Ethics beyond moral theory

Timothy Chappell, Department of Philosophy, The Open University

> The will to a system is a lack of integrity.
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Maxims and Arrows", 26

> Don't think, but look!
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, 66

> Or le réel est inépuisable, et par conséquent la tentative de le synthésiser sous des principes est une entreprise pratiquement impossible.
> Etienne Gilson, *L'Esprit de la philosophie mediévale* (Paris: Vrin), 1944

1. Pages from a sociology of academic life

Contemporary academic moral theory is a territory partitioned between a number of highly professionalised and (on the face of it) fiercely opposed schools of thought about how we should systematise our ethical thinking: consequentialism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, contractualism, natural law theory, sentimentalism, and others. Not every academic ethicist is aligned with any of these schools, but most are, and all face insistent pressure to become aligned. (For example, appointing committees for ethics jobs often ask, either directly or indirectly, "What sort of ethicist are you?", and tend, both intentionally and unintentionally, to penalise complex or unusual answers.)

Perturbingly often (throughout this paper I shall be observing tendencies, not generalising without exceptions) these various schools behave as sects, in the pejorative sense of the word. The schools out-group and ignore each other, sometimes to an extent that suggests that no member of any other sect has ever produced any work worth discussing, or that no member of any other sect could so much as be tolerated as, for instance, a colleague. (I have heard of a job candidate who was asked at interview "How she thought she would fit in to the department, given that all the other moral theorists in it were consequentialists".)

At other times, though less frequently, the sects stage cumbersome debates over "which of them is right". Like Presidential debates in the US, these *gigantomachiai* have the air of mock-battles rather than real ones. There never seems to be much danger that anyone's opinions will actually be changed. Not, at least, by the *arguments* involved—though there is always the chance of someone's committing some catastrophic gaffe that will swing the "mood music" in favour of his opponents. (Perhaps, again as in a Presidential debate, these gaffes are really what the two sides are playing for.) Overall, if these sham debates resemble any real battle, it is Jutland: the key priority for both sides is to satisfy their paymasters by performing a

convincing impression of a genuine exchange, while in reality steering their juggernauts of vested interest away from the actual danger-zones as soon and as unscathed as possible.

Why is academic moral theory today so perturbingly often in this parlous condition? Clearly, simple academic *Realpolitik* is part of the explanation. As all too often elsewhere in universities, the entrenched sects and their apparently immutable and interminable oppositions persist, not because a compelling intellectual case can be made in their defence (*a priori* it is entirely possible that the whole lot of them are indefensible), but because each of these sects has fought a successful campaign in institutional politics to establish its curricular and budgetary space—in other words, to become one of the vested interests that deans, heads of department, and other "bureaucratic managers" (MacIntyre's term) must accommodate.

But there is more to it than that. Vested interest is not the full explanation of why academic moral theory today is the way it is. Many of moral theory's deepest faults arise from factors inherent to the whole enterprise of moral theory. Or so, at least, I shall now argue.

2. Moral theory and the quest for the Master Factor

Moral theory has an unhelpful tendency to base everything on looking for what I shall call the Master Factor. The Master Factor is the single, simple, clear determinant of rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, in any and every possible situation. Apparently, utilitarian moral theorists think the Master Factor is utility; Kantians think it is universalisability; Contractarians think it is absence of reasonable rejectability; Virtue Ethicists think it is accord with the virtues; Natural Law theorists (I used to be one of these) think it is respect and non-violation of all basic goods, and pursuit of some; *et cetera*.

Why is it unhelpful for moral theorists to be seeking the Master Factor? Consider a character whom moral theorists of all the above schools are likely to have little time for: the widely-mocked kind of Christian fundamentalist who seeks to resolve every practical issue by appeal to the single stark question "What does the Bible say?" About this character, I imagine most moral theorists will tell us pretty smartly that his decision-procedure is narrow, diminishing, unimaginative, lacking in creative depth or space, humanly impoverished, fanatically monocular. Someone who runs or tries to run his practical deliberation exclusively in line with the fundamentalist's simplistic model is, they will tell us, living within the constraints of a deeply *boring* mode of deliberation. And, they will add, someone who comes into this model of deliberation from outside it—at conversion, say—has been *corrupted*. He has become a worse person, because—a little like Mr Bast in *Howards End*—he has replaced the polymorphic and polyvalent richness and diversity of real life for the grey uniformity of a theory.

> The three hurried downstairs, to find, not the gay dog they expected, but a young man, colourless, toneless, who had already the mournful eyes above a drooping moustache that are so common in London... One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization

had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit. Hints of robustness survived in him, more than a hint of primitive good looks, and Margaret, noting the spine that might have been straight, and the chest that might have broadened, wondered whether it paid to give up the glory of the animal for a tail coat and a couple of ideas. (E.M.Forster, *Howards End,* Chapter 14)

The very complaint that the moral theorists would make against the fundamentalist applies to them as well. Suppose we agree that it is boring to make your decisions solely by reference to the question "What does the Bible say?", and that it is humanly diminishing—hence, corrupting—to move from richer and more natural modes of deliberation, to the mode that uses that question and nothing else. It is no less boring and diminishing to give up the glory of our natural deliberative life for the exiguous "couple of ideas" that are involved in the kinds of deliberative life that depend on The Master Questions "What would promote utility?" or "What is universalisable?". Either question has, when you get down to it, not that much to recommend it over the Master Question "What does the Bible say?".

My point is not that it could never be worthwhile to ask whether any given action promotes utility, or is universalisable, or can be reasonably rejected, or is in accordance with the virtues, etc. Nor, come to that, is my point that it could never be worthwhile to ask "What does the Bible say?". Provided we can do what fundamentalists—as opposed to more sophisticated sorts of Christian—conspicuously and characteristically fail to do, and develop a workable account of what it is for the Bible to *say* anything, there may well be illumination in these old pages even for doctrinaire atheists. These are all important and illuminating questions to ask about good and bad, right and wrong—or they can be. The point is rather that systematising moral theory, like fundamentalism, typically tells us to take *just one* of these questions, and treat it as the Master Question—the question that in every case identifies the Master Factor, the one thing that truly matters in ethics and which can settle every possible question that comes up for practical deliberation. The happy fact that real life just isn't like this will be obvious to anyone who has grown up properly.

Often, some theory has been under criticism, and the more particular material [e.g. the famous examples in Williams 1973, 93-100, of George and Jim] has come in to remind one of the unreality and, worse, distorting quality of the theory. The material… is itself extremely schematic, but… it at least brings out the basic point that… the theory is frivolous, in not allowing for anyone's experience, including the author's own. Alternatively, the theory does represent experience, but an impoverished experience, which it holds up as the rational norm—that is to say, the theory is stupid. (Williams 1995, 217)

In plenty of real-life cases the questions what promotes utility, what is universalisable, what is reasonably rejectable, and what accords with the virtues will *all* be questions worth asking. Often more than one, perhaps all, of these questions will have something to bring to the party. The characteristic trouble with moral theories starts when each of them tries to take over the party. Or, to take a more scientific metaphor, the trouble starts when we forget that our theoretical idealisation is just that—an idealised model and no more—and try and treat it as if it was a complete and literal description of reality. The moment where we forget that we are

talking about an idealised system, and start imagining we are talking about reality as it is, is the moment where scientism emerges from science; at the analogous moment in ethics, moral theory emerges from moral thought.[1]

To attempt to resolve every practical issue by means of a single Master Question is a desperately boring way to conduct our lives. To get going the pretence that this life of willed deliberative monotony is a real option for us, we have to convince ourselves that other questions besides the Master Question really don't get to the heart of things; that nothing except the Master Factor is really of any importance. (It is an interesting comment on the workings of typical moral theory that one common way to argue for a moral theory's favoured Master Factor is to point out that that factor is of moral significance in some particular case. How we are supposed to get from that premiss to the conclusion that *only* that factor *ever* matters in *any* case is not satisfactorily explained.[2])

Like fundamentalism, the pretence that nothing matters except the Master Factor must either involve self-deception; or it must involve us in making ourselves stupider, narrower-minded and more monocular, than we were when we started out; or both. Either way, the process is corrupting; and knowingly going along with it, in *mauvaise foi*, is actually corrupt. (I mean the French term pretty literally, by the way. Moral theories offer us decision procedures that pretend to be inevitable. We can be taken in by this pretence of inevitability. We can also pretend to be taken in because it suits us to pretend. This latter is *mauvaise foi* in exactly Sartre's sense.)

