career in order to impress others. Only later might I pause to consider what kind of a role the opinion of others should play in my life; finding I had given them too prominent a role, I am also able to consider the impact of my career on other areas of my life. Reconsidering the place of others' opinions, has enabled me to realign other elements of my life and I find I need to juggle things less and am less stressed. I aim at the best account of my life and so argument should be aimed at opening me to this. This possibility is central to Taylor's conception of practical reason, for his conception is based on transitions between accounts.

However, Taylor glosses over the fact that the Best Account will be a narrative. As was clear in my earlier treatment of it, the BA-principle is intimately tied to narrative identity. If it is a narrative, then it is also never final. This is something that Taylor more or less acknowledges when he emphasises transitions in his account of argumentation. For what he is aiming at is not a final account of how one should lead a life, but only to be able to identify the superior amongst competing accounts. However, this suggests that we are not looking for the best account, inasmuch as this suggests finality, only the best one which presents itself at the time. Because he glosses over narrative's place in his conception of critical argument, he underestimates its implications for what such argument can achieve. This oversight explains why he claims too much for his conception, and places it too squarely in the tradition of the project of reason by claiming it can offer some kind of final adjudication. As we shall see, treating the role of narrative more conscientiously shows that matters are more open than Taylor is finally willing to acknowledge. In

trying to reshape the ambition of practical reason, he has moved further beyond the project as it is normally undertaken than he seems to realise.

Because there are no absolute foundations on which to rest practical reason, argument becomes based on a comparison of the transitions possible. That is, I might start off with position X and then encounter someone who holds position Y. What is compared is the account that can be given of the transition from X to Y versus the account which is possible for the transition from Y to X. What Taylor argues is that very often the account will be asymmetric in such a way that the rival positions cannot simply be taken as two sides of the same coin. The transition one way can be portrayed as a gain, while it seems impossible to portray the opposing transition this way. Three forms of transition are given by Taylor.[257]

The first transition Taylor gives is based on a comparison between the rival theories and a comparison not only between how they deal with features of our lives, but how they deal with each other. Taylor draws on the example of science to illustrate this sort of transition. What matters is not just how the rival positions explain facts, but also their power to explain each other. Can they, for instance, not only explain events the other theory cannot, but also explain why the rival theory cannot? The move from X to Y then cannot be described as symmetric with the move from Y to X. You are able to give a better account after one transition than you can after the other.

The second kind of transition Taylor outlines is based on considerations implicitly shared by the rival positions. In the example of Galilean science, Taylor observes that pre-modern science held there to be a chain of being in which things had their place. Any account of motion would at some point involve an understanding of things' place in the cosmos. What Galilean science offered was a radical breach with this by separating the question of what the world is like from how we should see ourselves in it. Setting these two outlooks up to appear radically opposed and individually enclosed makes the leap from one to the other appear to be without rational basis because by accepting the Galilean account the Aristotelian would be giving up a world with an inherent moral order. Taylor contends that after a while the Aristotelian could no longer deny the increased ability to manipulate things in the world which arose from post-Galilean science. While a proper understanding of our

[257] Taylor 1993: 43-53

place might remain important for an Aristotelian, they cannot account on their own terms for what the Galilean is actually able to do, and the Aristotelian still has an interest in being able to carry out his various goals. After a point, the Aristotelian cannot ignore the increase in manipulative capacity and cannot explain it or make use of it in his own terms.

The third kind of transition is portrayed as being mediated by some intrinsically error-reducing move. It is enabling inasmuch as it clears up some confusion. Taylor provides biographical examples of this, in which someone's situation is made clearer by altering their understanding of what is entailed by the concepts thought to be involved in it. The move seems to be a variant on narrative therapy: by changing how I understand the values I have, I also change how I cast my situation and help to clarify it. Taylor gives the example of a boy who behaves aggressively at home. His behaviour changes when he learns that it emerged from an unacknowledged resentment that, as the eldest, he was not being given any privileges. He has come to see his behaviour in a new light and, acknowledging that being the eldest child does not bring special entitlements, he has amended his behaviour. Much of this kind of recasting goes on through childhood as we slowly come to learn the reasons for the rules adults set: we learn that punching is brutal not expedient, lighting fires dangerous not fun and so on.

One difficulty with this approach is highlighted by Rosa. Taylor makes clear that because his conception of practical reason is based on transitions, what we learn in debate is not anything absolute, but only something relative. We do not learn what the best position is, we learn which is superior amongst the rivals. 'The claim is not that Y is correct simpliciter but just that whatever is "ultimately true," Y is better than X.'[258] However, as Rosa points out, this only seems to move the question back a step, for what is grounding the claim that one is superior to the other?[259] The point is sobering, for it reminds us how strong the tendency is to search for absolute grounds. It appears that we have stopped looking for the Absolute and, in our modesty, now only seek absolute superiority. A model that prides itself on being *ad hominem* cannot claim to reach conclusions which are absolute – even if the absolute to be found concerning the relative merits of two positions. The only ground we have for

[258] Taylor 1993: 54
[259] Rosa 1998: 497-9

the claim of superiority is what we find in dialogue with our interlocutor and what they can show about the position they advocate. This is a further constraint on what kind of claims can be made for this variety of practical reason, for all we can learn about alternative ways of looking at things is in the light of what others can show us. They do this not only in conversation but also by example. This is part of the reason it is easy for people to dismiss others' outlook from afar – spend time with them and see how they live out the values they espouse and they often take on the shape of a life that is just as deep and serious as our own. Who our interlocutor is matters since different people offer different embodiments of even the same way of life. This is a common feature of public debate, in which we sometimes wonder if our cause is really aided by some of the people who are meant to be on our side. What must not be forgotten are the resources we are drawing on, which include the cultural background against which a person's claims are given their sense (or shown not to have any). We enter into these debates because we think that the outlook we advocate has merit and is rewarding when lived out. The nature of the grounds for a claim of superiority must not be forgotten, however this should not confuse us into thinking there are no grounds at all.

Rosa's point regarding the circumscribed grounds for claiming the superiority of an outlook is extended temporally as well. Based as it is on self-interpretation, Taylor's account gives no reason for thinking that, having made the transition from X to Y, a person will not later find some position Z which is better again – it may even be one which sees us returning to an outlook very similar to X. Since many transitions are based on us being able to make better sense of our situation or lives as a whole, there does not seem to be a solid foundation for thinking that my new outlook is really more authentic or illusion-free. This point is in fact inherent in recognising our identity is given in narrative, and I sought to address it in my explorations of narrative identity and ethical necessity. Internal to narrative identity is the possibility of changing the narrative. This can happen frequently in minor ways, it can also occur quite radically throughout life. Being narratively given, there is no reason for thinking that any understanding of who I am will be final.

There will always be the possibility of change and recantation, when I come to view my earlier transition from X as an error. What I show in the next chapter is that even

my narrative exists in a broader context than an isolated and solipsistic mind. For the narrative to be meaningful, it must draw on a world outside of the narrator. The social nature of our lives conditions the conceptual- and life-space in which my narrative (and therefore my identity) takes shape. This situation also means that we are not beyond the reach of criticism just because we believe a position sincerely. Once again, *ad hominem* argument is going to depend upon a person being present in debate and understanding the way in which their life and how they understand it is already enmeshed in the world. In any case, it is unclear what further reassurance we can hope for when contending our outlook is better than someone else's. Our own self-confidence based on the reasons we have for our position as well as the sense it makes of the world is all we have available.

