

CONTINGENCY AND NECESSITY: HUMAN AGENCY IN MUSIL'S *THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES*

I. INTRODUCTION

It has often been seen as a crucial feature of modernity that the old chains of necessity—religious, political, social, or otherwise—have been shaken off and human beings have been released into a radical form of freedom. This kind of freedom has both a positive and a negative side: on the one hand, it may seem to allow us to make a kind of individual decision and to act according to our own will. On the other hand, it also brings with it the dire difficulty of dealing with what we can call the problem of contingency: how to decide what to do if it is equally open to us to perform a certain action as well as its opposite, if there is no necessity, no sufficient reason that tells us to do the one but not the other? In this paper, I argue that this problem of contingency has a prominent place in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. I do not claim that Musil's novel suggests any definite answers, but rather that it presents and explores different strategies for dealing with contingency.

Given the limits of this paper, I will not be able to give an exhaustive account of this problem in Musil's novel; a lot of the important ethical implications will have to be left out, as, for example, the relation of this problem to any form of violence. The paper will start by clarifying the notion of contingency as it is taken up in the novel and its connection to what Musil calls the *sense of possibility*. Subsequently, I will show how Kakania, the "servants" and citizens of this state, deal with contingency. The Parallel Campaign will be argued to be one big attempt to ground this state in some kind of necessity. We will then move on to Ulrich's way of dealing with contingency: with Ulrich, Musil introduces the thought experiment of assuming a person who is fully aware of the challenges that contingency raises for human agency and who attempts to face up to

them. Finally, I will contrast Ulrich's way of dealing with contingency with the way of some of the other characters in the novel.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS: CONTINGENCY AND THE SENSE OF POSSIBILITY

Let me first clarify the notion of contingency at work in this paper somewhat further, which will help us in our analysis of the different contingent phenomena sketched in the novel. I want to understand contingency here as the opposite of necessity¹—so as a first pass we can understand it positively with the help of notions like chance, indeterminacy, or possibility.

In *The Man Without Qualities*, necessity can be found in three different spheres:² there is (1) logical necessity—Ulrich's ideas for new ways of living our lives are based on his attempts to follow only logical necessity; (2) causal necessity—referred to in the discussions of the laws of nature;³ and, most importantly for the great majority of citizens, (3) necessity within the sphere of politics or society. The rules and regularities of society are explicitly understood as a form of necessity by certain figures of this novel; for example, Bonadea considers the changes of fashion as following a form of necessity,⁴ and initially the regulations of the military have the same status for Stumm von Bordwehr.

This last form of necessity—political or social—is put into doubt by what Musil calls the “sense of possibility,” which takes this alleged necessity as just one possibility among others. We get a famous account of this sense right at the start of the book. Chapter 4, entitled “If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility,” introduces the *sense of possibility* in the second paragraph:

Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not. The consequences of so creative a disposition can be remarkable, and may, regrettably, often make what people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible, or, also, make both a matter of indifference. Such possibilists are

said to inhabit a more delicate medium [*Gespinst*], a hazy medium of mist, fantasy, daydreams, and the subjunctive mood. Children who show this tendency are dealt with firmly and warned that such persons are cranks, dreamers, weaklings, know-it-alls, or troublemakers.

Such fools are also called idealists by those who wish to praise them. But all this clearly applies only to their weak subspecies, those who cannot comprehend reality or who, in their melancholic condition, avoid it. These are people in whom the lack of a sense of reality is a real deficiency. But the possible includes not only the fantasies of people with weak nerves, but also the as yet unawakened intentions of God. A possible experience or truth is not the same as an actual experience or truth minus its "reality value" but has—according to its partisans, at least—something quite divine about it, a fire, a soaring, a readiness to build and a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something yet to be invented. [...]