The question that these points raise is, I suggest, the question whether in fact we need moral theory at all.

> There cannot… despite the vigorous activities of some present practitioners.. be an ethical theory, in the sense of a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning. This… undertaking has never succeeded, and could not succeed, in answering the question, *by what right* does it legislate to the moral sentiments? The abstract and schematic conceptions of rationality which are usually deployed in this connection do not even look as though they were relevant to the question—so soon, at least, as morality is seen as something whose real existence must consist in personal experience and social institutions, not in sets of propositions. (Williams 1981, ix-x)

The charge is that moral theory is exclusive, reductively narrow in its approach to the practical questions that we need to answer; and that these features of moral theory make it boring, because monotonous, and corrupting, because they encourage us to see this monotony, wrongly, as a good thing; they make moral theory actually corrupt, where *mauvaise foi* is involved.

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[1] Thanks to Phyllis Mackay for suggesting this analogy to me.

[2] For one application of this general point cp. Williams 1995a, 164: Sidgwick is "sometimes guilty of a mistake that turns up in later writers; this is to infer that, because considerations of utility or the greater happiness are quite often used in order to resolve a conflict between two other values, it then follows that those values must all the time be directly or indirectly expressions of the end of utility or the greatest happiness. This simply does not follow."

To this charge a number of lines of rejoinder spring immediately to mind. Here are three.

1. "Come now, it's not really as bad as that." I will be challenged to produce evidence to support the pessimistic picture I paint of contemporary moral theory. And of course I can be got to admit at least this: that I am not claiming that every single practising moral theorist alive today is working, in bad faith, for the sectarian and exclusive promotion of his own school of thought against all others. I am not unaware, for instance, of the ecumenical efforts of a writer like Derek Parfit, in his unpublished *Climbing the Mountain,* the central thesis of which is that consequentialism, contractarianism, and deontology, on the best understandings of each, are convergent theories—as it were, different routes up the same mountain. Nor am I unaware of the work of contemporary intuitionists like Berys Gaut and (though they don't use the label) David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, all of whom energetically deny that there is any such thing as a single Master Factor (Gaut 1993, McNaughton 1996, McNaughton and Rawling 2000). What I am saying is that professional ethicists are under a lot of systemic pressure to play the moral-theory game: to engage in the sectarian and exclusivist search for a unique Master Factor. Anyone who has never noticed this pressure cannot, so far as I can imagine, have been to any moral-theory conferences.

2. "Unfair to moral theory." A related rejoinder says that my argument so far underestimates the resources of moral theory. Of course—says this rejoinder—the moral theorist isn't condemned to settle every moral issue by reference to just one Master Question. Moral theory, even if it does recognise some one thing as a Master Factor—utility or universalisability or virtue or whatever—can still deploy lots and lots of different *sub*-questions; and so, moral theory can be *sophisticated* and *rich*. In fact, the rejoinder continues, the problem I have identified is not really a problem about *moral theory* at all. It is a problem about crudity and poverty of thought. And surely it is obvious that no moral theorist worth controverting will be in favour of *these* qualities?

I have no wish to claim, in the teeth of obvious evidence, that moral theory cannot be subtle and sophisticated. On the contrary, there is a great deal to admire in contemporary moral theory in these respects. My point is that even when it is at its most subtle and sophisticated, the subtlety and sophistication tends to come (again: does not inevitably come, but tends to come) in the wrong place to prevent moral theory from still harbouring a *drive towards* crudity and poverty of thought; as for instance when a staggeringly complex and ingenious account is given of the nature of a fundamentally reductive and oversimplifying notion such as "utility". As actually done these days moral theory—however subtle—instinctively aims to systematise, to give economical explanations, to reduce the phenomena under as few and as simple explanatory headings as possible.

Consider here the remarkable words of Raphael 1994, 55: while intuitionism "gives a reasonably accurate picture of everyday moral judgement", "it does not meet the needs of a philosophical theory, which should try to show connections and tie things up in a coherent system". "The needs of philosophical theory"? What sort of needs are these, and how do they compare for importance with, for instance, the needs of actual people? And what kind of suasive force, *per se*, should we attach to mere

theoretical *tidiness*? These are not rhetorical questions; I would genuinely like to hear good answers to them, if there are any.

Even if a moral theory does recognise a plethora of sub-questions, it will still typically want to regiment these sub-questions, however numerous, tidily under its Master Question. The reductive and simplifying drive does not go away, however well moral theorists may disguise it.

3. Criterion of rightness vs. deliberative procedure. A third response runs on exceedingly familiar lines. It points to the well-known fact, which I have ignored so far but now come to deal with, that a moral theory's criterion of rightness (CR) is independent of its deliberative procedure (DP). So, says this response, there is no reason why a theory that has a very simple CR, as in fact all major moral theories do, should not also have a very complex DP (or suite of DPs) at its disposal. Once we separate out CR and DP (the response continues), we can see that the moral theorist need not claim that the moral *agent* must constantly be engaged, as the fundamentalist is, in thinking about the Master Factor. It is only the moral *theorist* who has to do that.

The trouble with this claim that CR and DP are independent runs deep, and we shall come back to it in section 4. First time round, I will just ask: what do we mean by "independent" here? Certainly a criterion of rightness is not the same thing as a deliberative procedure: in *that* sense, of course they are independent. Equally certainly, the two cannot rationally be kept apart if both are present in the same consciousness: in this sense, they are not and cannot be independent. There simply is no logically or psychologically stable way for a CR and a DP to coexist in a minimally self-aware and intelligent moral agent without interacting. If I know (say) that right acts are all and only those which promote utility, and am also seeking to do all and only right acts, then it is just impossible for me—unless I am grossly irrational—to keep these two thoughts from influencing each other. My awareness of the CR will inevitably find work to do as I try to deliberate about how I should act. Conversely, the deliverances of my DP will be one source of critical leverage on my own, and others', beliefs about the CR. The result is that any person who (correctly) accepts a complex DP is going to have to let that complexity generate a critical perspective on his CR. And if his CR is implausibly simple, as the moral theorists' CRs are, this critical perspective will be very likely, if all goes well, to tell him so.

My thesis is that moral theory is a poor way to do ethics, and I shall have more to say about this thesis in later parts of this paper. But first, since my thesis obviously prompts the question "So how else could we do ethics?", I shall sketch an alternative. I do this in section 3, by developing the idea of an *ethical outlook*.

The point that I want to make about ethical outlooks is *not* to recommend that we now start introducing them into ethics to replace moral theories. My point is rather that ethical outlooks are there already, in all half-way decent ethical philosophy; and that the role of moral theories, in practice, is mostly just to disguise their presence, and to confuse the issue about what the enterprise of ethics actually is (or could be, or should be). Refocusing our thinking in ethics around the idea of an ethical outlook may help to straighten that thinking out.

3. The idea of an ethical outlook

Anybody who is going to live a genuinely worthwhile and a fully human life will have to live out a set of views and commitments about the central questions concerning value: what is worth living for and what is worth dying for, what is really admirable and what is really contemptible, what we must do at all costs and what we must not do no matter what; and so on. This set of views and commitments need not be very explicit; but it must run deep—must be sincerely and indeed passionately held. And it need not be very systematic; but it must be as considered, rationally defensible, and coherent as possible. Any such set of views about value is what I will call an *ethical outlook.*

What must a set of views and commitments be like, to constitute a credible and liveable ethical outlook? One difficulty in answering this question is that no universally-quantified generalising answer to it, of the kind usually preferred by systematising philosophers, is available. In fact it is a key part of what I shall argue in this section that credible ethical outlooks are known by recognition, not definition.

A second difficulty is that what counts as a credible and liveable ethical outlook is dependent on how the world is. If there is no God, for instance, or if the God that there is is the Christian God rather than, say, the Odin of Norse myth, or if determinism or evolutionary reductionism or classical Marxism or Freudianism is true—whatever the truth about these big questions may be, it is bound to constrain what counts as a genuinely credible and liveable ethical outlook. This is hardly the place to decide between these alternatives. But if we don't, how can we say what ethical outlooks are credible or liveable?

These two difficulties do not stop us from identifying some examples of what are, surely, at least *prima facie* credible ethical outlooks, and some features that all such ethical outlooks must surely have in common. Here is one example.