These reasons are interpretive, as I argued in Chapter 1. Their place and meaning is to be located within a broader network of meanings in life. When we disagree in ethics, we are disagreeing about how a situation or a part of life, or life as a whole, should be seen. For instance, 'Roughing him up was not valiant, it was cowardly', 'So-called "therapeutic" cloning is not therapy, it is murder', 'We keep on trying to accumulate our way to happiness, like mice on a wheel, but if we want happiness we have to put down gizmos and look at what we really want from life'. These and other such statements are common enough, what they show is people insisting on the terms in which we should see certain actions. The claim is that there are better ways of looking at things, or, using my language, there are better narratives we can give. In disagreements in ethics we are essentially offering different narratives.[260]

Drawing as it does on the narrative in the shape of the BA-principle, Taylor's conception of argumentation shares this insight into the relation between narrative and argument. Taylor is right to see that arguments persuade because of factors beyond logical structure alone – that sense-making has a place. But sense is only made against a background of meaning structures inhabited by particular people. Arguments in ethics persuade by what they suggest about life. There is hazard in this, of course, for it is possible to attract people to terrible ways of thinking. The onus is on people to ensure that we do not lose sight of what is precious, and to show where thinking has become warped: where supporting the weak becomes thuggery and

[260] Interestingly, this is akin to what Dancy suggests at one point (Dancy 1993: 113). See also the section entitled 'Narrative' in the earlier chapter 'Excursus on Dancy'

vigilantism, where self-determination becomes racism, where generosity becomes condescension and so on.

Rosa teases out another important constraint on this mode of practical reason when he explores what it is to adopt a new outlook in the first place. There is no neutral, acultural or meta- language available.[261] Rosa draws on this inability to unify the different accounts of people with different outlooks to argue that Taylor's conception of practical reason is hamstrung in conflicts between radically different outlooks. On the one hand, if it is possible to see the transition from X to Y as an advance from both perspectives, this suggests that we were not dealing with a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense, so much as an evolution of X. Alternatively, if X and Y really do involve very different background structures of meaning, such as practices and language, then they represent different worlds, and no unifying narrative can be found from within which the claim of superiority can be shared.[262] If we are engaged in clearing up internal confusions, which seems to be the focus of the third type of transition Taylor describes, then this process would seem to occur within an outlook and does not assist us in inter-cultural disagreement. In the case of radical divergence in outlooks, different worlds seem to be inhabited which can gain no traction on one another. If the two positions X and Y really do involve incommensurable ways of seeing the world, then, if I have made the transition from X to Y, the transition becomes reconstructed from the perspective, and in the language, of Y. X cannot help but seem incomplete and the reverse transition – from Y to X – seem irrational.[263] There being no over-arching meta-language to unify the two, there seems no real way of being able to unify our judgement about the adequacy or relative merits of them. The narrative of the transition from one position to the other is constructed from within one position or the other and it seems that what is to be made of the transition will depend upon our perspective.

This is a difficulty first of all only in cases of radical difference. It is also only a difficulty if we think we are looking for or need a foundational meta-narrative, or that one can be given. However, there is no reason to think that we must insist on this, even if Taylor does seem to slip by writing in absolute terms about the

[261] Rosa 1998: 500
[262] Rosa 1998: 502-3
[263] Rosa 1998: 500

superiority of one outlook over another. The unifying narrative just is the narrative which is given in the process of transition. It is true that there is not one grand narrative in terms of which we can adjudicate between outlooks. However narratives can be persuasive for what they offer, allowing us to see things in ways hitherto unthought of.

Is an injustice being done because of this limitation? That is, does Taylor's picture always involve a kind of imperialism of outlooks, in which one outlook is inevitably unjustly cast down because it is not given due credit precisely because it can never be inhabited by the other and therefore never properly understood? There is obviously a risk of this, and, as Rosa's point makes clear, it is a risk inherent in any such exercise.

**Radical difference**

In what remains of this chapter, I shall discuss some features of radical difference. There is an enormous literature on this issue, and clearly much more could be written. Consequently, what I write is all too brief. In approaching it, I set out first of all to temper what is at issue. Trying to judge whole cultures is, apart from anything else, a hopeless exercise. What's more, it is often easy to radicalise difference when it is perfectly possible for it to be explored and unpacked rather than baulked at. What we aim toward in such exploration also should not be overstated – there is no need to think that we aim to see with the other's eyes. Finally, radical difference returns me to a re-statement of the motivation behind pluralism: there are basic and deep reasons behind the different outlooks we find in the world. Apart from the obvious impracticality of trying to smooth all such difference, thinking that they must be brought into some kind of unity just misses what nourishes these ways of life and the people who enjoy them. In consequence, projects of practical reason which seek to adjudicate finally between rival outlooks just miss the point that there usually is no need for any such adjudication. If we were to try we should only find there is no further truth than the difference itself, or do someone a great injustice.

Radical difference is a familiar problem, arising often in colonial histories. It seems inconceivable, for instance, that colonists could see with the same eyes as the indigenous people. The way that Australian Aborigines related to the land was completely alien to early settlers. Even if the colonists had been prepared and able to

understand the Aborigines' relationship to the land and therefore how the European colony impacted on them, it seems highly unlikely they would have viewed the Aborigines' culture as equal, let alone superior. One need look no further than the second of Taylor's examples to see why: 'look at what we can do and they cannot, look at our increased manipulative capacity.' This is akin to Rosa's point that it can be nigh on impossible to capture an outlook once I inhabit another. Rosa's point remains persuasive in its focus on the apparent impossibility of two people agreeing on how a transition should be understood. Once the perspective of X has been left behind, it can seem impossible to recapture it and see how it held together in the first place. In addition, inhabiting the perspective of X, it seems that the new position, Y, makes it impossible to express some of the things which matter most. The problem is insurmountable if we aim to rule on all differences.

However radical difference can be wielded prematurely. My description of a European's limited capacity for response to Aborigines' way of life may be tendentious, for surely they could have enquired more deeply, and there were certainly things the colonists could have learnt from the Aborigines about the land, apart from anything else. We may query the pessimism about the colonists' ability to observe and learn from the Aborigines. There were individuals who did show an interest in their way of life, and, over the long term, European anthropologists and others did come to learn considerable amounts about Aboriginal culture. Aborigines also clearly learnt about Europeans as well. There are obvious difficulties with all of this, and I am certainly not claiming that one group will ever 'get into the mind' of another. I am only making the cautionary point that radical difference is not always quite so radical after all.

In such encounters, progress will no doubt be piecemeal and stuttering. We do not ever learn all about a culture all at once, no one ever does. We can learn 'things' from others. Indeed, what I showed in the last chapter was the importance of making a serious attempt to understand an interlocutor's position – what sustains it and gives it depth. This is the case for any difference, radical or not. In any case, the task at hand need not be as large as radical difference first suggests. Rarely do we try and take on all their culture at once even if practices must be understood against its background. There seems no requirement that an Australian converting to Tibetan

Buddhism must take on the whole life of a Tibetan Buddhist, for instance. Buddhism may open her eyes to possibilities in life and a way of seeing things she finds greatly enriching. The conversion might fundamentally change the Australian's life, without her thereby being committed to live just like a Tibetan. Indeed, she clearly cannot sensibly take on the history of a Tibetan or claim the Tibetans' history to be her own, even though the Buddhism she adopts will be influenced by it. The narrative she would give of her conversion may not accord with that which the Tibetan would give, and yet it may still remain a narrative of conversion to Tibetan Buddhism. Arguing that people inhabit different horizons of significance (different 'worlds' in Rosa's language) should not let us miss the fact that people do indeed come to be convinced by others even when the differences are radical.

