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The Ethical Implications of Simone Weil's Notion of Reading

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Abstract

In this thesis I develop the ethical implications inherent in a short paper written by Simone Weil, entitled "Essay on the Notion of Reading," with a view to exploring possible ways in which we are able to incorporate the unconditional value of each and every human being into our everyday apprehension of the world. Mindful of the fact that conceptions of unconditional value tend to be associated with religious belief, I make a distinction between religious theory and practical religious engagement, privileging the latter, in order to show common ground between theistic and nontheistic ways of understanding unconditional value. My focus is on practical ethics, and the relationship between our direct and immediate ethical responses and their conceptualisation plays an important part in my thesis, in tandem with an important distinction between absolute and relative forms of evaluation. The emphasis I place on the relationship between direct responses and their conceptualisation is developed in the light of Wittgensteinian philosophical insights, both of Wittgenstein's own and those of certain other philosophers who employ versions of his method. I also draw on both Platonist and Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, with particular attention to the relationship between our natural ethical responses and the terminology in which they find expression.

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Introduction

The driving force behind this thesis is a concern I share with Raimond Gaita; our frequent failure to extend our moral universes to fully include those who are damaged or socially excluded, despite our common insistence that each and every human being is irreplaceable, infinitely precious, sacred, an end-in-themselves, of intrinsic worth, a possessor of human dignity, and so on, and so on. As well as Gaita himself, whose work has been an inspiration to me, I frequently make reference to both Simone Weil, on whom I wrote my Master's Thesis, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, with whose work I have grown familiar over the course of this piece of writing. In fact I have chosen Simone Weil's "Notion of Reading,"¹ as the lens through which to focus my thoughts on how we allow a sense of the unconditional value of all human beings, understood in relation to absolute conceptions of value, to penetrate the ways in which we operate in the world and interact with others. Other philosophers with whom I engage at some length are G. E. M. Anscombe and Blaise Pascal.

I differ in focus from Gaita in that where he disavows the claim that his work is religious, while retaining some sympathy for religion,² I am more interested in

¹ Weil, Simone, "Essay on the Notion of Reading," trans. Rebecca Fine Rose and Timothy Tessin, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 13.4, (October, 1990), pages 297-303

² Gaita, Raimond, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, Second edition (Routledge, 2004), page xxvi

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the common ground that can be found between religious and nonreligious ways of thinking about absolute value. By my reading, Gaita assumes stronger ties than are necessary between religious belief and religious metaphysics, which can occlude the similarities in responsiveness that theists and nontheists share. Within this context, I have placed Gaita's work within the frame of reference that is encapsulated by Wittgenstein's expression, "a religious-point-of-view".

In **Chapter 1: Morality and the Notion of Reading**, I introduce the idea which forms the mainspring of my account, with a view also to showing the frame of reference within which my discussion takes place, namely, the relationship between responses and their conceptualisation, as opposed to theory and its application. I draw on Gaita's account of remorse in order to show that there are responses which involve the apprehension of others in terms of a particular kind of value, which Gaita terms "infinitely precious" and I term "of unconditional value." I make a reluctant break with natural language to speak in this way, because the distinction between unconditional and relative value plays an important part in the overall thesis.³ In this chapter, again with a view to reaffirming the response/conceptualisation relationship, I look at readings of Plato that stress the self-involving nature of knowledge. I finally turn to Weil's original paper, so as to outline the difficulties involved in reading, which pertain

³ I use "relative" in this thesis as the natural antonym for "absolute", so, in context, it can mean relative to something (an end, either general or individual, an outlook, either cultural or individual, a period of time, circumstances, etc) or comparable/commensurable.

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to the fact that we register some things and not others, in accordance with what grips us. The problem then, even though it may at times appear to be on the back burner, is how to get the unconditional value of others to penetrate our reading, when much of our reading is focussed on our immediate concerns, and our immediate concerns tend to be with relative rather than unconditional value.