> He was but three and twenty, and had only just learned what it is to be in love—to love with that adoration which a young man gives to a woman who he feels to be greater and better than himself. Love of this sort is hardly distinguishable from religious feeling. What deep and worthy love is so, whether of woman or child, or art or music. Our caresses, our tender words, our still rapture under the influence of autumn sunsets, or pillared vistas, or calm majestic statues, or Beethoven symphonies all bring with them the consciousness that they are mere waves and ripples in an unfathomable ocean of love and beauty; our emotion in its keenest moment passes from expression into silence, our love at its highest flood rushes beyond its object and loses itself in the sense of divine mystery. And this blessed gift of venerating love has been given to too many humble craftsmen since the world began for us to feel any surprise that it should have existed in the soul of a Methodist carpenter half a century ago. (George Eliot, *Adam Bede,* Chapter 3)

Dinah Morris and Seth Bede are uneducated and undistinguished people, adherents of an unsophisticated and undistinguished creed, Primitive Methodism. But as the highly intellectual agnostic George Eliot shows us, it is their deeply felt faith in that creed that gives their ethical outlook its profundity. At this point in the novel,

Seth Bede is in anguish because Dinah Morris has just rejected his proposal of marriage. The simplicity and inarticulacy of Seth's mind, religion, and character does not mean that there is anything shallow or crude about his emotion and his attachment to Dinah, or about the overall ethical outlook of which his attachment is a part. After all, the "unfathomable ocean of love and beauty" that Seth is brought to touch on by his love for Dinah is there in Plato's *Symposium* too (210d). Seth Bede and Dinah Morris have a *prima facie* credible ethical outlook, even though, as good Primitive Methodists, they believe "in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions". Indeed it is the beliefs of their faith, and what those beliefs mean to them, that gives their ethical outlook its shape and tone.

Something more like George Eliot's own ethical outlook is famously expressed by Matthew Arnold in the closing words of "Dover Beach":

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! for the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Here too is a *prima facie* credible ethical outlook, albeit at the opposite extreme of pessimism from the rapturous and ecstatic Platonism of Seth and Dinah. The most disturbing part of it is, of course, the implicit tension between the plea "Let us be true to one another!" and the universal darkness that Arnold finds around him. If the world contains *no* "certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain", then it inexorably follows that no lovers can be sure of being true to each other, or hope to help each other's pain even if they are.

No credible Christian or other theistic outlook can deny that the world very often at least seems to fit Arnold's tragic vision of it, as a place of unheeded routine agony and brutal chaos; whatever a theist may go on to say about that "seems". Certainly Gerard Manley Hopkins' theistic ethical outlook, for example, does not lead him to deny it in "God's Grandeur":

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
>   It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
>   It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
>   And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
>   And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
>
> And for all this, nature is never spent;
>   There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
> And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
  World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

A very different kind of theist from Hopkins has no trouble with the obvious clash between the divine benevolence and the malignity of the world, because he does not see the divine as benevolent in the first place. So Hyllus at the close of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, as he watches the removal from the scene of his father, Zeus's stricken son Heracles, who is dying in agony because he put on the shirt of Nessus that was sent him as a present by Hyllus' mother, Deianeira, whom Hyllus has now provoked to suicide by accusing her of deliberately killing Heracles.

> Attendants, take him up. And pity on me,
> Pity and compassion for my fault,
> All while the unpitying gods indifferently
> Watch these things unfold and call no halt.
> They make us and they claim the name of fathers
> Then stand afar and watch our suffering.
>
> No one knows what the future time will offer;
> The present time, for us, means suffering,
> And for the gods means shame;
> It means worse than any human suffering
> For him on whom this doom of anguish came.
>
> Girl, come away, and leave this house behind.
> New shapes of enormous death now fill your mind,
> Novelties of agony, pain beyond all use;
> And nothing in all this that is not Zeus.
> (Sophocles, *Trachinae* 1264-1278; my own translation)

Hyllus' ethical outlook is as bleak as Matthew Arnold's. That does not, unfortunately, make it any less credible.

Even if we cannot capture the idea of a credible and liveable ethical outlook in a definition, we can use examples like these four to draw out some features that credible ethical outlooks will normally have. Here are six such features.

First, despite the clear religious content of at least three of my four examples, an ethical outlook does not need to have any explicitly theological or even philosophical content to count as *prima facie* credible. Its import is, as they say, existential, and it is an open question whether existential concerns are best expressed by theological conceptions, or by philosophical ones; or indeed by either. (The literary expression of existential concerns is one clear alternative to both the theological and the philosophical forms; and there may be others.)

Secondly, and connectedly, an ethical outlook needs to match and to encapsulate lived human experience; it needs to be true to experience, or at least to have a *prima facie* chance of being true. And it needs to be *generally* true, not just partially or occasionally true. That is, it needs to match and encapsulate a wide and

generous range of human experience, not just a small and gerrymandered selection from, or a distortion of, human experience.

Thirdly, a credible ethical outlook needs to contain two sorts of elements corresponding to what Bernard Williams, as quoted in section 2, calls "the moral sentiments": what I shall call *commitments* and *perceptions*. By "commitments" I mean the things we care about—our life-shaping relationships, and our life-shaping projects. Who (or what) I love, and how I love them, is a crucial ingredient in making my ethical outlook what it is—indeed, it is perhaps *the* crucial ingredient. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine a credible or liveable ethical outlook that does not have love for someone or at least something at its heart. It is equally hard to imagine a credible or liveable ethical outlook that does not include at least some things like ambitions, interests, vocations, "ground projects" as Williams calls them; and these too are commitments.

By "perceptions" I mean what are sometimes called "moral intuitions". At the foundations of any normal person's first-order morality stand a variety of basic moral convictions by reference to which her other views are justified, and from which her other convictions are inferences or extrapolations. For instance: for most of us today[3], the claims that, at least in the great majority of conceivable cases, it is very seriously wrong to torture, steal, murder, or rape will be basic moral convictions in this sense. We will regard these basic claims as *obviously* true, and our access to them will at least seem to be direct and quasi-sensory—which is why I call them perceptions. We will regard these perceptions as more certain than any argument that we can imagine being brought forward either to support them or to undermine them. They will strike us with such evidential force that it would be at least subjectively irrational for us to abandon them under the influence of some argument or perception which is itself much less persuasive or vivid than they are. New or doubtful moral claims will be tested against these basic convictions; if the new claims contradict the basic convictions, the new claims will normally be rejected. Although our perceptions obviously have cognitive content, they are also a third sort of commitment alongside our relationships and our projects. We care deeply about respecting our strongest moral intuitions, and feel as personally violated by having to go against them as we do by having to abandon or betray our relationships or our projects.

Fourthly, and as a corollary of the second feature, about truthfulness, a credible ethical outlook needs to be *open-edged*: an ethical outlook must be sensitive to the possibility of new experiences, and of resulting new perceptions, new projects, and new relationships. It must also be open to the converse possibility, that new experience might show up old perceptions, projects, or relationships as no longer worth their while—or never worthwhile in the first place.

Fifthly, a credible and liveable ethical outlook needs (as I said at the start of this section) to be "as considered, rationally defensible, and coherent as possible". Put this together with the points I have just made about truthfulness, and this much should be clear: that a credible and liveable ethical outlook displays no more system or coherence than is true to life itself. It does not automatically seek to reduce the obvious diversity of the projects, relationships, perceptions, and other commitments

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[3] "For most of us today": the relativity of such views is, of course, not lost on me.

that are its elements to any sort of uniformity, e.g. by representing novel and hitherto "unprocessed" experiences as mere variants on previous experience—by pigeonholing the unfamiliar with the familiar. Instead, it is always open to the thought "This is not the same thing again, but something new".

Sixthly, this willingness to live with diversity is also a willingness to live with complexity and even conflict. In sharp contrast to what is expected of moral theories, we may say that a credible ethical outlook does not have to include a way of resolving every possible value-conflict, or even every actual value-conflict, that occurs within it. Only a few of the indefinitely many value-conflicts that are possible even could come up within any actual life, and there is no particular reason to think that those that do come up are all sure to be resolved.

I do not mean to deny by this that *often* such conflicts can be resolved within a credible ethical outlook; and their resolutions can involve reasoning, sometimes including e.g. reasoning about consequences, rather than just being a matter of a sheer change of perspective. (As one humble example, take the reasonings that Dinah Morris and Seth Bede have just been engaging in with each other about whether to marry, immediately before the quotation from *Adam Bede* given above.) However, value-conflict resolution within an adequate ethical outlook, where the values in conflict are ones that the agent actually has a genuine stake in, is typically an experiential and narrative business.