It is usually pointless to compare whole cultures, although it is possible for one belief to be so virulent as to corrupt a whole culture, for instance anti-semitism in Nazi Germany. Cultures are complex and rarely homogeneous, with features that are admirable and practices and outlooks which are not. Even if these strands cannot be isolated cleanly, they can still be teased out and explored. Is Islamic culture superior to Christian? The question is hopeless. Narrowing it down to ask if Malay culture is superior to Australian similarly. Yet this does not mean that there is nothing that we can learn from another culture. Coming into conflict at points means that we should not be distracted by oversized questions like which culture or outlook is superior in toto. While the different parties' different views on a matter will be given their sense against a broader cultural background, we should not allow this to trick us into expanding the matter at hand.

Most importantly, we should not lose sight of the variety of disagreements which occur. Most disagreements are not 'clashes', and it is often only arrogance on one side or another that sees people feeling the others must come around to their way of thinking. There will be a number of occasions where what our interlocutor puts forward seems perfectly reasonable, except that we just disagree. This is one of the fundamental insights of pluralism and multiculturalism – sometimes there is nothing more to be said than that we see things differently. In the previous chapter I gave the example of the atheist asking why someone prays. The atheist simply cannot throw himself into the believer's world view as a result of argument and will always be

unpersuaded by it. What nourishes the believer's outlook is just what is unavailable to the atheist. If the atheist could honestly believe in a god, then the role of prayer would be more convincing. At bottom, it is usually the same between cultures: there is no reason to think that the different way of life of another group substantially impacts on my own.[264]

Radical difference between cultures is often brought up because culture is so important to people. Much of the time culture is taken for granted and operates in the background, until something impacts on that way of life and makes forced change a real possibility (and usually perceived as a threat). Much has been written about the importance of recognition, especially as it relates to culture. It is within a cultural horizon that I give meaning to my life. Blocking cultural self-expression also blocks access to resources of meaning in life. People see their lives as diminished, and, if the block continues, feel their grievance is not recognised, and therefore that they are not being recognised as equal. Pluralism is not simply a pragmatic concession to the fact that the histories of different outlooks are too deeply rooted ever to be erased. It is a recognition that there is not reason for thinking that there is only one proper or justifiable way of life, that meaning can be found in a host of places and practices, and that different languages and horizons of meaning will inevitably arise in response to the very different conditions people experience. Historical experience marks cultures as much as it does individuals, and it is no surprise that dignity is bestowed on practices and outlooks which meet either the daily challenges people face or particular calamities that have arisen. With such a scope for finding meaning in the world, it is amazing how commonly people in fact do believe there is one proper way of looking at things. It is disheartening how often they think it needs to be imposed on others.

What I have written on radical difference is clearly open-ended. There is in fact little to say of a general nature. My point all along has been that it is misguided to look for a general solution to it. Taylor's conception of argumentation is informative for how it places actual people at the centre of argument, and does so within a narrative framework. That it cannot always finally adjudicate on all matters is not a weakness

[264] There are of course complications with this. If a way of life consumes vast resources others need, there may well be friction, especially if the consumption of resources reflects a central tenet of the culture, namely the right of the individual to shape their own life. But even this belief is not unqualified.

(though Taylor at times shies away from this) and will often only reflect the fact that no such adjudication is necessary. When people do not share the same view on a matter, there is no reason to think in advance that one must be shown to be superior to the other, and therefore no reason to think that there will be an asymmetry in the possible transitions between the two views.

Our prime critical tools are closely entwined with narrative and the need to adequately represent or own outlook as well as to try to understand others' – this always had to be the case, once we consider that the problem of radical difference emerges from the way in which our agency is interpretive. In the next chapter I look more closely at the cultural and linguistic background of our interpretive agency and show how this in fact provides tools for *Kritik*. While they do not provide a solution to radical difference, they do provide powerful possibilities for internal *Kritik*.

# 9. *Kritik* in Dialogue

In my exploration of disagreement I have emphasised that disagreement  is between people, and that dialogue must likewise be between real people speaking for themselves. In turn throughout this work I have written of agents not only being interpretive, but also being ‘situated’ in a horizon of meaning. In this chapter I look more closely at how we are situated in a realm of meaning that extends beyond ourselves as individuals. I do so by looking first of all at Gadamer’s analysis of prejudice and tradition, which in its turn draws on Heidegger’s picture of the ‘fore-structure’ of the world, in which we find we are in a world in which meaning precedes us. While prejudice and tradition have traditionally been seen as hindering thought, Gadamer argues they are inescapable for an agent who is born into a social world, who must learn from others – the issue is not whether we follow in a tradition or have a prejudice, but our awareness of and response to this.

The role of prejudice and tradition in Gadamer’s thought is connected to the role he gives language. For as much as we reside in a horizon of meaning, we also live in language, which in its turn is held by a community – language is essential to our agency and it is fundamentally social. Language and culture are thereby closely tied to how concepts are available to us and how they stand in relation to each other. It is in light of this, and via Winch, that I explore our resources for *Kritik*. At the same time as my analysis of interpretive agency has opened up how we should see reasons as operating and how they can properly stand in relation to each other, this perspective brings to the fore resources for *Kritik* which draw on our interpretive situation. Our resources in thought are not solipsistically our own; they are shared and this provides grounds for *Kritik*. As I made clear in the preceding chapter, this does not mean that there are final or absolute truths to be found in ethics, but it does show ways in which I can said to be mistaken and others can argue this. In conclusion I turn briefly to observe that the nature of these debates is such that we should not think it is sensible to assume that they can be conducted dispassionately.

## Gadamer's Analysis of Prejudice

Partners in dialogue depend upon their experience in what they bring to the dialogue. Experience is not, however, to be understood simply in terms of a list of events that might give rise to more information that a person can draw on in moral deliberation. Experience has to do with our position and outlook on the world. The significance of experience here is that it is the experience of a particular upbringing, milieu or way of life within which the world has taken the shape it has for me. While individual events might have a major influence on the course of our lives and outlook, our relations with others also work to shape our view over time, whether they are intimate, or operate at broad social and cultural levels. I have already dealt at length with the role narrative plays in the configuration of meaning in our lives. Narrative acts at the individual level and also at the social and cultural, because I do not only tell stories about my own life, I take on and respond to the stories told around me. It is central to phenomenology that we live in a social world in which we not only give meaning to the world, we also encounter the world as having meaning, and already organised in light of the meaning-laden activities of others. We come to things in terms of our own meanings, developed in the course of our experience.

However, it is crucial to observe that we live in a world of pre-existing meanings, overlapping and often contested. This is the 'world' as Heidegger understood it – a realm of meaning into which we feel ourselves to have been thrown. Although we give meaning to our world through our activities in it, we find that it is arranged to fulfil the interests of others, and these arrangements and interests interlock into chains of significance. Meaning has therefore preceded each of us individually as we encounter the patterns others and society at large have developed. We therefore live in a social world and our engagement with it is constitutive of our lives. Dialogue or discussion is a basic feature of our social lives; it is obviously social in its own right. As noted earlier, dialogue can be understood narrowly as discussion, or broadly to include any kind of activity by any individual or grouping which responds to the activities of an other. Without wishing to preclude the latter, and while emphasising dialogue's social nature (and crucial place in social life) I will continue to understand it narrowly in terms of discussion. Including the broader meanings might prove fruitful for a more extended exploration, but can only unnecessarily complicate the

matter at hand. The point is that dialogue not only removes me from a solipsistic or purely private life, it is the basic activity of a life so removed. It is basic to social life.