But such a man is far from being a simple proposition. Since his ideas, to the extent that they are not idle fantasies, are nothing but realities yet unborn, he, too, naturally has a sense of reality; but it is a sense of *possible reality*, and arrives at its goal much more slowly than most people's sense of their *real possibilities*. He wants the forest, as it were, and the others the trees, and forest is hard to define, while trees represent so many cords of wood of a definable quality.⁵

The sense of possibility is introduced first as a certain distance from reality: it allows a person who possesses it to understand that the fact that one thing happens does not imply that it happens with necessity, either metaphysical or epistemic. Rather, it is possible that something else might happen. This focus on what is possible can be a real deficit, if it is indeed a mere escape from reality. But it may equally well be a deliberate step of gaining some distance from reality, if reality is itself understood as "a project, something yet to be invented." Such a positive sense of possibility may in turn be understood in two ways: it can be a sense of the possibilities which are inherent, if undeveloped, in what is real; on the other hand it can be a sense that reality as a whole could perfectly well be different. The first conception of possibility captures what has been established in philosophical discourse, at least since Aristotle, as potentiality: such potentialities are dependent on what there is, on what is actual. People focusing on them have a sense for "real possibilities." By contrast, the second conception applies to people with a sense of possible realities, who toy with completely new kinds of reality, in which previously unthought possibilities may have a place. This is the *sense of possibility* in its genuine sense, which the man without qualities possesses.

The man with a sense of the real possibilities relies on a fixed system of given possibilities and can thus care for the individual trees. The man with a sense of the possible realities, on the other hand, without any given fixed system, searches for the forest; he has an eye for the whole. But in order to think about creating completely new realities, what is now seen as real in society must be understood as what could equally well not be real, as contingent. So the true *sense of possibility*, the sense of possible realities, has to understand what is happening in the world as contingent, which, by contrast, is not required of the sense of real possibility.

Let us now look at the notion of contingency itself. Musil employs different notions of contingency, depending on whether we are dealing with an individual event, or the interconnection of different events. If we look at an individual event, not only is what happens contingent—it could equally well not have happened—but so also is the way in which it happens.⁶ However, several of these individual events that are contingent in themselves could still, taken together as a series, follow some regularity and thus show some predictability—the regularity of probability, which can be expressed in the form of statistics. Right at the very beginning of the book, in the first chapter, some statistics about the numbers of car accidents are introduced in order to calm down the lady witnessing a car accident: while it is not necessary that this car accident, then and there, needed to happen, such and such a number of accidents “have to happen” according to the statistics. Thus the individual, contingent event is integrated into the regularity of yearly statistics and seems to acquire some form of “necessity.” This form of necessity, which is not fully graspable by the individual citizen but reflected in some piece of statistics, is a constant theme of the book.⁷

However, even if some connections of events seem to show some regularity, on a yet more general level (as is the level of a political system of a state) the connection of different statistically regular series of events may nevertheless be contingent. Musil is not so much interested in the question whether a system as a whole is indeed metaphysically contingent per se—though for the most important example of the novel, the state Kakania, we are not given any reason to assume an underlying metaphysical necessity—as in whether it is *perceived* as metaphysically contingent, which is what affects human agency. For example, a state as a whole can be perceived as contingent thanks to its being excessively complex, as we will see when dealing with Kakania below.

Finally, we find a form of contingency when we look at the role individual human beings play within an economic, political, or social system: while the fulfillment of a certain function within a system may be necessary, in many cases the individual person fulfilling this task can be arbitrarily exchanged.⁸

Contingency has often (but not always) been seen as the basis for the freedom required for actions: according to this position, human beings can only be free agents if not everything takes place necessarily, but at least some things are contingent. This is the positive side of contingency. However, understanding oneself as living in a world of mere contingencies, where everything, or most things, that take place could equally well not take place, or take place in a different way, seems to leave human agents without much orientation for how to act: if everything we do could equally well not be done or done in a different way, how are we to decide what to do? This feeling of contingency is hard to cope with, and it either prevents normal agency—it leads to the inability of or impediment to normal agency—or it is unconsciously compensated by creating new forms of necessity according to which we act.

In the following, we will focus on Musil's discussion of how we human beings can act in face of a contingent world. We will not develop the notion of consistency at work in the novel any further, but rather concentrate on the practical question of how contingency is dealt with by the characters in the novel.