> The choice between one potential love and another can feel, and be, like a choice of a way of life, a decision to dedicate oneself to these values rather than these. (Nussbaum 1990, 328)

Such choices are not about weighing and measuring different quantities of some arcane property that only trained philosophers fully understand, called "value". They are about asking "What do I want to do about the place in my life-story of these two values, given that I cannot go on giving both of them the place that they have had up to now?". (I am using the vague, abstract place-holding term "values"; it may help to sharpen the focus if the reader thinks of these values as *persons*—which they often are when this sort of question comes up, as e.g. they certainly are in Chapter 3 of *Adam Bede*.) The process of working out an answer to such a question is costly, and personal. It is not abstract, deductive, and weightlessly theoretical, as the rankings of values within the axiological schedules beloved of some philosophers typically are. If that sounds messy, we may retort, with Sir David Ross, that it is no messier than real life:

> If the objection be made, that this catalogue [of perceptions] is an unsystematic one resting on no logical principle, it may be replied… [that the first principles of any moral theory are] reached by exactly the same method— the only sound one in the circumstances—viz. that of direct reflection on what we really think. Loyalty to the facts is worth more than a symmetrical architectonic or a hastily reached simplicity. (Ross 1930, Chapter 2)[4]

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[4] "I will not stir a finger to compress the world into a system, and it does not at present seem as if it was going to harmonise itself without compression": Henry Sidgwick, quoted in Williams 1995a, 159.

Or as Aristotle puts it, in about the clearest statement he ever gives us of his own method in ethics:

> Just as we did in our other inquiries, we must take hold of what looks to be true, and start with the problems about that. This is the best way to prove perhaps all of our intuitive beliefs (*endoxa*) about these experiences—or if not all, then the majority of them, and the most authoritative. For if the difficulties raised by our intuitive beliefs can be resolved in a way that leaves those intuitive beliefs standing, that should be all we need to prove their truth. (NE 1145b3-8, my own translation)

This, then, is my positive thesis, about what an ethical outlook is. In the rest of the paper I develop a negative thesis. This is that no moral theory that I can think of[5] can be a credible or liveable ethical outlook.

4. "Ethical outlook" and "moral theory": some contrasts

What is a moral theory? Bernard Williams' characterisation, as quoted in Section 2, gives us a first approximation: "a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning". The clearest examples are the systematic normative theories that are considered and compared on the usual curriculum for basic undergraduate courses in ethics: consequentialism, virtue ethics, contractualism, Kantianism, divine command ethics, natural law ethics, and sometimes some others.

As I hope is clear by now, when I speak critically of moral theories or of moral theory in this paper, it is the building of normative systems like these that I am targeting. It should be obvious that moral theory in some other senses is not at all my target. Clearly, for instance, I cannot have a general objection to philosophising about value, or to the critical evaluation of systematic normative theories, since this is what I am doing myself. Nor, again, am I presenting any general objection to the activities of moral psychologists and metaethicists: these activities too are often called moral theory, but this paper is not about them.

Every "moral theory" in the tight sense—every first-order system of normative practical philosophy—aspires to be an ethical outlook. It is not clear what point there would be to a moral theory that did not have this aspiration. But there are problems about supposing that any moral theory could adequately play the role that we want, and need, our ethical outlook to play.

Some of the reasons why this is so begin to appear when we note the intimate connections that an adequate ethical outlook will inevitably have with motivation and deliberation on the one hand, and explanation and prediction on the other. We want our ethical outlook to be something which, in real time, can be the source of our reasons to act (*motivation*), and which can structure our thinking and deciding about how to act as it actually happens (*deliberation*). We also want our ethical outlook to be something which, offline, can articulate and deepen our understanding of what

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[5] NB this restriction. It is of course entirely possible that I'm just not very well read.

counts as good or bad and right or wrong action, and why (*explanation*); and we want it to be something which can explain what will or would be good or bad and right or wrong action, in future or hypothetical situations that we ourselves have not actually met, but which we or others might conceivably meet (*prediction*).

Moral theory is ill-fitted for any of these four roles. To see why, let us consider them one by one.

Motivation. I said above that "we want our ethical outlook to be something which can, itself, be the source of our reasons to act." At a first look, it seems that consequentialism identifies The Overall Good as the thing for good people to be motivated by; that Kantianism's motivational goal is rational action, in a special sense of "rational", or Duty, in a special sense of "Duty"; that virtue ethics tells us to act out of the virtues; and so on. Perhaps some moral theorists in these schools do think about motivation in this direct way: Peter Singer, for example, seems more than once to suggest that we really should aim to be motivated by "the overall good"; that there is nothing better to be motivated by, because (roughly) there is nothing bigger.[6] But this is not the commonest line about what should motivate us among moral theorists, and the reason why is obvious: the sheer implausibility of the moral theories' adopting any such direct account of motivation. As Susan Wolf and Michael Stocker have famously pointed out:

> There is something odd about the idea of morality itself, or moral goodness, serving as the object of a dominant passion in the way that a more concrete and specific vision of a goal (even a concrete *moral* goal) might be imagined to serve… when one reflects, for example, on the… Saint… giving up his fishing trip or his stereo or his hot fudge sundae at the drop of the moral hat, one is apt to wonder not at how much he loves morality, but at how little he loves these other things. (Wolf [1997], 83)

> [S]uppose you are in a hospital, recovering from a long illness… when Smith comes in… You are so effusive with your thanks and praise that he protests that he always tries to do what he thinks is his duty, what he thinks will be best. You at first think he is engaging in a polite form of self-deprecation… But the more you two speak, the more clear it becomes that he was telling the literal truth: that it is not essentially because of you that he came to see you, not because you are friends, but because he thought it his duty, perhaps as a fellow Christian or Communist or whatever, or simply because he knows no one more in need of cheering up and no one easier to cheer up. (Stocker 1976, 453)

Nobody sane generally or standardly acts so as to realise utility, or "on the motive of Duty" (Kant's own phrase), or "for the sake of virtue itself" (Aristotle's own phrase). Even people who only act occasionally in these ways can be in danger of looking priggish, and out of touch with what really matters in life, to the rest of us.

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[6] Singer 1995, 276: "If we take the point of view of the universe we can recognise the urgency of doing something about the pain and suffering of others, before we even consider promoting other possible values..."

As I hinted in the last section, what really motivates most of us, most of the time, at least if we are moderately good people or better and are not being distracted by false motives like concern about "what others will think", is *love*: love for spouses, love for children and parents, love for friends, love for God, love for ideals, love for valued places or artworks or possessions, love for pet projects, love for pets. The centrality of love is a striking feature of any typical credible ethical outlook. The marginality of love in typical moral theories, and more broadly in contemporary philosophical research, is equally striking.[7] Love is at the heart of our ethical outlooks; it is love, and not concern with what is right and wrong, that mostly drives us into action. In that sense love puts us "beyond good and evil", and beyond morality; while morality is a constraint on what motivates us (and *a* constraint: there are others), love is the very engine of motivation.

Their disregard of love is one major reason why none of these moral theories can itself furnish us with the central and most important source of our motivations. Hence cautious and sophisticated moral theorists quickly retreat to a "filter view" of the role of moral theory in motivation. That is, they suggest only that our maxims must pass the tests of rationality (if they are Kantians); or that our motivations should be whatever motivations it is in fact best for us to have (if they are consequentialists); or that we should act, not on thoughts about virtue, but on the thoughts that the virtuous person will have (if they are virtue ethicists)… and so on.

I don't wish just to make the utterly obvious and familiar point that the moral theories do not themselves provide us with any realistic set of motivations, and that none of them could, in itself, plausibly become the main source of our deepest and most pervasive aims in life. I also want to observe that a credible and liveable ethical outlook *will* provide us with our deepest and most pervasive motivations, and that, insofar as all moral theories fail to give themselves any chance of playing this role, they fail to meet the first criterion for being an adequate ethical outlook.

Deliberation: "We want our ethical outlook to be one which can structure our thinking and deciding about how to act as it actually happens." It is difficult to imagine a really clean separation between questions about motivation, what moves us to act, and about deliberation, our reasoning about how to act. For any well-constituted agent, reasoning about how to act will be an integral part of being moved to act, and *vice versa.* So doubts about the place of moral theory in motivation are also, *mutatis mutandis*, doubts about the place of moral theory in deliberation. If Utility or Duty or Virtue cannot plausibly be the main spring of our motivation, then it cannot plausibly be central to our deliberation either. It is no more plausible to say that a psychologically healthy moral agent's deliberations are typically guided by the question "What would maximise utility?" than it is to say that she typically acts on the motive of maximising utility.