As was suggested in the exploration of narrative, the meanings that we engage with (responding to them or taking them up) themselves have a history. Just as we as individuals are marked by our histories, so too society and culture are marked by theirs. This extends right down to the concepts we employ in thought as well. In his exploration of prejudice, Gadamer also begins to discuss the role of tradition in hermeneutics. His interest in hermeneutics means that Gadamer is primarily interested in what takes place when we approach a text with a view to understanding it, nonetheless what he writes also sheds light on aspects of the situation in which dialogue can take place. Gadamer begins by drawing on Heidegger to explore 'the fore-structure of understanding' – the structures of meaning which precede any attempt to understand a text. We arrive at texts with interests. That is, we begin our reading with a preconception of their meaning, and throughout the process of reading them continue to make judgements about their meaning. This leads him to explore the place of prejudice, recognising that it is always involved in understanding, our task being always to be aware of it, though not with a view to being rid of it, since this is impossible.[265] The point for Gadamer is to keep our prejudices provisional and open to change, since for him prejudice is only 'a judgement that is given before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.'[266] Since nothing can be finally examined in life prejudice becomes an expression of human finitude and the place of thought is squarely within the particular historical situation in which it takes place.[267]

One component of prejudice is the authority of others in general and the authority of tradition in particular. For Gadamer, the authority of others, far from being an impediment to the free reign of clear thought can be its expression, since we must first of all judge others worthy of that authority. That is, authority can be bestowed through recognition of the superiority of another person in judgement and insight. Similarly, tradition can develop because of human finitude. Most knowledge is transmitted to us through the authority of tradition rather than being the result of free

[265] Gadamer 1979: 238-9
[266] Gadamer 1979: 240
[267] Gadamer 1979: 245

insight, which can occur only once we have developed the maturity to employ it effectively. Gadamer observes that education depends upon this: and even though its function is ultimately to make educators lose their function, the capacity for insight developed in education does not free the pupil from tradition. In the case of morals, they are taken on freely in Gadamer's view, but not as the result of a free insight. [268] He is right to suggest that morals are not the result of free insight alone, however, the extent to which morals are taken on freely would seem to depend upon the extent to which people willingly act or see their lives in their light. It is obviously possible to feel blighted by some value one nevertheless finds oneself acting out. Free insight might be used to try shaping ethics, though this insight would again only be free in a general sense, since it, too, would be constrained by the conceptual resources the person could bring to the matter.

While I have already declined to explore what relationship there might be between a hermeneutic encounter with a text aimed at understanding and a dialogue with another person, there are clearly also going to be differences. What Gadamer writes about prejudice does not map neatly onto dialogue, however it does provide some insight into our situation in entering dialogue, and it also sheds light on how radical difference comes to be seen to be a problem. Our interest in understanding an other, and our place in any dialogue will always prevent us from 'seeing with their eyes'. The claim often is that the problem of radical difference comes about when our tradition or location – our prejudice – blocks all attempts to understand the other. However, as will be seen in a moment, what makes radical difference a difficulty on the one hand, on the other enables *Kritik*. Gadamer's analysis of prejudice makes clear the place of tradition in our lives, as well as our capacity to bring judgement to bear on what we know from tradition. Similarly, it shows that what we bring to dialogue is not simply to be dismissed as prejudice: if we are to be present in dialogue, we must bring ourselves to it, as has already been argued. In bringing ourselves, we also bring our history and the tradition that nourishes us. Understanding the place of tradition and the prejudice we have in dialogue gives us insight into the way in which we are open to a question, or the sense that it can have for us: it does not mean we must endorse all aspects of tradition or of ourselves.

[268] Gadamer 1979: 248-9

Dialogue can be therapeutic to the extent that it can open up possibilities not otherwise considered and which might liberate one from a *cul de sac*.

More importantly, emerging as it does from a more general concern with the 'fore-structure' of understanding, Gadamer's attention to tradition once again alerts us to the role our social and historical situation plays in how we approach our lives in the first place. If tradition is of interest, it is because of the way it structures our thought and action. The traditional prejudice against prejudice and tradition that Gadamer analyses arose in part because tradition and prejudice have this power. Gadamer's intention is to show how tradition and prejudice are necessary features of our lives and thence to clarify their role. They can be distorting and lead to irrationality and injustice, however they remain for Gadamer a basic existential condition for us.

I have already argued that we are historical agents – agents who are partly constituted by their history – we are also social creatures. In the beginning of this thesis I emphasised a necessity at the heart of human agency, that is, the necessity of the individual to decide how to act. However, as I hope has been made clear in the course of this work, this does not eliminate the role of the social in our thought and activity. Our social nature runs deeper than the requirement to meet basic needs of food and shelter. We grow up in a social world, which is larger than our family. Even if we grow up in physical or spatial isolation, the structure of the society in which we live impinges in a myriad of ways. While it is possible to remove ourselves entirely from society, that someone is unwilling or unable to engage regularly with society usually reflects the already diminished condition of their life. It is radical to attempt to cut ourselves off from society altogether, and, when we do, the attempt will always be structured with reference to society, if only through our rejection of it. The way of life which emerges from this rejection becomes a kind of negative of the society the person has withdrawn from. This conceptual point highlights how pervasive the social is in our lives. This is at the centre of Heidegger's idea of the 'fore-structure' of the world: no matter what our personal aims are, we find ourselves in a world which is already saturated in meaning, reflecting the society and history into which we are thrown.

Normally, we mature and live deeply embedded in society and in active engagement with it. We immerse ourselves in it and are nourished by it, even at the same time as

thereby becoming open to the trials and hurt social life makes possible. We take up the way of life in which we find ourselves and take on the orientation to the world which is characteristic of it. Clearly this does not mean our thought is determined by our society: 'way of life' is in some ways a term of art, since it will inevitably involve a diversity of opinion and this diversity can extend down to the idiosyncrasy of the individual. There is always disagreement about what is involved in any particular way of life, how we might improve ourselves as a society and how we might meet challenges we face collectively. That is, a way of life will in part be constituted by debate about what ideals and history actually structure it in the first place, rather than by substantive agreement. What is informative is the terms in which this debate takes place and how ideas are linked to one another and to the practices which are said to embody them. A way of life therefore structures thought at the same time as leaving open how we think about ourselves and our way of life. One of the central ways it does this is through language.

### Language, cultural context and concepts

It is with language that we live amongst others. Again, our use of language is not simply to impart bits of information, like asking another person to pass the salt. Language plays a far richer role in our lives. A central part of Gadamer's conception of language is that language is not an instrument: we cannot set it aside when we please, but in all knowledge of our world and ourselves we always already find ourselves in the grip of our language.[269] We can only think in our language, and we therefore dwell in it, and because of this, language structures our thought.[270] This 'structuring' is clearly not a determination of thought. Rather, what is worth attending to here is the way in which cultural and social life – a way of life – go hand in hand with language. Our social life introduces us to a pre-existing horizon of meaning in which we orient ourselves in the world, and language is closely bound to this, since it is through language that we usually communicate and give expression to this position. It is worth noting that it is not solely through language that we do this, since it is also in activity that we give expression to our place in the world. Language is social at its root because it is not in any one person: there is no 'I' present in

[269] "Wir sind vielmehr in allem Wissen von uns selbst und allem Wissen von der Welt immer schon von der Sprache umgriffen, die unsere eigene ist." (Gadamer 1966: 96)
[270] "Nur in einer Sprache können wir denken, und eben dieses Einwohnen unseres Denkens in einer Sprache ist das tiefe Rätsel, das die Sprache dem Denken stellt." (Gadamer 1966: 95)

language because it always rests in a community, a ‘we’. We can only be said to speak if we speak a language that others can understand[271] – a point closely aligned to Wittgenstein’s.