III. DEALING WITH CONTINGENCY

Let us move on to analyze some of the strategies for dealing with the problem of contingency that Musil discusses with the help of different characters of his novel. On a general level we can say that most of the figures we encounter try to deal with the contingency they experience by constructing some necessary connections either vertically or horizontally. In talking of vertical connections I have in mind that individual events or rules are tied to one underlying principle.⁹ Horizontal connections, by contrast, are a matter of individual events being connected with each other in such a way that their connection now seems necessary.

The people in the novel—with the crucial exception of Ulrich—are not aware that reality itself does not come well furnished with necessity,

but rather that it is they themselves who establish such seemingly necessary connections. These constructions are meant to help them orient themselves in a reality that has become excessively complex. They allow their creators to feel embedded in a meaningful order—an order that seems comprehensible and gives its creator the feeling of having a place in a clearly structured world.

As in Plato's *Republic*, Musil shows the effects of the topic investigated—here the problem of contingency—for a whole state as well as for an individual soul, in order to see its influence on human agency. But in contrast to Plato's *Republic*, we will not see a parallel in each case. Rather, the most important individual soul Musil discusses, Ulrich, is perceived by his surrounding as attempting to destroy the systems of order that the state has set up by questioning their very basis. I will first look at how the people of Kakania deal with contingency before I move on to Ulrich.

1. Kakania's Muddling Through

Kakania is a paradigmatic example of how a political system that has become too complex to be understood can finally appear as contingent. If the degree of complexity is too high, people from their concrete epistemic point of view cannot understand how the system is set up nor how it works, and accordingly its very existence as well as the way it works can seem contingent (and there is no reason to assume that there is some underlying metaphysical necessity that is simply hidden). Kakania is such an excessively complex political system, which is in no way understandable for the individual citizens, even though it pervades all their doings. In order to let this incomprehensibility not destabilize their agency, most citizens simply take the activities of this state as nonexistent. If, through some accident, one is confronted with the incomprehensible connections and doings that form the state of Kakania—as Ulrich is when he defends a drunken worker and suddenly finds himself in the hands of the police—panic seems the most natural reaction. While individual citizens understand parts of the whole state system of Kakania—as, for example, Tuzzi understands the subsystem of diplomacy—they are as helpless as their fellow citizens when it comes to other parts of the system. And it is not clear how the different subsystems are connected.

To its citizens the incomprehensible system of Kakania attempts to seem necessary in its existence as well as in its workings. Any appearance of arbitrariness has to be avoided as it could support the breaking apart of

this state in line with the different nationalities that compose it (they claim a form of necessity for their existence which a state composed of people of many different nationalities would not ordinarily provide). Accordingly, once Ulrich has been arrested by the police, he cannot simply be released again with an acknowledgement that his arrest has been a mistake, as this would mean that the arrest has been an arbitrary act. It is only Ulrich's relationship to the influential Count Leinsdorf which allows the police to let him go, since this relationship can be interpreted as a different and higher form of (social) necessity.

Within Kakania, cases where it seems unclear how to deal with them are not simply decided according to one's best conscience—one cannot permit that element of arbitrariness. Rather, these cases are sent up to the next higher official or authority. The idea is that a seemingly exceptional case that defies the order of the state system will thereby become integrated into this very order—either because the next higher authority has more power (not necessarily more insight), or because something happens on the way to this higher authority that determines what to do with this case (a second instance of chance can eliminate the first instance and thus protect the system from any arbitrariness and contingency).

In spite of these efforts, the novel presents the citizens of Kakania as having lost their belief in the necessary existence and working of their state. And the emperor has lost his ability to serve as a unifying principle for the different nations. It is no coincidence that in this state, which is full of contradictions and confusing national problems, questions of identity arise as pressing problems—something which is mirrored in Ulrich's proclaimed lack of qualities. Nationalism seems to be one answer to these questions,¹⁰ as it seems to offer a new, unconditional feeling of community and orientation,¹¹ and the idea of a nation seems to give each individual some form of necessary identity. Within Kakania such nationalisms have the effect that everything is done only provisionally, since the continuous duty of balancing the demands of all the different nationalities prevents the ruling powers from taking any real decision.¹² In this permanent provisional state there is neither a unified people of Kakania—something that Count Leinsdorf attempts to create—nor are there nation states as the individual nationalities envision it. All that is thus left is to muddle through, *Fortwursteln*. While the system of Kakania, in its failed attempt to give the impression of being necessary, is kept going by the civil servants,¹³ the

citizens are left with the vague feeling that the system as a whole may be as contingent as their position in it.