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[7] There is of course *some* recent research on love, some of it really excellent— Nussbaum 1990, Velleman 2006*,* Frankfurt 1988, and Slote 2007 come to mind. Still, even that fine online resource *The Stanford Encyclopedia* contrives to supply 38 articles on logic, but only one article on love.

Unsurprising, therefore, that cautious and sophisticated moral theorists retreat at this point too—though they have found some divertingly elegant ways of covering their retreat. One is another application of the "filter view". Moral theorists will talk about moral theory as providing a *constraint* on deliberation, or the form of deliberation, rather than the subject-matter or content of deliberation. Deliberation, they will say, may take as its subject-matter whatever desires or pro-attitudes in fact motivate us, but it must always pass the universalisability test, or must always be maximising deliberation, or must never be contrary to the rules laid down by the virtues—and so on.

The first thing to say about this manoeuvre is just to point out that this too is a retreat from our expectations of an ethical outlook, which, we might hope, will provide both the content and the form of our deliberation. We would be justifiably disappointed in an ethical outlook that was topic-neutral in the familiar way that Humean and Hobbesian moral theories are: one that had nothing to say about *what* we desired, and told us only how to pursue it.

But anyway, it is unrealistic to hope that moral theory will give us even the form of deliberation, never mind both the form and the content. There is simply no reason to think that *all* good deliberation must, in any non-trivial sense, be universalisable or in accord with the virtues, or that it must satisfy such supposed rules of rationality as a maximising rule. Theorists' attempts to argue the contrary are always vulnerable to the question posed by Williams in section 2, "by what right they legislate to the moral sentiments". Of course good deliberation *sometimes* calls upon considerations which look very like thoughts about universalisability or utility or maximisation. But not always—and even when good deliberation does deploy one of these thoughts in one context, that is no guarantee that it must deploy that same thought in every other context. As soon as we look in detail at actual good agents actually deliberating, the idea that any moral theory even gives the form of their deliberations becomes hopelessly implausible. Good deliberation simply isn't that "programmed".

Or at any rate, it becomes hopelessly implausible to think that good agents who are deliberating must be *explicitly and consciously* using some moral theory as a constraint on that deliberation. But (to rehearse a second very familiar manoeuvre) mightn't moral theory serve as a universal *de re* constraint on their deliberation, even if it is only occasionally a *de dicto* one? That is to say: can't their deliberations *in fact* be always responsive to such a constraint (a "criterion of rightness", as it is often called: cp. section 2), even if that constraint is not always a conscious part of their *actual thoughts* in real-time moral reasoning—part of their "decision procedure"?

Once more, my main point about the moral theorist who proposes this is not to query the feasibility of his proposal—though we can query that too, of course. My main point about this proposal is that the moral theorist who offers it is retreating. It is a crucial part of what we hope for from an ethical outlook that it should guide our deliberations *de dicto*—should be consciously and explicitly present in our decision procedures. We want our ethical outlook to serve a bigger role than the merely *de-re* one that this proposal gives to moral theory, as a pattern which some detached observer can pick out in our deliberations and critically assess us for adhering to or not—irrespective of whether we realise the pattern is there. The central concepts of an

adequate ethical outlook must be, as we might put it, *psychologically real*: our most normal and natural forms of deliberation must, actually and consciously, be about them, and must present themselves to us as being about them. If the central concepts of any moral theory cannot be psychologically real in this way, that just reveals another sense in which no moral theory is fit to be an ethical outlook.

In any case, as I say, we might wonder whether a moral theory which is only *de re* applicable to our deliberations, and not *de dicto*, has any grip at all upon the psychological reality of deliberative life as it is actually happens. Wondering about this brings us to consider the two "off-line" roles that we want an ethical outlook to play: explanation and prediction.

Explanation: "We want our ethical outlook to be something which can articulate and deepen our understanding of what counts as good or bad and right or wrong action, and why." We might have expected moral theories to be on home ground here. After all, explanation (and prediction, which I treat separately below) are supposed to be the main strength of sophisticated moral theories. Those moral theorists who admit that moral theory cannot plausibly be directly involved in motivation and deliberation see its main role, instead, in explaining why it is good for agents to be motivate, and to deliberate, in whatever way it is that their theory recommends.

But first, this is already a puzzling claim. What these theories are telling us is that it is good, or best, that people should deliberate and be motivated in ways that do not directly involve the terms of the moral theory itself. But if the moral theory is *true*, why would that be so? Surely a good deliberative or motivational process will involve the best possible materials for deliberating over or being motivated by. And surely the *best possible* materials will include *the truth*? And in particular, the real explanations of goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness? Not so if the moral theorists are correct. On their account, the best possible materials for deliberation and motivation about what it is good and right to do, and why, do not include the truth about what it is good and right to do, and why. If you don't find this claim puzzling, you can't be taking it seriously. Certainly it is not a claim that we would expect to find in any plausible ethical outlook. Plausible ethical outlooks typically take the pursuit of the truth as one of our most non-negotiable and fundamental aims. Even if the truth turns out to be hard to live with, to create deep conflicts with our other aims, it is not an aim that we naturally think we can just *ignore*. It takes a moral theorist to claim that the idea of bypassing our commitment to the truth is at all easy to swallow. Here too notice what we lose when we try too hard to systematise.

Secondly, typical moral theories are not, in fact, very good at explanation anyway. Very often, they just do not succeed in "articulating and deepening our understanding" of good/ bad or right/ wrong. In many cases moral theory creates problems that did not exist at all before it came along. In other cases the explanation it offers either fails to add anything much to our understanding, or actually darkens counsel.

One case where moral theory creates gratuitous problems is a supposed difficulty about punishment. When someone is punished for a crime, the crime (which is one bad thing) has already happened, and now the punishment (which is another

bad thing) is proposed as a way of dealing with it. But, the objection runs (it is an old one: it goes back at least as far as Plato's *Protagoras*), how can it be good to make two bad things happen instead of just one? The heart of this "problem" about punishment is the theory-driven assumption that all reasons must be future-directed—that wherever there is a reason to act, it is because there is some future state of affairs that can be brought about by so acting.[8] You need to be in the grip of a theory to find this assumption remotely plausible—especially given the difficulties it makes for our understanding of punishment, and of desert in general.

A case where moral theory, at best, adds nothing is the explanation of the wrongness of murder, the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. To any sane ethical outlook, including the ethical outlooks of many off-duty moral theorists, the wrongness of murder is a *paradigm* of wrongness. It is a perfect example of the kind of action that strikes us immediately and perceptually as wrong; we do not know about its wrongness merely by inference from other and more basic sorts of wrongness, but directly. Yet moral theorists have tied themselves in the most remarkable knots about this fundamental question.

Consequentialist or consequentialist-influenced moral theorists, for instance, have tended, in line with their general and characteristic preoccupation with the future, to suggest that the wrongness of murder lies in something like its depriving its victim of a "future like ours" or a "future life of value" (Marquis 2002). Such suggestions seem obviously false. Knowing that some person's future will be radically unlike "ours", or drastically deprived of positive value, falls well short of what we need to know in order to know not only that it is not wrong for that person to die; not only that it is not wrong for someone to kill that person; but also that it is not wrong for us to kill that person.

Virtue ethicists, by contrast, will typically speak of murder as an act of injustice. That does not seem too hard to believe, but (at least on its own) it does fail to tell us *why* murder might be unjust. More difficulties appear when we look at the explanation more closely: as many have commented, justice is a very difficult virtue to give an account of, and it would be nice to have an explanation of the wrongness of murder that does not need to drag us through these dense and thorny philosophical thickets.

Kantians, meanwhile, are likely to speak of murder either as a non-universalisable choice, or as a failure to respect someone as an "end in himself", or both. Both these descriptions too seem right, as far as they go. But appeal to universalisability begs the question as to why murder might not be universalisable; similarly, the contractualist appeal to "the reasonably rejectable" begs the question why murder might be reasonably rejectable. As for failure to respect an end in himself, this description does not explain *why* murder involves such a failure. And

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[8] Strangely enough this assumption that all reasons are future-directed, or at least all reasons relevant to punishment, seems to be present in some of Ross's remarks about punishment (though we might have expected him to have got free of it): "The duty of reward and punishment seems to me to be… derivative. It can be subsumed under the duty of producing as much good as we can" (Ross 1930, 55). More oddly still, Ross argues, in the same discussion, for the more general claim that all reasons of justice are "really" reasons to promote the good—and seeks this conclusion for the sake of systematicity (Ross 1930, 27).

here too the key notions of "respect" and of "ends in themselves" get more complicated the more closely one looks at them; here too it would be nice to be able to explain something that seems relatively simple and basic, the wrongness of murder, without having to make the "detour through theory" that obliges us to thrash out an account of these very difficult and obscure notions. A similar point applies to Finnis-style natural law theories of the wrongness of murder (Finnis 1980). These tell us, in their proprietary vocabulary, that the wrongness of murder consists in a violation of the good of life—thereby raising a host of difficult questions about what violation is, and what the good of life is, that were not in any very obvious way prompted by the original question about what is wrong with murder.