Drawing on Wittgenstein, Winch connects the role of language to the conceptual horizon of agents, and thereby provides the basis for a kind of *Kritik*. In *The Idea of a Social Science* Winch looks at what is involved in an observer offering an explanation of someone’s behaviour in terms of reasons or motives – that is, in terms which make it meaningful for the agent.[272] He argues that the force of the observer’s explanation will depend upon the concepts appearing in it being grasped not only by the observer and his audience, but also by the agent himself. To illustrate his argument, Winch gives the example of a man voting Labour at an election for the reason that they will better preserve industrial peace. For the observer to be able to give this explanation, the agent must actually have some idea of what it is to ‘preserve industrial peace’, and, furthermore, what the relation is between this and the kind of government he expects if Labour is elected.[273] This is held to apply even in more complex cases, for instance where the voter does not have an obvious reason for acting one way or another. An example is given of the voter being unable to offer any reason for why he voted Labour – he may in fact be unreflectively following the example of his father and friends. Even then, Winch notes, his actions have a sense: ‘What he [the voter] does is not *simply* to make a mark on a piece of paper; he is *casting a vote*.’[274] This in turn depends upon him having some conception of the symbolic relation between his making a mark on the piece of paper and the formation of government: he must live in a society with certain political institutions and he must have some familiarity with them. What we can say of someone’s actions therefore depends on the concepts available to the agent.

> If he lives in a society whose political structure is patriarchal, it will clearly
>
> make no sense to speak of him as ‘voting’ for a particular government,

[271] Gadamer 1966: 98
[272] Winch 1990: 45-51
[273] Winch 1990: 46
[274] Winch 1990: 49, italics in original. This point applies even in the face of the Freudian objection that the agent may not be able to represent their reasons for acting if they are unaware of and cannot acknowledge those reasons. However, even then the agent must understand the concepts needed to describe what is being sublimated since they could not otherwise be moved by it. I may have no inkling of my sublimation, but I must be able to understand the concepts involved, or how else could I be saide to be moved by my concerns regarding them.

> however much his action may resemble in appearance that of a voter in a country with an elected government.[275]

Sense is given to an explanation in part through the context in which the behaviour is situated as well as what kind of relation the agent can claim between his activity and its context. There is, therefore, the possibility of criticising someone's behaviour or beliefs in the light of what sense can be given to the concepts the person uses. I shall return to this important point in a moment.

For now, the point is that for sense to be made of a person's actions, an account will have to be given which invokes concepts available to the agent in the first place, as well as to the person giving the account. What's more, Winch, following Wittgenstein, argues that for sense to be so given, an action will have to go 'together with certain other actions in the sense that it *commits* the agent to behaving in one way rather than another in the future.'[276] Winch emphasises the commitment involved. This is not a moral commitment, and if the agent does not follow through on this commitment, it does not mean her original action loses its sense. Winch gives the example of using a bookmark: placing a slip of paper between the pages of a book is 'using a bookmark' only if the slip will be used to mark where to begin reading next time. The fact that the person begins reading at another spot does not mean the slip was not being used as a bookmark. The commitment to behave one way and not another is to be seen in the light of the more basic Wittgensteinian point that to give something a meaning is to narrow the field of meaning by excluding (some) other possible meanings. What's more, it shows again the way in which actions depend on their situation for their meaning. Winch emphasises the need to look forward to later behaviour to see what meaning-commitment was given, but part of understanding the context of action is to look backwards and see how it develops from history as well. Indeed, he briefly discusses tradition and the fact that when we act out of tradition our actions still depend upon our familiarity with the conceptual field of that tradition. Even though when we act out of tradition we often do so unreflectively, our actions still have a sense within that tradition and in explaining

[275] Winch 1990: 51
[276] Winch 1990: 50

our actions recourse will have to be made to the field of concepts which the tradition plays out.

That an explanation of a person's meaningful actions depends on their conceptual space returns us to language, since this is a prime element in shaping that space. In *Understanding a Primitive Society* Winch writes, 'What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has….[W]e could not in fact distinguish the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in language.'[277] In a follow up article he is at pains to make clear that the grammar of a language is not a theory of reality.[278] Language is a medium in which self-understanding occurs. The self-understanding need not be deep or rich, perhaps only placing an action in the context of a moment. Action is to be understood in terms of the context in which it occurs, and that includes its cultural context – the context of meaning in which the individual already finds themselves located. What the grammar of a language provides – that is, the sense that language provides – is the background and assumed way of using the concepts at play in a culture.

In the course of arguing that language is the basis of understanding, Gadamer provides an interesting approach to this, connecting language, assumed knowledge and dialogue. He observes that it is through dialogue that shared meanings develop - they can then fall back into the silence of agreement and the taken-for-granted.[279] That it is through dialogue that shared meanings develop reinforces that this occurs in language. If we are basically social, and our horizon of meaning develops through social engagement, then this horizon is given in language as well as culture. This obviously does not mean that the horizon is fixed, any more than a language is fixed or a way of life is.[280]

This means that while our horizon of meaning is in language, it is also located in a context of cultural activity, spilling into and also often nourishing the particular significance things can come to have for us as individuals. Understanding these

[277] Winch 1964: 309
[278] Winch 1976b
[279] Gadamer 1970: 98. Taylor makes much the same observation (Taylor 1991: 33), noting that it is in dialogue with others that we develop our capacities for language and therefore also for expression.
[280] Gadamer's theory of language demands more analysis than can be given here – see for instance Figal 2002 and Schmidt 2000. Furthermore, alternative deployments of his work in critical theory are possible, and I have not been able to contrast my own position with these either – for instance see Kögler 1996.

connections helps us to make sense of what Winch then means when he writes, “Culture sets limits to what an individual can intelligibly be said to be doing.”[281] Cultures contain tremendous resources of meaning, however they are circumscribed: this is why we talk of ‘ways of life’, cultural contexts and so on: they provide an orientation to the world and an interpretive lens for our life in it. Once again, by giving meaning, they also exclude some possible meanings. Winch’s and Gaita’s reference to the ‘grammar’ of cultural meanings shows how meanings interlock and overlap, with some combinations falling into unintelligibility, just as some combinations of words render sentences unintelligible. The combinations of meanings at play in cultural meaning is not only the meaning of words, for clearly the use of the word ‘grammar’ is intended metaphorically: they include the combinations of what we claim regarding our actions and what sense can be made of those claims.

All of these arguments are intended to show the way in which the concepts we draw on in our lives take shape in a broader context of meaning, whether reflectively or not. Our meaning horizon is shaped by history, culture, society and individual experience and these all connect in language. Making sense of our actions involves taking all these into account. The fact a concept will have to have meaning for some*one* if it is to feature in action and moral deliberation does not diminish the need for it to be located in structures expanding well beyond the individual, to include their history, intimates (and enemies) and cultural milieu. What I will now do is show this can become a resource for *Kritik*. While the depth of personal, cultural and historical context causes much of the diversity which makes wading through moral disagreement so hard, this depth and the horizon it provides for deliberation at the same time enables *Kritik*.