In **Chapter 2: Meaning, Theistic Metaphysics and Living Faith**, I defend the religious philosophy of D Z Phillips against charges of nonrealism made by John Haldane and Brian Clack. I argue here that it is mistaken to conflate adherence to philosophical metaphysics with realism and then to reject accounts that do not defer to such metaphysics as non-realistic. I concur with Phillips in thinking that philosophical religious metaphysics fail to justify religion on grounds that are suited to empirical science, and also fail to take into account the meaning religion has for believers, which is revealed in the ways in which religious language is used, as well as ways in which it is not used. The purpose of this chapter is to get metaphysics out of the way so as to give my attention to the common ground of responsiveness that theists and nontheists may share.

In **Chapter 3: Unconditional Value: Religious and Non-Religious Conceptions**, I broach the common ground I have been claiming can exist between theists and nontheists, firstly by drawing on a paper by John H. Whittaker, who, without recourse to metaphysics, offers an account of religious

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engagement. By this account religious understanding differs from empirical understanding in that the latter carries no large point for one's self-understanding. In comparison, in the case of the former, not to be transformed by belief is not really to believe. Taking these findings on board I turn to a paper by R. F. Holland, in which he discusses Wittgenstein's religious-point-of-view alongside A. E. Taylor's insistence that ethics cannot do without the support of religion. In relation to these papers I argue that Wittgenstein's religious-point-of-view, while it excludes any adherence to a historical religion, does retain the tension between the temporal and the eternal, or the relative and the absolute, that Taylor thinks is lacking in philosophical ethics. Taylor applies this judgement particularly to ethical theories in which absolute conceptions of value are divorced from historical religious attachments. The religious-point-of-view retains this tension because it is based on the relationship between certain responses, which occur within the natural world and so are temporal, and the absolute conceptions of value that are necessary to doing these responses justice. In the final section of this chapter I argue that while religion has a richer range of concepts and a deeper history of discussion within which conceptions of absolute value are understood, it also carries with it temptations that its secular equivalent may lack. Hence the secular and religious versions of the religious-point-of-view are able to provide checks to each other's excesses or deficiencies.

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In **Chapter 4: Dying to the Self and the Concept of Flourishing**, I look at the concept of "dying to the self," which plays an important part in religious ethics, alongside the neo-Aristotelian concept of flourishing. Drawing on a paper by Gregory Vlastos, I posit the main distinction between Plato's and Aristotle's ethics as lying with their conceptions of the real. For Plato, on this account, "real" is associated with purity, while for Aristotle "real" is associated with existence. I go on to look at G. E. M. Anscombe's advocacy of Aristotelian Ethics, alongside Simone Weil's Platonism, arguing that both women turned to the Ancient Greeks out of a fear of morality's becoming displaced by a form of instrumentalism which I have termed "complacent relativism." I argue here that while the Aristotelian and Platonist accounts can be drawn close to each other, they cannot be brought to coincide, due to the differing criteria for judgement that go with their disparate conceptions of the term "real." At the same time, I argue, the two conceptions put together make for an ethical depth that may be lacking in either by themselves.

In **Chapter 5: Complacent Relativism and the Moral Perspective**, since it is the penultimate chapter, I begin by offering a brief summary of the previous chapters, so as to reorientate my reader in relation to the overall thrust of my thesis. Here I offer reasons as to why I think that Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and the religious-point-of-view, put together, offer the chance of moral depth. My argument follows this line: while Aristotelian Virtue Ethics has the advantage of

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unmistakably moral concepts, it is open to being given its measure in relation to relativistic conceptions, and thus becoming conceptually sullied. I further argue that theoretical moral systems, while they contribute to good organisation, lack the relevant link to our natural responsiveness that would contribute to the kind of moral depth that can withstand such challenges as may arise when a social organisation itself continues to run smoothly while ceasing to be moral.