Moreover, there is one very basic and obvious point about murder that all of these moral theories seem to miss. This is that murder is not just a matter of treating someone badly, unjustly, unfairly, or in a way that deprives them of goods. In murder you do not so much take something away from someone as take away the someone; you deprive him, not of this or that good, but *of himself*, by destroying him. This seems to be the most central wrong involved in murder, and most moral theories, remarkably enough, do not even get around to mentioning it.

One moral theory that does mention it—whatever its other faults may be—is the version of natural law theory, which I have defended myself in some of my previous publications (Chappell 1998, Chappell 2002) which takes the wrong of murder to be the violation of the individual good that the human person is: that individual good is violated in the most obvious and radical way—by being destroyed. The problem with this too, it now seems to me, is not that it is wrong, but simply that the specifically moral-theoretical aspects of such a claim do not add anything to its explanatory value. It is undoubtedly explanatory to be told that the wrongness of murder consists in the badness of destroying a person. It is much less clear that we are told anything more, or anything that sheds any interesting or useful light on matters, by the addition that persons are individual goods, and that murder violates such goods.

On this evidence, these theories' explanations are redundant at best, and often worse than useless. Of course, I do not pretend that my wafer-thin selection of evidence—I have looked at just two cases, the rightness of punishment and the wrongness of murder—is sure to be representative of all the evidence there is. Perhaps there are cases where a moral theory's explanation of why something is wrong or right, good or bad, is genuinely illuminating and richly explanatory, in a way that no non-theoretical explanation could possibly be. It's just that, right now, I can't think of any. And even if there are such cases, the explanations that moral theory offers suffer from other faults too beside redundancy. Most notably, they suffer from reductive narrowness, which I say more about in the next section. But first, a few words about prediction.

Prediction: We want our ethical outlook "to explain what will or would be good or bad and right or wrong action, in future or hypothetical situations that we ourselves have not actually met, but which we or others might conceivably meet". Prediction is, of course, just the future or hypothetical correlate of explanation. Still, it is worth considering separately, because thinking about prediction brings out more

clearly some difficulties for moral theory which are already latent in the notion of explanation.

Moral theory's difficulty about prediction is basically a problem of over-ambition. What the moral theorist wants to say is that hypothetical case A *would inevitably be* a case of right action (or wrong action, or good or bad action, or whatever) because case A is just like real case B, which is right action: or again, that cases A and B both fall under moral type T, and every instance of type T is a case of right action.

The problem here is not restricted to the cases, common though they are, where moral theorists expect us to produce clear and definite intuitions about hypothetical cases which are very complicated, or very unlikely, or both. The trouble is completely general, and it begins with the "inevitably". As moral theorists frequently point out, it is a requirement of rationality that the same moral verdict must be returned on two qualitatively indiscernible cases. Of course. The only problem is that there *are* no qualitatively indiscernible cases—not even in everyday life, never mind in trolley or reduplicated human-shield problems. There are only cases which are more or less roughly similar. Judgements about which similarities and which differences matter, and how much, and why, and which exceptions override which similarities, and how often, and why, can certainly be made. But the idea that there is any set of similarity-judgements which is *rationally required* of us is simply a myth. Picking up a similarity-judgement between two cases as the one that matters morally is not a matter of pure reason or value-neutral logic; it is itself an exercise of moral perception. So here the point is not exactly that non-theoretical ethical outlooks do better at prediction than moral theories. Rather, it is that moral theories have an over-ambitious explanatory pretension that they cannot possibly sustain, because it rests on the false assumption that some pattern or other of similarity-judgements is rationally required, and that anyone who fails to judge in line with this pattern is cognitively deficient.[9]

To sum up what this section has shown: typical moral theories fail to fill the deliberative and motivational roles that we want our ethical outlook to play—as the most sophisticated moral theorists themselves agree. And the explanations that moral theory offers of goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, typically do not articulate or deepen our understanding of those notions, as a good ethical outlook does: where moral theory's explanations are not clearly false or frustratingly incomplete, they are generally just unhelpfully obscure. In the final role that we want our ethical outlook to play, prediction of what will be right/ wrong// good/ bad in hypothetical cases, moral theory typically proves over-ambitious: it tries to enforce a uniformity of similarity-judgements that simply cannot be rationally required. In all these respects, typical moral theories fail the tests that they need to pass to count as credible or liveable ethical outlooks.

Why do moral theories typically fail these tests? No doubt there are a number of reasons for that; but one of the most striking and obvious reasons seems to lie in moral theory's attempts to emulate science. I look at these in the next section.

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[9] The question here is how similarity-judgements can be warranted—by pure reason or by moral perception? This is not the question at issue between particularism and generalism, which is (usually) whether similarity-judgements are needed for the formation of moral beliefs (Chappell 2005).

5. Observation in ethics and science

A typical moral theory aims to be as much like a scientific theory as possible, and a good scientific theory certainly aims, at least, at a kind of reductive streamlining: it aims to explain a maximal number of complex phenomena or observations by way of a minimal number of simple principles. Moral theories similarly aim to explain as much as possible by means of as little as possible. Let us explore this analogy.

In science, we ask the question "What difference will it make if this hypothesis is true?", and devise an experiment to see if things *are* different in this respect from other ways they might have been. Or, the other way round: a series of observations are made before any theory to explain them has been advanced, and it becomes clear, over time, that those observations fit some pattern. In ethics too we can start at either end. We can offer a bold general conjecture like the utilitarian's or the Kantian's, then look for cases where such a conjecture can be tested. Or we can start with particular experiences of positive or negative value, and look for some pattern or generalisation that they fit.

Observational data are fallible in science. They have to be, because what scientists have counted as observational data has included contradictions. Scientists can misunderstand what they actually see, or get false readings through carelessness, inattention, or equipment glitches, or home in inadvertently on a misleading subset of all the observations that they might have made. Nonetheless, it is a fundamental part of a working scientist's integrity not to falsify, ignore, or downplay those data when they are inconveniently out of line with what the scientist is looking to prove.[10]

The reason for giving scientific observations a priority in our thinking is their certainty. Some scientific phenomena are better known to us than any scientific theory that explains them. For example, we are more certain that things drop—that unsupported large bodies near the earth's surface tend to move towards the earth's centre—than we are that there is such a thing as gravity. Ask an ordinary person *whether* things drop, and he will happily agree that they do. Ask an ordinary person *why* things drop, and he may be less sure. He may have nothing to say except "They just *do*". Or he may offer you the rudimentary explanation "Because of gravity," and then prove quite unable to say what gravity is. Or again, if he has some scientific training, he may be able to say something illuminating about what gravity is—though he won't be able to give you a complete theory of it, because in our current state of knowledge, nobody can do that. None of this haziness about or ignorance of the scientific theory about gravity undermines our right to say that things drop. For that they do is an obvious and undeniable matter of everyday experience.

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[10] Indeed scientists' respect for the observational data has sometimes led them to the opposite extreme—an undervaluation of the potentialities of theory. "From Halley's and Cassini's point of view, Newton's work [in *Principia Mathematica*] was a tribute to an ongoing collaboration between the best astronomical observers from two Royal Observatories. The theoretical work was secondary, and represented Newton's attempt to 'make sense of' the data. It was the nitty-gritty of practical observation… that impressed the international community" (Jardine 1999, 38-39). Remember here Newton's own famous line *hypotheses non fingo*.

One thesis that I have already argued for[11] is that there are observational data in ethics too: moral perceptions. Just as experimental observations are basic to the scientific method, so moral observations have to be basic to any serious attempt to do ethics in a way even roughly analogous to the methods of science. And as with observations in science, we should give moral perceptions a priority in our ethical thinking because of their high degree of certainty. Some moral phenomena are better known to us than any moral theory that explains them. For example, we are more certain that it is wrong to cause pain—that normally, it is impermissible to hurt creatures that are capable of being hurt—than we are of any moral theory that offers to explain this fact. Ask an ordinary person *whether* it is wrong to cause pain, and he will agree. Ask him *why* it's wrong to cause pain, and he may well be at a loss: even if he is a philosopher, he may find little to say beyond "…Because pain is bad". None of this haziness about the reasons *why* it is wrong to cause pain undermines our right to say that it *is* wrong. The fact that causing pain is wrong is an obvious and undeniable matter of moral experience.