What is missing is a principle that might allow for integrating the different subsystems as well as all its citizens, something that could bestow on their complex relationships a “natural” and thus noncontingent meaning—and this is what the initiators of the Parallel Campaign are looking for.

2. *The Parallel Campaign*

The Parallel Campaign is meant to justify the state of Kakania in the symbolic form of the emperor. The participants of the Parallel Campaign are trying to find some kind of basis for the state that would demonstrate its existence to be necessary, some perceived metaphysical necessity.

This campaign comes into existence thanks to the news that Prussia is going to have a big festival in 1918 to celebrate the thirty-year jubilee of its emperor. If the always distrustfully regarded big brother wants to show its might, then Austria, whose emperor will be able to celebrate many more years of being on the throne in 1918, will have to react to this (and hence a *parallel* campaign is set up). A great idea, of importance for the whole world, needs to be found in order that Austria can find its own true self again. However, this great idea that is meant to justify the existence of Kakania, turns out to be very hard to find—in spite of a plurality of committees, meetings, and receptions.

From the very beginning it is clear to Diotima that this unifying and grounding principle is the human spirit (*der Geist*), and since human spirit has its origin obviously in Austria, the existence of Austria is credited with some necessity; Austria can be seen as “a model for the nations of the world” (chapter 57, 246). However, the slow-witted ones would like this principle to be more concrete—they would like to have the concept of spirit to be “fleshed out with a particular content”—and thus the participants of the Parallel Campaign are looking for a content of that kind, a concrete idea that makes the connection between human spirit and Austria, and thus the idea of a Global Austria obvious.¹⁴ But, a time of great ideas does not seem to lend itself to admitting a greatest one, and there seems not even to be an “orderly” connection between the great ideas—so Diotima assembles the most important thinkers and writers in her salon in order to find a system connecting these different ideas and to determine the greatest among them.

The fierce search for such an idea changes gradually into frustration—until Count Leinsdorf finally announces the slogan “Action.” This empty slogan—which allegedly transforms into practical action the intellectual attempts that so far have been entirely without success—at first seems to satisfy. Although nobody knows what kinds of actions are meant and which aims they are supposed to support, the slogan manages to stir up new enthusiasm for the Parallel Campaign. However, the only action that is performed at Diotima’s second big reception is performed by people who in fact do not belong to the Parallel Campaign.

Finally, in the last few chapters the Parallel Campaign does find an aim—even if finding this aim happens as a matter of chance, rather than as a matter of the hard thinking of its members: the world peace conference, which had already been mentioned as a possible aim at the beginning of the campaign. Hence, the principle that is meant to justify the existence of Kakania and thus to give it some necessity owes its own existence to chance; it thus undermines itself.

3. *How Ulrich Deals with Contingency*

Ulrich is introduced as the only figure in the novel who is fully aware of the contingency of our actions and conditions, as well as of the possibilities and the problems that it implies for us as agents. Ulrich understands that the contingency of the construction of our world allows us to have the freedom not to be bound by any human situation; but at the same time it also means “never knowing what one wants to be bound by” (chapter 63, 285).

He even sees the relationship we have to ourselves, to our own characteristics and qualities, as contingent. Accordingly, he understands himself as a man without qualities. While other figures in the novel attempt to find some sufficient reason or necessity for what they do, Ulrich is the only person who is happy to undermine the very principle of sufficient reason according to which the others work—by understanding it as the principle of *insufficient* reason: it seems this is what we in fact go by in this arbitrary world.

Against the reality of the society in which he lives, Ulrich permanently comes up with other possible realities. He doubts the necessity of the whole way in which society is set up—the necessity of individual subsystems, as, for instance, the conventional system of moral values,¹⁵ as well as the social system as a whole.