In **Chapter 6: Reading, Virtue and a Religious-point-of-view**, I revisit the relationship between theism and a nontheistic religious-point-of-view. Drawing on Earl Stanley B. Fronda's work, I look at the relation between apophatic conceptions of God in relation to religious practice, and the apprehension of things in terms of divine effects, alongside certain claims of Weil's and the three examples Wittgenstein gives in "His Lecture on Ethics," that he understands in relation to absolute conceptions. My aim here is to show that the experiences or responses to which Weil and Wittgenstein attest are in the order of things that are understood within religion as divine effects. The "essential mystery" that goes with such responses is comparable to an apophatic conception of God. My point in this is to show the importance of the responses themselves, since without such responses an apophatic conception of God is effectively nothing, while metaphysical replacements for an apophatic conception of God tend to lack the necessary connection with our lives. In light of this, I ultimately argue that the capture and development of these responses to the point where they are

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able to penetrate our reading is achieved to at least some extent by what Gaita calls "leaving open conceptual space for such concepts as love, purity and goodness," combined with a notion Weil expressed in terms of "contagion."

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Chapter 1: Morality and the Notion of Reading

(1) Introduction

The concern that I am seeking to address has to do with the moral relations between those who are not naturally comparable in terms of power and status, an area which in my estimation is not consistently well-served by the ethical systems to which we most often refer. Simone Weil, in a short paper entitled "Essay on the Notion of Reading,"⁴ has provided what I think is a good starting point for addressing this problem. The notion of reading, put in a nutshell, is Weil's way of describing how we derive meaning from, and so respond to, the external world. Much of our reading, in the abovementioned sense, is immediate and non-reflective, rather than a result of considering and ranking our priorities.

My reading of the world depends very much upon the way in which I am orientated within it, along with the range of perspectives that spring from my central orientation. For example, if my central orientation is material ambition and my present perspective involves finding someone who will lend me money with which to further that ambition, then people, or features of people, that have no worth as means to my ends will in that respect be meaningless to me. Those who are not potential lenders, being meaningless relative to my pursuit, will fall into the background for me, in the way that extras fall into the background of a

⁴ See above, page 1, fn 1

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movie. Suppose that one of these extras, one burdened with far more pressing problems than my own, somehow enters into the orbit of my attention. While I may be curbed from doing them harm by adhering to a moral rule or by reflecting on the sort of character I would like to be, neither of these moves by themselves will alter my narrowly focused view of them and their situation. Hence, from my ambition-centred orientation I may still fail to attend to this person with due moral seriousness: impatient with an interruption to my own plans, but accepting that the moral law or my own aspiration to virtue requires me to help someone in distress, I might, for instance, employ boisterously jolly methods so as to quickly cheer them up, when a more attentive reading would reveal that their need is more for patient listening on my part. My treatment of them might be even more perfunctory if they seem to me to pose an impediment to my plans, perhaps by burdening me with a negative association in the eyes of the potential lenders whose favour I am courting.

By contrast, a perfectly clear or lucid reading would include as meaningful the unconditional value of the human being in front of me, and it would do so with the level of conviction with which I read a road sign written in English as being in English. I might not necessarily perceive what was *required* of me with such immediacy, but my immediate response would be inhabited by a recognition that the human being in front of me was indubitably worthy of my serious attention. This sort of recognition of a *human being* reveals one crucial difference between

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a lucid reading and a deficient one: while both the deficient and the lucid reader will grasp that the thing in front of them is a human person and not a horse, when the reading is deficient, the humanity of the individual in question may fall into the background. I may read a morally relevant situation just in terms of what it requires of me, rather than in terms of the human being with whose need I am faced. While this is certainly better than a reading which apprehends no moral claim at all, it is a less than perfect reading, if one is to genuinely accept the thesis that each and every human being is of unconditional value. It is a less than perfect reading because it involves a response to something that is explicitly claimed to be of unconditional value but does not include an acknowledgement of that value.

I shall argue, though not at any length in this chapter, that the most lucid reading of a morally serious encounter will involve an orientation to absolute Goodness, or in Wittgensteinian terms, a religious-point-of-view, whether or not the agent is a theist. One might frame things thus: if it is true that human beings are sacred, of unconditional value, or ends-in-themselves, as we often claim they are, then there is an intrinsic connection between clarity of reading and the recognition of moral worth in another. While even very high degrees of clarity, let alone perfect clarity, must surely be quite rare, I shall ultimately argue that our reading may develop in this direction through the capture of certain direct

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human responses and their adequate conceptualisation.⁵ Concepts of absolute value are important, so I claim, to our understanding and development of these responses, since at least some of them cannot be fully understood in relation to relative or mundane concepts. Attempts to understand them within a conceptual range that is thus limited can significantly reduce the ability of these responses to transform our reading of the world, and with that our attitude to other people, most particularly those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Take remorse, which I shall discuss in the first section of this chapter: it is at base a direct response to one's own wrongdoing. One's grasp of the fullness of its meaning however, depends upon the conceptual range under which it is understood. If it is understood within a conceptual range that is inadequate to the task, then our remorse's transformative potential may be similarly diminished. So it is with other direct responses that also have moral connotations.