Moral perceptions—like scientific observations—are fallible. They can't be infallible, because the moral perceptions that people claim to have often include contradictions. But moral perceptions, again like the observation-data of science, are rationally sacrosanct. When a scientific observation is repeatedly made, under the most reliable and stable observation-conditions that we can devise, we have no rational right to ignore it. Even if the observation is in fact, objectively speaking, wrong, we would be irrational, subjectively speaking, to reject it. Similarly in ethics: when a moral perception repeatedly occurs, under the most reliable and stable observation-conditions that we can imagine, we have no right to ignore it. Even if the perception is, objectively speaking, wrong, we would be irrational, subjectively speaking, to reject it.[12]

Scientists are, by and large, pretty good at recognising and respecting the rational sacrosanctity of the observational data that their studies are founded on.[13] Scientific theory shows integrity rather than corruption insofar as it shows this respect for the data; and it is interesting rather than boring insofar as it recognises the richness and diversity of the data, rather than trying to do everything by way of one tiny, oversimplified explanatory schema derived from the theory.

Moral theorists, unfortunately, are not always as scrupulous in their respect for the observational data as scientists are. One example of their shortcomings in this respect, compared with scientists, seems to me to be what Peter Singer has to tell us

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[11] Briefly in this paper, section 3; at more length in Chappell (2008).

[12] Anyone who infers that the intuitionism that I am developing is bound to be uncritically conservative should stick with the analogy with science, and ask whether science, which also takes its observation-data to be fallible but rationally sacrosanct, is bound to be uncritically conservative.

[13] A nice example of the scientist's painstaking care over his data: "In making of [these pictures of microscopic objects], I endeavoured (as far as I was able) first to discover the true appearance, and next to make a plain representation of it. This I mention the rather, because of these kind of Objects there is much more difficulty to discover the true shape, than of those visible to the naked eye. And therefore I never began to make any [drawing] before by many examinations in several lights, and in several positions to those lights, I had discover'd the true form." (Robert Hooke, *Micrographia* (1665) f2v, quoted in Jardine, 1999, 99.)

about infanticide (mainly in Chapter Seven, but also in some other parts) of his well-known book *Practical Ethics* (Singer 1993, 89-90):

> A self-conscious being is aware of itself as a distinct entity, with a past and a future… A being aware of itself in this way will be capable of having desires about its own future. For example, a professor of philosophy may hope to write a book demonstrating the objective nature of ethics; a student may look forward to graduation; a child may want to go for a ride in an aeroplane. To take the lives of any of these people, without their consent, is to thwart their desires for the future. Killing a snail or a day-old infant does not thwart any desires of this kind, because snails and new-born infants are incapable of having such desires.

Something very strange, but very distinctive of moral theory as it is too often practised, is going on here. A definition drawn from a moral theory is put to work to contradict what appears pretty clearly to be a datum of moral experience, and quickly declared to have won this struggle and invalidated the datum.

The datum is that it is wrong to kill new-born infants. This is, very likely, the view that almost anyone who embarks on *Practical Ethics* will have when he or she starts reading. My concern here is not to defend the truth of that view (true though it is). Rather, my concern is to point out that this view is at least an *apparent* datum of moral experience. For those of us who are normally socialised, the view that killing new-born babies is wrong is not something that we deduce from a moral theory: it is an immediate moral perception. So even if it turns out—as in principle it could—that Singer is right, and it is after all permissible to kill new-born infants, still there is a very strong presumption in favour of the apparent datum that killing new-born babies is wrong. The strength of that presumption is roughly proportionate to the strength and clarity with which well-disposed moral agents, in favourable epistemic circumstances, are sure of its truth.

A moral theorist needs to do a very great deal of work to overcome this kind of presumption of experiential or perceptual evidence. To overcome it, he needs to do the following (or something of comparable argumentative strength). First, he needs to present us with an at least equally strong moral perception that contradicts our apparent perception that killing new-born infants is wrong. And then, he needs to explain our mistake to us: he needs to explain why it so plainly *looked* to us as if killing new-born infants is wrong, when in fact it isn't. Singer makes no inroads on this philosophical task in the last quotation, where he simply tells us, in effect, that because his theory implies that a being cannot have a right to life unless it can have desires about its own future, there is no provision in his theory for new-born infants to be morally significant. No doubt there isn't; but that is a problem for Singer's theory, not for the claim that new-born infants should not be killed.

That is not to say that Singer makes no attempt at all on the two tasks that I have suggested any theorist in his position needs to try—first to present an alternative moral perception, and second to show us why we have mistakenly got hold of the idea that killing new-born babies is wrong. Singer's alternative moral perception (which is thrown out very much in passing; I find it hard to tell whether he offers it deliberately) is his comparison of new-born infants with snails. This analogy certainly suggests a

new way of looking at small babies. Unfortunately for Singer (and fortunately for small babies), it seems unlikely to catch on: "Babies", people will just retort, "are *not a bit* like snails!"[14] It looks, then, like Singer's alternative moral perception is going to command very little conviction.

Singer's attempt to explain away our moral perception that killing new-born babies is wrong seems equally unconvincing:

> In thinking about this matter [viz., killing babies] we should put aside feelings based on the small, helpless, and—sometimes—cute appearance of human infants. To think that the lives of infants are of special value because infants are small and cute is on a par with thinking that a baby seal, with its soft white fur coat and large round eyes, deserves greater protection than a gorilla... Nor can the helplessness or the innocence of the infant Homo sapiens be [relevant.] If we can put aside these emotionally moving but strictly irrelevant aspects of the killing of a baby we can see that the grounds for not killing persons do not apply to newborn infants. (Singer 1993, 170-171)

Instead of seeing the strength of our perception that it is wrong to kill new-born babies as an excellent reason for questioning or rejecting his moral theory, Singer questions the perception. *Why* would it be wrong to kill new-born babies? Confronted with such a question, many people will no doubt not respond very articulately (perhaps out of shock as much as anything else). And they may well say things like "Babies are so beautiful, so innocent, so helpless". These remarks can be read in the same way as we might read the rather unsystematic remarks that someone might offer if they were asked to explain, say, why pain or suffering or the frustration of innocent desires are bad. Such remarks are not meant as straightforward justifications of A by bringing it under the explanatory concept B, as we justify our confidence that Socrates is mortal by pointing out that he is human, or condemn my removal of someone else's washing from her back-garden clothes-line by pointing out that it is theft. Rather, they are hints and gestures and reminders, intended to help someone else to "cotton on" to a pretty well basic moral perception. (As we might ask: "If you can't see the badness of killing new-born babies, or of pain and suffering, what *can* you see?")

Singer's mistake is to take these hints and gestures and reminders as *more argument of the same sort*, and then point out that, understood that way, it looks like mere sentimentality to observe that new-born babies are beautiful, innocent, or helpless. But when I say that new-born babies should not be killed because they are beautiful, innocent, and helpless, I am not trying to ground their right to life in the conjunctive property beauty-innocence-helplessness, in parallel to Singer's attempt to ground the right to life in the present capacity to have I-desires about the future. Rather, I am stating it as a first principle, based in a moral perception, that new-born babies should not be killed; and I am trying (by talking of beauty, innocence, and helplessness) to nudge you into a position where you will share that moral perception.

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[14] Singer perhaps has in mind a comparison of what he likes to call "levels of sentience". Even seen this way, his comparison seems very far-fetched, as a brief glance at the comparative neurology and physiology of immature humans and (immature? mature?) snails will immediately confirm.

It happens in ethics, sometimes, that there is not much more to say, at least at the level of argument, than "Look and see". It happens in science too: no amount of elegant theoretical argumentation about the nature of an acid is going to help you to use the colour of litmus paper as a test for acidity, if you just won't look at the litmus.