Understanding himself as not bound, but rather *free from* the norms of his time and society, he attempts to give himself his own rules—he tries to determine what he is *free to* do. The rules he attempts to establish are not derived from any nature or essence—as the possibilities inherent in what is real would be perceived by somebody who has a sense for real possibilities. Rather, these rules are meant to be completely freely created, as a new possible reality.

The only necessity Ulrich acknowledges is logical necessity: the necessity that connects a thought and its implications. While Diotima wants necessity to be tied to a certain content (to a certain truth about the soul, for example), for Ulrich necessity is reduced to the mere formal system of inferences. He rejects general duties within society, as he does not think they possess any necessity. If he lives according to the general accepted norms of morality nevertheless, this is because he cannot find a way of consistently realizing his ideas about other possible realities.

Ulrich's attempts to live by self-given norms fail continuously, as can be seen, for example, with his considerations of how to furnish his house in chapter 5. These attempts fail, because by trying to integrate as many aspects of reality as possible into his set of rules, reality becomes too complex to handle: Ulrich begins by trying to take into account reflections of architects, reformers, and art journals on how to live, feeling that he can chose any style from the Assyrians to cubism, and starting to build his own furniture, which just opens up even more possibilities, but he finally leaves the furnishing of his house simply to his suppliers.¹⁶

An oversupply of possibilities is also what Ulrich faces on a more basic level—with respect to his own qualities. He has the disposition to display a variety of qualities, drawing, so to speak, from a pool of many different ones. Actualizing one or another of these qualities seems to be arbitrary, as if independent of him. What is specific for Ulrich is only his disposition to have such an impersonal relationship to his own qualities. And the qualities he displays in a certain situation are not necessarily compatible with the qualities he shows in other situations: Ulrich experiences himself variously as tall and broad-shouldered, like a sailing ship, or as slender and soft, like a jellyfish;¹⁷ in his eyes there are no features that stay the same throughout to characterize him.

As these qualities are all equally close to (or distant from) him, he has to choose from them contingently. Accordingly, he does not feel any

personal connection to his qualities, but rather looks at them as he might look at any possible qualities that human beings might have; they are “no more intimately bound up with him than with anyone else who also happen[s] to possess them” (chapter 39, 157). Thus the phenomenon of alienation prevalent in modernity is transferred to Ulrich’s relation to himself, and accordingly he often seems a stranger to himself.

Furthermore, the vast number of qualities he has at his disposal opens up too many possibilities for Ulrich to be able to give his life any clear shape. Most of the time he simply drifts or takes his life as an experiment that is not particularly serious. Sometimes this results in an inhibition or inability to act; at other times he just falls back into conventional behaviour—as, for instance, when Agathe forges the testament of their father and he reproaches her by the standards of conventional moral norms in which he himself does not believe. Thus, Ulrich “leads the life of another man” (chapter 40, 169); his thinking and his acting often contradict each other. Alternatively, he simply jumps to an action without this being based on any reflection and thus without it having any real reason. In these situations it is not particularly important which action he performs, but only that he performs some action or other.¹⁸

Ulrich’s awareness of the contingency of our existence and actions grants him, as a positive effect, freedom from conventional expectations of society. However, Ulrich also has to compensate for this, otherwise paralyzing, awareness in order to be able to go on living, to make decisions, and to act with reasons. We see Ulrich display three different ways of dealing with contingency, all of which involve establishing some necessary connections:

(1) While Ulrich doubts any necessary connection between the qualities a person possesses and the person possessing them, he recognizes that there can be some necessity in the way these qualities are connected with each other. Thus while Ulrich dissolves necessary vertical connections—a grounding in a more fundamental principle, as accidents might be grounded in a substantial essence—he accepts the possibility of a necessary horizontal connection: “he was able to say of his life that everything in it had fulfilled itself as if it belonged together more than it belonged to him” (chapter 39).

(2) Ulrich grounds his own actions in some indeterminate higher aim: he feels “on the way” (even if he is not clear which way this might

be and where it might lead) and as “a tool for an important aim” (even if it is unclear which aim this might be; chapter 40). Considering himself thus specially selected, Ulrich can feel integrated into a meaningful framework and whole that grants some security. However, while Ulrich wants to ground his actions in an aim, a *telos*, he leaves this *telos* completely undetermined. We will see below that grounding one’s action in a *telos* is the most common method of establishing necessity among the other characters of the novel. But in contrast to Ulrich, the other characters try to determine the higher principle which grounds their actions and they also see the whole order of society as in some way connected with some such principle, some alleged eternal truth.