### *Kritik*

> If I came across an Englishman in Richmond Park administering poison to a chicken while asking questions, I should not think he was consulting the

[281] Winch 1976b: 201

> poison oracle as a Zande tribesman might do; I should be at a loss as to what was going on...[282]

Winch's thought is that English culture at the time he was writing had no room for notions like witchcraft and oracles as the Azande practise them. The example of witchcraft shows that culture and language can serve as critical tools. Against the background of sense and meaningful activity in our culture, we can ask what sense a practice has. In the case of witchcraft, it is often found to have none – if witchcraft's practices are taken to involve claims about causality then they are always going to be in strife in a culture that is weary of superstition and admires the technical achievements stemming from the (scientific) practices which are commonly used to criticise witchcraft. Is it reasonable to critique against the background of culture? We are asking what kind of life should we lead, so it makes sense to ask this question against the background of what kind of life is conceptually available to us in the first place. The question can only make sense when it is understood within the horizon of lived practice - this was one of the conclusions regarding the importance of dialogue: that it reflects the lived experience of the interlocutors. Finally, in the arguments around witchcraft, we are reminded that clear thinking retains a role in dialogue – it is not a simple matter of registering one's thoughts and only acknowledging that people differ in their views. Concepts have a grammar, inasmuch as they have a sense deriving from their place in our cultural situation. 'Murder is just a fun kind of pastime': it is of course possible for someone to be sincere in claiming this, but we can recognise the moral absurdity of it as long as we think that 'murder' is a normative concept. We might disagree about what constitutes both murder and fun, without having any difficulty seeing that the two concepts cannot sit together in this way.

During a recent gangland feud, a leader of a criminal gang was executed while he sat in his car watching his son train at a football clinic. In the week that followed, amongst all the other analyses of the killing, one was offered by a man himself notorious as a convicted 'hitman'. What was terrible about the murder, he said, was that it showed the killers no longer had any honour; they were the lowest of the low because you don't kill someone in front of their kids, it was just wrong. The

[282] Winch 1976b: 201

wrongness or otherwise of executing someone was never directly addressed, but the thinking seemed to be that this was a legitimate action in the course of a conflict between criminal gangs. It seemed a strange notion of honour which only stops at executing people in front of their children, but which seems unfazed by the execution itself. There certainly does not seem to be any reason for leaving the matter at an acknowledgement of two different outlooks. *Criticism* is reasonable and there seems clear scope for it in this case. The caller might have appealed to the idea of a criminal community and said, 'this is how things are done around here. This is how we choose to live – it is our way of life.' But there is clearly enough held in common to identify, explore and contest the place and relation between concepts like honour, killing and crime. Of particular moment is what the *Kritik* would draw on: what we have in common in our way of life, and therefore a range of concepts that may have been taken up differently but are clearly intelligible across overlapping ways of life, and amenable to different presentations which highlight what might be possible in taking them seriously. If, as I suggested in the previous chapter, disagreements in ethics involve offering different narratives, it seems clear that some will seem more persuasive, attractive or enriching than others. In short, some will strike a person as superior to others. My task here is not to show that my approach proves the hitman is wrong, only to show how we already have considerable resources for criticising his view of the killing, and therefore for *Kritik* in general. However, the fact that an argument is persuasive for most people will not always be enough to convince everybody, and this may be for a variety of reasons.

The spirit in which an argument is put to the 'reformed' hitman will no doubt be fortified by the fact that the vast majority of people do not enter into this kind of behaviour and also think that something has gone awry when it is suggested the only problem with a criminal killing is that it is performed in front of the victims children.[283] But this narrative need not convince the criminal who has led this life. There could be a variety of reasons for this. Amongst them might be the fact that the hitman's own considerations are beyond me. Having decamped so far from the ethical conventions of his society - and therefore from the institutions which protect, support and enforce them - a different way of life emerges which retains only a tissue of the ethical concepts of the broader society (though those concepts may also be

[283] I confess, that I cannot help but think it true.

debated). In such a state, a life governed by the richer fabric of ethics may simply seem impossible. This would then put him in a conflicted situation (like that described in the first half of 'Conflict and Consistency in Ethics'), in which the room for manoeuvre is cramped. However, this does not remove the possibility of *Kritik*. For one thing, it is in fact doubtful that his way of life is so far removed from his society's as to make it impervious to *Kritik*.[284] After all, he has been able and willing to enter into a discussion about it, apparently seeing his view as unexceptional from everyone else's. There seems plenty of scope for exploring his idea of honour, parenthood, childhood and innocence to critical effect. Alternatively, if the description of his condition as conflicted were accurate, then he would implicitly endorse his society's values – it is just that he is not in a position to act on all of them.

Of course, it is controversial even suggesting this is another way of life which is simply blighted by its history and circumstance, and therefore simply reflects the limited possibilities of its members. Not only would this narrative not convince most people of the legitimacy of such actions, they would expect this way of life to be left behind. This is because ethics does not stop with critical concepts alone. Most ways of life bring with them avenues for redemption or improvement, and an expectation that they be used. The additional point here is not only that *Kritik* is critical, but that its resources (crudely put, the whole way of life) need not leave things at a simple acknowledgement of disagreement. At an individual level, there can be expectations of atonement, redemption and the like – the active choice of the better way of life. At a social level, as implied a moment ago, there can be coercive practices to enforce improvement or, at a minimum, obedience. Not only do the vast majority of our society give reasons for thinking that the criminal's ideas of honour are perverted,[285] they are willing to go so far as enforce them – and give reasons for this as well.

This opens up whole new dimensions which cannot be covered in this work: politics, justice, ideology and many other related issues. What I have sought to show in the example of the gangland killing is not only the kinds of resources a way of life offers

[284] This issue has already been looked at in terms of 'radical difference' in the previous chapter.

[285] Not forgetting it does this in at least two ways. Firstly, it brings us into the way of life and the way of thinking which has us understand these things. Secondly, in bringing us into this way of life, it furnishes us with the critical tools to support this way of life – this what enables *Kritik*, as I have described at the outset in this chapter.

for *Kritik*, but the depth that this practice can run to. The disagreement is real; it is not always left as the simple acknowledgement of a disagreement. These critical tools are deployed and give rise to actions such as enforcement, which in turn sometimes simply mark *Kritik's* limits. The pluralism I have argued for in this work has been intended to open the space for understanding there is a much wider scope for a recognizably ethical life than that which I believe is the best one.

Returning to the resources for *Kritik*, the issues at play can be more subtle than the hitman's, and call for careful and nuanced analysis, such as Taylor's analysis of authenticity.[286] Diagnosing an empty relativism in much contemporary thought today, he embarks on an intellectual history of how the modern emphasis on personal autonomy came about. Integral to this emergence was the development of a concept of authenticity – the sense that each of us has their unique way of being human.[287] This genealogy of authenticity culminates in a critical analysis firstly showing what this ideal of authenticity rules out, and later what it enables and how it should shape our thinking on a range of other topics connected to modernity. The genealogy shows not only the history of the concept of authenticity, but how we remain committed to it and what is involved for us in this commitment. It says little about why someone from a radically different tradition should be moved by it, though the historical approach might suggest possibilities for this, inasmuch as it starts from a point where the sphere of individual action is not understood in terms of the shape of an individual's life.

In *The Ethics of Authenticity* (as well as other works), Taylor draws together a range of resources which I have been discussing: a genealogical analysis of the concept of 'authenticity', locating it in Western political and social traditions, connecting it to other ideas and then developing an argument in terms of (and responding to) the way of life now emerging from this tradition. All this rests on the way of life itself and not on abstracted bedrock asserted to be shared by all. His genealogy begins by diagnosing and describing a contemporary malaise. The analysis centres on the diagnosis of a contemporary tendency to focus on free-choice as legitimating action, rather than what enabled (and he believes sustains) the drive to protect and promote

[286] Taylor 1991, for what follows see especially chapters 1, 3 &4.
[287] Taylor 1991: 28

free choice: authenticity – our need to lead our lives in ways expressive of who we are as individuals.