What drives this unscientific willingness to seek what Ross calls a "hastily reached simplicity" by falsifying, ignoring, or downplaying the data of moral perception? One factor is the messiness of the notion of moral perceptions. Part of the point of the experimental method in science is to get a clear boundary between what counts and what does not count as an observation, by *stipulating* that boundary. Experimental observation is different from commonsensical observation (and, correspondingly, less certain than commonsense observation). No such distinction holds in ethics, where the data of moral perception are identical with (and no less certain than) ordinary-life observations. Science can stipulate a special set of experimental observations because science is not about the whole of life. Ethics *is* about the whole of life, and that is why moral perceptions are not, and cannot be, demarcated from the rest of life as clearly as scientific observations.

Another factor is a pressure also found in science: the pressure for results. Moral theorists are supposed to produce a finite and determinate explanatory schema for the infinity and indeterminacy of the world. The task is daunting, and the temptation to cut corners is strong. Perhaps that is why moral theorists often build their theories on one set of moral perceptions, and simply ignore another set of equally well-founded and persuasive moral perceptions.

Moral theorists apparently think they are justified in this kind of selectiveness by a third factor, *the reductive ambition*: the aspiration which they detect in the scientific enterprise, and claim to share, to explain as much as possible by means of as little as possible, to separate out the genuinely explanatory factors and ignore the rest. But if so, what motivates moral theorists here is not really the example of science at all; it is no more than a caricature of scientific practice. Science certainly aims to explain as much *as possible* by means of as little *as possible*, but the italicised words are not idle. As is obvious to anyone who has tried, say, to follow recent work on string theory, even via popularised and dumbed-down accounts of it, "as much simplicity as possible" often means "not much simplicity at all". Likewise in ethics.

> Theory typically uses the assumption that we probably have too many ethical ideas, some of which may well turn out to be mere prejudices. Our major problem now is actually that we have not too many but too few, and we need to cherish as many as we can. (Williams 1985, 117)

There is nothing incoherent or even novel in a scientific research-programme that actually takes us further away from having a neat and unified theory, because the experimental results it produces do not prove or confirm our pre-existing theoretical picture: they ruin it. The honest application of science's experimental methodology can lead to a neat theory; or to a total theoretical mess—there can be, and often is, research where we simply don't know what to make of the results. Scientists, at their best, know better than to pretend that they have the answers when they don't. And it is a fundamental sin, in experimental science, to falsify or ignore inconvenient data. In this sense moral theory goes off the rails not, as some critics think, when there is too

much resemblance between it and the practice of good science, but when there is not enough.

Science and ethics alike involve a commitment to honesty about what is actually observed. Hard scientific thinking needs to go on, to make as much sense as can be made of the masses of observational data that experimental practice brings in day by day. And hard philosophical thinking needs to go on, to make as much sense as can be made of the data of human moral experience. As I've said already, making sense of those data may often involve us in making the sort of moves that are characteristic of the various particular moral theories: a Kantian generalisation may be useful here, a utilitarian criterion may be applicable there. And of course we will often be able to put to work the best insights of the best moral theorists, *despite* their underlying commitment to the reductive enterprise of moral theory. One does not have to share the underlying ambition to vindicate one sort of theory and thereby disprove others in order to find reading the work of a Darwall or a Pettit or a Scanlon or a Hursthouse or a Slote an exhilarating intellectual adventure.

The basic point remains that it is not intellectual progress to claim to find theoretical coherence where there really isn't any. And the price of this schematising zeal is much heavier in ethics than it is in science. For our scientific picture governs only our thinking about nature conceived of a certain way, whereas our ethical outlook governs our thinking about everything.

6. In closing: a little more about love

I said in section 3 that love (of people, or prized possessions, or pet projects, or pets, or…) is central to any adequate and liveable ethical outlook. And in section 4 I stressed the central role of love, within any such ethical outlook, in motivation and deliberation (and hence in explanation and prediction too). As I said there, love is something that can take us "beyond good and evil", beyond the whole idea of morality (though to say that love *transcends* the moral need not be to say that love is *im*moral). It is familiar enough to say, as Jesus says in the Gospels, that in a morally perfect person's thinking there would be no trace of legalism or pharisaism or obsession with the moral code. Perhaps we should take seriously the even more radical thought, that quite possibly a morally perfect person would barely be interested in *morality* as such, as opposed to love, at all.

Certainly, at any rate, I am inclined to think that ethical philosophers, whether or not they are "moral theorists" in my tight sense of that phrase, have not said nearly enough about love. Had ethical philosophy as a whole been less focused on the creation of moral theories, which as I say tend to sideline love, this problem might have been avoided.

Some of what ethical philosophers have said about love has, of course, been deeply perceptive. Some of it, though, has displayed very clearly, in another context, the reductive, streamlining, and systematising tendencies that I have been worrying about in this paper. Why, for instance, should we seek a philosophical theory of love which aims at classifying it as *either* "union", *or* "robust concern", *or* "valuing", *or* an emotion, and in refuting all alternative classifications (see Helm 2005 for a nice

survey of philosophers doing exactly this)? Why should anyone not "in the grip of a theory" expect love to be so neat a phenomenon that it fits into just one of these boxes? Why, having "succeeded" in so classifying it, should we then feel under intellectual pressure to deny or explain away all experiential evidence that suggests that our classification does not fit? (Cp. Williams' question again: by what right does philosophical theory legislate to *these* sentiments, too?) There is an over-schematic neatness about the main philosophical theories of love that serves as a nice illustration of the same reductive tendencies that I have criticised in moral theory. The same compulsive urge to *tidy real life up* is at work here on a slightly different enterprise from that of developing a decision procedure for moral reasoning, but still heading in the same direction.

Any remotely adequate account of love, surely, will need to be a very messy one, even if it restricts its attention to the paradigm but not the only case, that of interpersonal love. Love is, after all, a many-splendoured thing, and a many-sided (and highly ambiguous) thing too. Any adequate account of (interpersonal) love will say, disdaining falsely neat categories, that it is or can be *all four* of the above—and plenty of other things as well. For instance—and this does not always get a look-in, in the philosophers' theories—love can be passion, infatuation, drunkenness, the fetishising of everything the beloved is and does, the very smell of the beloved's hair. More soberly, love can be about wanting to be with the beloved, sharing a sense of humour and other tastes with the beloved, admiring and honouring and even being in awe of the beloved, creating a new space of private jokes and allusions and back-references with him/ her, having a special place in your future plans, present expectations, and past memories for him/ her. It can be wishing the beloved well, or being unable to avoid constantly thinking about the beloved; it can be pain at the beloved's absence, jealousy at his/ her interest in other people, sheepishness at realising the unfoundedness and unfairness of this jealousy; it can be associating everything you see with the beloved (Plato *Phaedo* 73d); it can be the simple animal security-wishes for sex, physical contact, company, and someone else's approval. And much, much else besides.

When we see that love is this messy we won't be tempted to ask the rather strange question, which Helm 2005 does a nice job of introducing and setting in context, what *justifies* love. There are aspects or parts of love that admit this question, sure. But there are other aspects, and I think more of them, with respect to which the question simply doesn't apply. Infatuations, for example, have causes, not justifications. With other aspects, e.g. admiration or the original decision to get together with the beloved in the first place, there will no doubt have been a justification at some stage. Yet at later times, that justification may well no longer apply. And this is not necessarily because the beloved is now less lovable than before. It can also be because love, in some of its forms, is something that seeks to move beyond the very question of justification. No one asks me to justify my being related to my father or my uncle or my brother. I just *am* related to them; these relations are simply given.[15] Love, both romantic and friendship love, seeks that kind of given

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[15] "The duty that a child has to honour its parents, for instance: it might plausibly be claimed that this duty rests on the single basic duty of gratitude" (McNaughton 1996, 438). Such a claim seems rather *im*plausible to me. In any psychologically realistic account, the basis of the child's duty to its parents is going to be both multiform and (in the sense I identify in the main text) a simple given.

naturalness that family-relations have, too: it too seeks to become a mere fact about how things are, one that stands beyond the challenge of justification. (That is one reason why it is usually already a sign of the breakdown or crumbling of a relationship, marital or friendship, when the question of justification comes back into view.)

Love is neither neat nor tidy. So to say, as I said before, that love is what, most of the time, motivates most of us who are neither complete bastards, nor distracted by secondary concerns such as "what other people will think"—to say this is not to say anything very neat or tidy, either. But that too is as it should be. The whole point about the notion of an ethical outlook that I have developed here, as an alternative to the distorting lens of theory, is not its tidiness, but its realism (Williams 1995a, 183):

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> We do not have to think that what is principally wrong with our ethical life and our understanding of it is that they are insufficiently rational; they may be, for instance, insufficiently honest.[16]

The Open University
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, England MK7 6AA
t.chappell@open.ac.uk

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