(3) Ulrich establishes some necessity on a general level, even if it is arbitrary which individual fulfils a certain function within this general structure. An example where this way of dealing with contingency becomes especially clear is Ulrich’s relationships to his girlfriends:¹⁹ his relation to his mistresses in the first book is merely determined by accidents; there is no necessity in his love for an individual human being—nothing, which could be understood as fate or some purpose for life. In order not to be continuously faced with contingency, Ulrich integrates his mistresses into different general systems; he understands them as instances of more general ideas.

The first woman we see at Ulrich’s side in the novel is Leontine, a chanteuse in a cabaret, tall, curvaceously slender, voracious. “Once a man has put his house in order it is time to go courting. Ulrich’s girlfriend in those days was a chanteuse in a small cabaret who went by the name of Leontine”—that’s how the sixth chapter of the novel, which deals with Leontine, starts. It seems as if Ulrich simply follows the convention that after having acquired a house one goes courting, without actually falling in love with some particular woman. We learn that he has been struck by Leontine’s eyes, her regular face, and her songs full of feeling, but she is not of interest to Ulrich as the individual person she is. Rather, she reminds him immediately “of old photographs or engravings of dated beauties.” He groups her with those beauties that are not the period’s taste, renames her, and now “desires to possess her, as he might have wanted to possess a luxurious lion-skin rug” (chapter 6, 17).

How Ulrich and Leontine separate we do not know. She is an episode in his life, replaced simply by another: in the next chapter Bonadea, who

accidentally enters his life, becomes his new mistress. Both women, Leontine and Bonadea, have become part of Ulrich's life due to arbitrary circumstances.²⁰ For Ulrich, the individual persons are interchangeable; it is only in their function as his mistress that they have any importance for him. In both cases we find two kinds of strategies in order to deal with the contingency at work: he renames them and connects them to ancient goddesses. In the case of Leontine the renaming follows her own name, and just makes the animal contained in the name (Leona) more obvious, whereas with Bonadea there does not seem to be a *fundamentum in nomine*, and indeed we never actually learn her real name. Both mistresses are connected with ancient goddesses:²¹ Leontina is compared to Juno, the voracious chanteuse to the grand goddess of women and marriage. Of the second mistress, we only learn her "divine name": Bonadea, the good goddess, for whom chastity and sexual excess are closely related. This act of renaming and connecting them with ancient goddesses raises his girlfriends to a more general level, while their individuality loses its importance.

In stark contrast to the contingency of his relationships to women in the first book is Ulrich's relationship to his sister in the second book. With her he has found a person who is a real soul-mate, a kindred spirit,²² so that his relationship to her seems to be grounded in some necessity; and this necessity is not merely biological (in that he is her brother). It is precisely a relationship that society dismisses as impossible, a love relationship between siblings, that bestows some necessity on his life. Living together with Agathe allows Ulrich for the first time to live one of his so far only theoretical ideas, and a possible reality seems to become a real possibility.

4. *How Other Selected Figures Deal with Contingency*

Ulrich's way of dealing with contingency is contrasted with and complemented by those of some of the other main characters in the novel. Bonadea and Arnheim, for instance, are examples of people who have set up their life in a way that decidedly attempts to avoid any disturbances stemming from contingency. Bonadea avoids becoming aware of any problem of contingency by having her life structured according to a clear duality: on the one hand there is her family, and a certain bourgeois ideal of life grounding this domain. Her beloved two sons and her much disliked husband are the fixed personages of this sphere. On the other hand,

there is her strong sensual excitement and the domain of relationships that it leads her into. As she satisfies this sensual excitement with changing and arbitrary people this may seem to expose her to the phenomenon of contingency. However, the end of such affairs comes about either through some “natural” detachment—“given her temperament, she had hitherto never lost her lovers except as one mislays something and forgets if attracted to something new”—or with a suddenness that allows her to understand it as the operation of some higher power.²³ The delicate balance between the two spheres that constitute her life is, however, destabilized by Ulrich’s “quiet resistance.” For the first time Bonadea feels abandoned, a feeling that had previously been prevented by the way in which her affairs had ended and by the stability of her family life. As a reaction, Bonadea tries to find a more secure balance between the two spheres of her life—by making Ulrich her permanent lover and thus by binding also the second sphere to one permanent individual.