I see three main advantages to looking into morality through the lens provided by the notion of reading: (1) Reading arises from the way in which we are embedded in the world, carrying with it the immediacy of many of our real-life ethical responses, where the time and space for reflection are minimal; hence it is practical on a fundamental level. (2) Due to the unreflective nature of this

⁵ "Direct human responses" is a term I shall use quite often, so I shall now explain how I am using it. What I am getting at is a vital recognition of external things, seen in terms of their meaning. The direct responses that are of interest here are those whose development is of a moral or religious nature. For example, our direct and unreflective response to, say, a toddler wandering out into a busy highway, is to run and retrieve it, and even a boy fleeing the police in a stolen car would probably swerve to avoid the child. What I am interested in is the capture and development of responses that are broadly, though not solely, of this kind.

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immediacy, the concept of reading is able to capture the agent as a mutual participant in relation to the objects of her moral concern, as opposed to an expert evaluator of actions or a moral exemplar, standing back and making considered judgements. (3) If we are going to claim that human beings are sacred, or infinitely precious, or are possessors of unconditional value, then it ought to be possible to have this understanding of their value permeate our ways of operating in the world, rather as simple mathematics and language are built into our operations, or if we are both virtuous and experienced, practical wisdom. Otherwise such claims as "all human beings are of unconditional value", etc, are little more than comfortable reassurances. The notion of reading seems to have the potential for opening up the possibility of incorporating the sacredness, preciousness, or unconditional value of each human being into the fabric of one's understanding.

In the first section of this chapter I shall look at the ethical importance that Raimond Gaita gives to remorse, with a view to showing the connection between the experience of remorse and the apprehension of human value. This account moves from the response of remorse to the conceptual range under which it can be understood, while seeing the two as inseparable. I shall then, in the following section, draw attention to an understanding of Plato which brings key features of the concept of reading to the fore. To this end I shall draw on Gaita's account of Plato's response to Socrates, and the importance of absolute concepts to his

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registering of that response, and Eric E. Springsted's distinction between readings of Plato in which metaphysical speculation is emphasised, and those that privilege self-involving knowledge, the latter way of reading Plato being the one that is relevant to this project. Informed by the above discussion, I shall in the final section show how the notion of reading works, and how it might be connected with the idea that each human being is sacred, infinitely precious or of unconditional value.

(2) Raimond Gaita on the Ethical Implications of Remorse

Raimond Gaita's thesis in *Good and Evil*, as the title suggests, is centrally meta-ethical,⁶ in that his arguments strongly support the important role absolute concepts of good and evil play in relation to our moral understanding. This includes our receptivity to, and understanding of, remorse. While I am in many ways drinking from the same well as Gaita, my focus, being on reading, is on the practical aspect, though I shall enter into meta-ethical territory in Chapters Two, Three and Six, in attempting to establish common ground between theistic and nontheistic conceptions of absolute value. However, the meta-ethical and practical aspects of our moral understanding are deeply linked, since the core relation lies between direct human experience and its conceptualisation, as opposed to theory and its application. Hence the meta-ethical and the practical

⁶ *Good and Evil*, page xii

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aspects are not easily separated. Gaita, whose meta-ethical claims are consistently tied to living examples, is effectively saying that there are real and important human responses that really do happen, to which we cannot do justice without concepts of absolute value. I think he is right in this, though my own emphasis is ultimately on (a) the connection between theistic and nontheistic conceptualisations of these responses, and (b) the incorporation of conceptions of absolute value into our practical lives, with particular attention to our attitude to those who suffer social degradation. This latter is of great concern to Gaita as well, so perhaps I can frame things by saying that I am drawing on his meta-ethical account with my own practical end in mind.