A key concept for our way of life is explored and its relation to (and perversion in) our contemporary way of life developed. A logical claim is then made – the logic inhering in the picture of our way of life: our concern for free choice depends upon our unarticulated concern to lead our lives authentically. Taylor argues on this basis that we therefore temper our concern for free choice with an understanding of its place in our lives. Free choice gains its significance against a background of other goods and locating it lucidly amongst these will also divest us of the blights of empty subjectivism he diagnoses at the beginning of *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Again, Taylor is offering an enriched and clarified way of understanding our lives – of narrating them.

These different examples illustrate different styles of *Kritik* drawing on shared conceptual resources, and illustrate the variety of ways in which we can be mistaken in our moral thought. It is not just that we act against any number of values we inhabit and the relations between them. Obviously we can be weak willed, and we can be unjust when we mistakenly believe an innocent person is guilty. We can also misunderstand things and be impoverished in our deliberative resources in ethics. If an ethical life is played out in the space of meaning and significance, then it will also have to do with seeing things aright, and the kind of mistakes we can make will have to do with this. It is possible to misread a situation or to place a significance on it that it does not have. Because meaning occurs in a social space it is also possible to misunderstand the significance of an act. A simple example might be a misunderstanding when someone does not receive an expected invitation. 'Why did you snub me by not inviting me to your function?' The reply might run, 'I didn't think I had snubbed you – I knew you would be away at the time.' Many things, such as invitations, have an intrinsically social dimension to them.

An ethical life having to do with understanding in a realm of meaning, it is no surprise that an appreciation of the range of meanings things can have takes time to develop. It is through experience that we will learn the significance that things can have, both, in our own life and in others'. It is through experience that we come to understand and place the values and concepts we draw on in the course of our lives.

It clearly does not always have to be the case that the experience is of the first order – an experience of something that happened to us: it might be that someone else tells us about how something matters to them. For it is not only the experiences of events in my life that teach me how things can stand for a person. A feature of this chapter is its emphasis on the need for moral deliberation not to be construed solipsistically. An appreciation of how things can stand for others is central to moral life, however this cannot be developed except by entering into some kind of dialogue with them, as well as allowing them an authority in my life such that they are taken seriously and what they claim is thereby given the space to be seen for its contribution to their life.

### Passionate argument

Treating someone seriously does not mean setting aside criticism altogether, as has already been shown. Of course, it is easy simply to assert that people make mistakes and that they can radically mistake the reach of particular concepts which they draw upon. In practice, we find that matters are rarely clear cut, and most often the matter is disputed. Is abortion murder? Is the foetus something which can be killed? Is voluntary euthanasia suicide or murder? What if it is either, both or neither of these? The account I gave of *ad hominem* argument last chapter showed there is a space for meaningful argument on such issues without thinking that there is an absolute and correct position on such matters. When they are informative, these are not just abstract debates about concepts like ‘murder’, ‘killing’, ‘life’ and so on - the vehemence of the debates springs from the significance these issues have for us in the first place. In Australia in recent years there has been an ongoing debate about government policies towards Aborigines and the practices of white Australians, whether on behalf of the government or not. There had been fighting and massacres during European settlement; policies for the forcible removal of children of mixed parentage were also implemented. Was it right to call these policies and practices genocide? Naturally, the different historical situations were separated: policies and practices had varied between states and over time, as had their implementation. A spectrum of positions were adopted, but at their centre convictions remained polarised: some held there had been genocidal policies; others remained convinced that, whatever had occurred, it was not genocide. One side accused the other of refusing to acknowledge the full extent of the evil committed against Aborigines, and demanded a sober sense of Australia’s history. The response described this as a

'black armband' history which distorted the character of European settlement through exaggeration, adding that Australians must be proud of their history.

These debates were not just reports of people's feelings, or sprays at others. People felt these issues mattered, and mattered for reasons. Clear, precise and thoughtful arguments could still not be described as dispassionate, even if the language adopted was measured, since it was clear all the time that what was at issue mattered deeply to those involved. It seems absurd to think it could be otherwise – for, at their best, the debates were concerned with a proper understanding of the character of what had occurred. They were not simply concerned with whether the word 'genocide' could sit in apposition to a particular set of policies and practices; the point was that if these were genocidal then that said something deep and important about them. The concept carries weight because of its moral content – a point which featured by implication in the debate for those who were concerned that its use not be extended too far, lest it lose that significance. What could be called genocide was hotly contested; what was agreed by implication was that calling a policy and/or its implementation genocidal should change our understanding of it.[288] The best writing in the debate kept in view that it was not a definition alone that was at stake, rather it was what we might therefore think of the actions it describes and the cultural life which undertook it. Even when it was measured and civil (and it was not always these things), the debate could not be described as dispassionate because of this understanding of how the outcome of the debate would shape national self-understanding and what could be said of people involved in genocidal policies. This last question, would, of course, splinter into a myriad of particularities. The passion I refer to here is not one of breast-beating, tears or spitting rage, but emerges from a lucid understanding of the significance of what has been done – ignoring a genocide or falsely accusing someone of benefiting from it. I do not mean that understanding a wrong has been done must always stir someone; however, it seems natural to think that understanding the character and significance of a wrong might well incense us. That we are impelled to debate a matter at all will often be the result of our understanding the significance of a wrong we perceive: understanding how it matters

[288] This change in understanding would not be without consequence, for there is such a thing as implication in moral arguments. Acknowledging one thing entails others – my point has been that these are more open than people generally acknowledge.

means we cannot sit still when the issue crops up. This simply reflects the phenomenology of value which I discussed in earlier chapters.

Concepts will change and be contested because of what they mean to our self-understanding and how a shift in understanding can impact on our way of life. Changes in people's sense of the significance of a practice and the ideas associated with it can have a dramatic effect on self-understanding and livelihood. It is no accident that we speak of fishing and timber 'communities', for a way of life has often developed around the practices, which is taken up not only by the people who fish or cut trees, but also those who live beside them in the towns. Stopping these practices in a region obviously threatens the material livelihoods of those involved; it also threatens the community inasmuch as it can no longer be structured around a practice which is no longer permitted. What's more, the self-understanding of the community is no longer settled: are they the inheritors of a noble pioneer spirit which first settled these areas and now provide jobs and wealth for people well beyond them? Or are they pillagers of nature, polluting beauty that can never be enjoyed by others again, and at the same time contributing to an environmental crisis that will ruin us all? Put like this, it should be no wonder that these issues matter to people, and that they do not matter dispassionately.

In the course of pointing out the resources which culture provides for criticism, I have touched on the role of passion. It is a feature of good dialogue because, as I have mentioned earlier, if we are to be present to each other in dialogue we must be located in our lives as well, and this is to ensure that we retain a sense of the significance of what we are claiming and debating. What should also be noted in what I have said is that the resources for criticism as well as the impetus for it emerge from culture. The debate itself can only be productive and sustained if we are open in dialogue in the way I discussed in my chapter on disagreement and dialogue. Environmental debates will involve scientific studies about the effects of various practices on various types of natural environment; political debates will often involve studies of history to see what took place. However, implicit in these studies is the interest we have in undertaking them or deploying them in our debates. These interests can only emerge in the course of a life, and this will be one which is social. That is, they emerge in a socio-cultural situation. Debates and dialogue are

inextricably bound to the situation and outlook of their participants. It is this situation, locating the person in a culture, language and history, which gives sense to their behaviour and deliberation and enables these to be rendered as intelligible. The situation is historical and responds to the outlook of the person, however it is also outside the individual. The individual finds himself in a social environment which structures meanings – the particular circumstances demand a response by the individual, but can only be understood in terms of a background which goes well beyond them. The same goes for the ideas they draw upon in their deliberation as well as their self-understanding. This means that in important ways the individual's deliberative resources are shared by others and can therefore be engaged with critically by them. The reasons I draw upon are not beyond scrutiny by others – the adequacy of my deliberation is not something that I alone can determine for myself, since the resources I draw upon in undertaking it are not mine alone. This is the case even at the same as I must lead my own life in the light of reasons which must be my own.