Arnheim is probably the figure least affected by the problem of contingency in the novel, and thus a natural opposite to Ulrich. While Ulrich has a sense of possible realities, Arnheim has a sense of real possibilities, which bring with them a certain necessity—it is necessary that a certain reality should contain this set of possibilities and no others (otherwise it would be a different reality).²⁴ Thanks to his family and personal gifts Arnheim holds an extraordinary position within society and possesses a strong sense of his own self, which for him grounds his thinking and acting.

Two further characteristics allow him to avoid any real experience of contingency: the fact that he is well read in many different fields and can relate them to each other allows him to see such different realms as economy, the arts, politics, mysticism, etc. as intimately connected and thus as a meaningful whole.²⁵ And whatever he cannot grasp, he devalues as unimportant.²⁶ It is no surprise that he takes Goethe as a paradigm for himself, the well-rounded universalist for whom freedom is not tied to radical contingency but to autonomy.

His tendency to give all his actions generality (which allows him to avoid the contingency an individual action may possess) seems to come in conflict with the love he develops for Diotima, which may be perceived as “betraying a cause for a personal weakness” (chapter 105). However, as their love is understood by both as a meeting of minds, it also can be seen as presenting some necessity for Arnheim.

Diotima and Walter are less immune to the phenomena of contingency and so feel some unease about it. In contrast to Ulrich, Diotima understands her own life as a necessary unfolding or ascent, as continuously climbing up a stairway.²⁷ However, once involved in the Parallel Campaign, she realizes that the great ideas that seem to be the basic principles of states, societies, and everything she thinks of as good and right do not seem to stand in any intelligible relationship to each other; they present her suddenly with many “eternal truths” that even contradict each other. And there is no single idea capable of grounding all the others. Both Diotima as well as Walter blame the current times as the reason for the lack of necessity they experience in the world.²⁸

Clarisse, finally, who often seems at the brink of madness, at times possesses the same impersonal relationship to herself as Ulrich.²⁹ Like Ulrich, she does not believe in any of the necessities that society claims; she draws connections nobody else does, and she asks for more consistency in our actions.³⁰ While she does not herself understand the implications of such an impersonal notion of the self, she eagerly takes up Ulrich’s suggestions, and tries to push his ideas further, as when she demands that Ulrich should free Moosbrugger, or that the Parallel Campaign should be devoted to a Nietzsche or Ulrich year.

The way she grounds her life and gives it meaning is by attaching herself to some other human being of great importance: first to Walter, in whose genius she originally believes, and, after it has turned out that Walter will not produce anything of real genius, to Ulrich, whom she takes to be a kind of redeemer, a devil or a god.

IV. CONCLUSION

I have tried to give an account of Musil’s treatment of the problem of contingency, of his discussion of different ways in which individual people as well as a whole state attempt to deal with contingency. The figure of Ulrich allows Musil to radicalize the problem by showing what happens if the problem of contingency is transferred even to the relationship one has to one’s own self—the ultimate outcome of which leads to self-alienation. If this radical contingency is not softened in any way, as we see it at times being the case with Ulrich, then it will lead either (1) to

the impossibility of any action, or (2) to what from the outside looks simply like acting according to the dominant conventions, or (3) to arbitrary actions for which no reason can be given.

The alternative is that the radical contingency is weakened by finding some form of grounding or necessity. This can be done either (1) by tying individual acts back to a basic principle, or (2) by seeing some necessity in the connection of the different individual contingent acts; or (3) by seeing some necessity at a general level, even if at the individual level it is arbitrary who or what exactly fills out this general structure.

Finally, with the relationship of Ulrich and Agathe, Musil also puts forward the possibility of some natural necessity, which seems to have no place in our modern times any more.