# Conclusion

MacIntyre has correctly observed, 'we have not yet fully understood the claims of any moral philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be.'[289] There is therefore clearly much more I need to write before I could suggest my project is complete. However, I have reached a good point at which to catch my breath and reflect on what has been achieved. Expanding what I have said into political theory would introduce issues best treated in another work altogether. As it is, my treatment of a range of matters has been briefer than I would have liked – at times only cursory. So, before extending the work into new domains, the reader may prefer I elaborated on the matters I have already touched on. Even this would provide almost unlimited possibilities, since each chapter could be expanded into a monograph in its own right.

Either way, the arc of this work is balanced between its opening and closing chapters. The former have placed the individual firmly at the centre of moral deliberation. I have begun by treating seriously the fact that we are first of all located in a world of meaning, which we take up and respond to. This gives rise to plurality in ethics, and makes it responsive to who it is who is deciding what they ought to do. The closing chapters have continued the theme that moral deliberation has no foundation beyond the lives which embody it. In them I have emphasised that while moral decision-making is responsive to individuality, individuals are nonetheless situated. Our history, society, culture and experience all serve to provide an horizon of meaning which is not anybody's in isolation. Along the way I have had the opportunity to sally into other contemporary debates in ethics, ranging from Bernard Williams' work on internal reasons, through Korsgaard's on the sources of normativity, to Dancy's on particularism.

Returning to the arc of the work, what I argued in the last chapter has rounded out the position I argued in the opening chapters. Most obviously in Chapters 1, 3 and 6 I

[289] MacIntyre 1985: 22

emphasised the open-ended nature of reason-giving. In ‘The Openness of Reasons’ I introduced the thought that our agency is interpretive, and showed the implications of this for reasons for action. Reasons are open, inasmuch as what is entailed by them depends upon how they are taken up by the agents acting on them. They have no vector pointing to one course of action or another until they are instantiated. How I take up reasons therefore reveals something about me and how I orientate myself in the world. What’s more, an ineliminable feature of a situation is who is caught in it. It is the orientation I bring to the situation which in a sense makes it what it is.

What I bring to the situation is not just a set of values, projects and commitments. As I showed in ‘Narrative Identity’, who I am is also constituted by my narrative, the account I would give of myself. My identity is not something which simply occurs in the moment. I have a history and this also features in my orientation to the world. Through my narrative I bring a kind of unity to my life. This does not mean I must unify my life in terms of some overarching higher ideal. However, it does mean that events do not stand in isolation from each other – dealing with one case I am implicitly drawing on my experience of other cases. This was one of the considerations qualifying the particularism I developed in the ‘Excursus on Dancy’. Furthermore, the way in which narrative is constitutive of experience played a role in showing limits on any idea of moral necessity. Recantation is narrated, and can take the form of saying that whatever I made of my situation at the time, I now see I was wrong and had alternatives. Moral necessity is subject to revaluation.

In bringing together strands of my life, narrative also reveals how those strands sit together. For different commitments can sit together uncomfortably. Indeed, sometimes circumstances can conspire to bring them into outright conflict. There is no reason to think that our lives can avoid tragic conflict. Knowing that I have only willed the good may fortify me against misfortune, however it cannot protect me entirely, and the requirements of morality may leave me crushed. While I argued this in ‘Reaching My Limit’, in ‘Conflict and Consistency’ I explored the idea of conflict in more detail. Drawing on Williams and Nussbaum I firstly showed why we cannot avoid all conflict in moral life - that moral requirements will sometimes conflict with one another. Of course, not all conflict is inevitable, and part of life is spent

negotiating tensions between our commitments. This applies even to ideals which are central to a culture, for instance liberty and equality.

Once again, there is nothing inevitable about the relationship between different ideas. The appropriateness of the charge of inconsistency depends on how ideas are taken up in the first place. This was shown in the second half of 'Conflict and Consistency' when I showed how inconsistency in ethics depends upon the way of life. How we understand ideals will shape how they conflict with one another; alternatively, the possibility of conflict can see us shape the ideals. Whether there is inconsistency between ideals will often only show itself in how I lead my life. Our interpretive agency is therefore central not only to our understanding of individual reasons, but also to how they stand in relationship to one another.

Our thinking is therefore responsive to our way of life. My arguments in these three chapters - 'The Openness of Reasons', 'Narrative Identity' and 'Conflict Consistency' – all showed how this can take place at the level of the individual. That is, 'way of life' should not be understood referring to something that must be shared at all levels with others. My identity might spring from cultural or social factors, but these influences are by no means exclusive. Social life is heterogeneous and characterised as much by the differences between people as much as their convergences. We can be surprised by others' views on the world, and sometimes see them as the product of idiosyncrasy or of cultural background. The plurality of moral views operates across many levels.

However, it is the convergences and what is shared that gives a ground for *Kritik*. Even the idiosyncratic takes root in shared meanings. This does not mean it is caused by them, only that it takes shape through them. We grow up in a social world. This is not just a world that we must share with others, but otherwise go about our lives in isolation from them. Instead, it is a world in which our most basic understandings take shape in relation to other people. Beginning at the broadest level, our cultural milieu, we enter a world in which meanings pre-exist us. My conceptual capacities develop concurrently with my linguistic capacities. My language is something which precedes me and is ineliminably social, depending on a society for its vigour. In addition, the arrangement of things I encounter will also reflect the interests of others. This occurs at the individual level, for instance in how my house's

arrangement reflects everyone living in it. It also occurs at the social level, for instance in the arrangement of whole cities or regions, including services and housing. At the personal level, I will learn a great deal about how I should engage with others by how I am treated and how I see people treating each other. This is something that feminism has drawn attention to for some time. Roles, expectations and vocabularies attach to people according to how they are perceived to fit into society. Women one way, men another; immigrants one way, locally born another and so on. The way these meanings overlap and bear on groups or individuals can be perplexing. What this means, however, is that there is a vocabulary and field of concepts which are shared and offer an enormous resource for critical discussion. Part of the point of this discussion will also be to change and develop perspectives. Saying that meanings are shared need not mean they are endorsed by all, nor that they cannot be changed. Clearly they do change, and for a variety of reasons.

So, while it is I who must lead my life, this does not mean I do so in isolation, nor that I am beyond criticism. That differences between people run deep places limits on what can be expected from any process of argument. This was perhaps clearest in 'Disagreement and Dialogue' and 'Taylor on Practical Reason'. In the course of those chapters, analysis of disagreement led to an analysis of dialogue. This in turn dovetailed with Taylor's work on argument, which takes seriously the thought that there is no fundamental (or transcendental) foundation for debates in ethics.

All we have is who we are and the life we lead. The final chapter showed what surprising resources these offer – looked at one way, the whole history of moral philosophy should make this clear as well.

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Citation:
Gaff, A. D. (2007). On reasons and disagreement in ethics. PhD thesis, Faculty of Arts, Philosophy, University of Melbourne.

Publication Status:
Unpublished

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/39497

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