Part of Musil's insight with regard to the problem of contingency seems to be that the question how individuals are to make sense of their actions or their lives in such a way as does not prevent them from acting is best discussed in a novel, since discussing it in general philosophical terms necessarily abstracts from the individuality of the circumstances and persons. Whether we can indeed integrate this individuality into a meaningful basis for our actions is, however, exactly what the problem of contingency poses as a challenge.³¹

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NOTES

1. If we capture modality in terms of possible worlds, then what is (logically or metaphysically) necessary is what is true in all possible worlds; what is contingent is true in some but not all possible worlds; and what is impossible is what is false in all possible worlds. What is contingent can not only be seen as the opposite to what is necessary ($\Box p$), but also as the opposite to what is impossible ($\Box \neg p$); cf., for example, the article "Kontingenzt" in: J. Ritter, K. Gründer and G. Gabriel, eds., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1971–2007. I will not deal with this other opposition, impossibility, here, since this opposition is less important for the problem of human agency.

2. These different spheres do not always fit exactly the division into different kinds of necessity which we find in contemporary debates. Especially the division between epistemic and metaphysical necessity is not one that can always clearly be drawn in the novel.

What is important in the novel is the “perceived metaphysical necessity,” not metaphysical necessity *per se*.

3. Cf. Ulrich’s comparison between natural laws and statistical regularities, *The Man Without Qualities (MWQ)*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike, London: Picador 1995, chapter 103. All further references are to this edition.

4. “When Bonadea studied her appearance in a new dress in her mirror, she could never have imagined a time to come when leg-of-mutton sleeves, little curls framing the forehead, and long bell-shaped skirts would be replaced by knee-length skirts and hair cut like a boy’s. Nor would she have argued against it; her brain was simply incapable of imagining such a possibility.” *MWQ*, chapter 109, 572.

5. 11–12, my italics.

6. Cf. the beginning of the quotation above.

7. It can, for example, be found in Ulrich’s reflections about the “law of large numbers,” see chapter 103, 532.

8. Cf. Musil’s account of a world of qualities without man in chapter 39, and Ulrich’s relationship to women as characterized below.

9. This principle could be some *telos*, which is what the members of the Parallel Campaign are looking for, or divine predestination, as Count Leinsdorf wants to claim for his self-understanding as an aristocrat.

10. “There are so many inexplicable things in life, but one loses sight of them when singing the national anthem.” Chapter 109, 577.

11. As can be seen, for example, with the proto-fascist group around Hans Sepp.

12. Cf. chapter 108.

13. Thus a “bureaucratic necessity” is all that is left.

14. Chapter 57, 246.

15. Cf. chapter 114; against the conventional morality Ulrich attempts to come up with a moral system that possesses more internal consistency.

16. Chapter 5, 16.

17. Chapter 40, 169.

18. Cf. chapter 39, 157.

19. Since love is a feeling that is often involved in our attempts to give our life meaning, it seems to be a particularly interesting field for studying the effects that awareness of contingency can have on it.

20. Ulrich’s relationship to Gerda, Clarissa, and Diotima are also erotically coloured; however, since they are not his girlfriends, no mechanism of compensation does seem to be necessary.

21. Cf. also Ulrich’s renaming of his cousin as Diotima.

22. This is also expressed by the fact that right at the beginning, when they first meet again after many years, both have independently decided to wear some clown pajamas.

23. Chapter 33, 133.

24. Thus for Arnheim nothing that is not rational ever happens in world history. For him the fact that the first session of the great patriotic campaign could take place shows already its “profound necessity” (chapter 43).

25. Cf. chapter 44: “the world was in order as soon as Arnheim had given it his due consideration,” and also chapter 48 and 86.

26. Cf. chapter 86.

27. Chapter 69, 313.

28. Cf. chapters 17 and 24.

29. Cf. chapter 82.

30. Book II, chapter 7. And, like Ulrich, Clarisse is convinced to play some important role in life, cf. chapters 38 and 97.

31. I would like to thank Justine Broackes, Michael della Rocca, and Wolfgang Sattler for their comments on this paper. A first version profited very much from Ulrich Bergmann's criticism and encouragement.