Gaita rejects the idea that remorse is a merely psychological response to wrongdoing, and construes it instead as "...a pained, bewildered realisation of what it means...to wrong someone. When it is lucid, remorse...is an astonished encounter with the reality of the ethical."⁷ One could say that the fact that our wrongdoing can evoke remorse in us reveals in sharp relief a distinction between moral and nonmoral value, since the harshest blow in the latter field cannot bring about a response that equates to remorse. In cases involving losses that evoke grief, such as the death of a loved one, or the discovery that one's life's work has come to nothing, we are able to draw some comfort from others who have suffered or failed as we have, and our wounds may also be healed by the

⁷ Ibid, page xiv

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passage of time. In comparison, to seek comfort in the company of others who have acted as we have acted is a corruption rather than a pure expression of remorse, and the passage of time by itself will not heal remorse either. One might think here of the elderly man who confesses to a murder done thirty or forty years previously because he can no longer live with it on his conscience, and does not want to take it, without expiation, to the grave with him. Nonmoral regrets and failures, however severe, neither haunt one's life in this manner nor cry out for expiation.

The significance of an adequate conception of remorse, for Gaita, lies with its capacity to bring out in us an awakened sense of the reality of another.⁸

Remorse may also, as Gaita points out, awaken one to what one has become; a murderer, for example, or a wrongdoer of some other morally serious kind.⁹

However, even where the wrongs done are unintentional, one is not only faced with the reality of another through the harm one has done to them, but also the limits of one's control over events. The significance of accepting the limits of our control will gain importance in my later chapters.

In light of the idea that remorse may bring about an awakened sense of another's reality, consider passing a vagrant in the street. If he asks for a dollar, one might give it to him if one is feeling generous, or one might not, there is no

⁸ Ibid, page 51

⁹ Ibid, page 50

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sense of compulsion, and nothing about the event to draw this person into the orbit of one's concerns. Then consider accidentally running over and killing the same vagrant on the motorway.¹⁰ Even if he is the one at fault, having wandered out onto the road and into one's path, his reality as a human being will be brought home to one with a force that his living, unharmed presence was unable to muster. What is more, despite his being at fault, one's mind will almost automatically contain in its confusion the thought that one could have acted differently; driven more slowly, been more attentive, etc, since there is no escaping the responsibility for what one has done, even if one has neither intended it nor acted in breach of a law. The shock of an accident that brings about the death of another human being is of a very different calibre than the shock of an accident in which a car is written off but no one is harmed, as accords with the difference between remorse and other forms of regret.

Simone Weil has written of saintly people who are able to receive "the shock of reality" from any human being whatsoever, in any circumstances whatsoever.¹¹

For such people, other human beings are never without value or of instrumental

¹⁰ Gaita himself has put forward similar examples to this one. In particular he has drawn attention to an example of Bernard Williams', in which a man accidentally runs over a child. Williams conceptualises this in terms of "agent regret" and notes that the driver's response will be different from that of a passenger who has witnessed the event – *Good and Evil*, pages 53-55. I have chosen the above example to capture the contrast between the responses to the man as he sits begging, and as he lies dead on the motorway.

¹¹ Weil, Simone, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" trans. Marian Barabas, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 10.1 January, 1987, page 4 – this of course is a broad conception of a saint of a particular kind. I am aware that there are saints of whom this way of seeing their fellow human beings is not the central feature which causes us to regard them as saints.

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value only, and it is in this sense that they are *real* to the saint. They contain the *shock* of reality because, for the saint, recognition of their value is a live response, like thirst, for instance, and not merely a matter of applied theory. Under the conditions of remorse, the vagrant's unconditional value becomes a live matter for us as well, though it may not be so, for the large number of us who are not saints, when he is alive and begging by the side of the road. It is in this sense that one may be awakened by remorse to another's reality.

For a further example, consider Oedipus, faced with the fact that he had killed his father and married his mother. Here, under the conditions of remorse, the awakening is to the reality of Oedipus's own life; that he is in fact an inadvertent wrongdoer, and that the status and honour he has so far enjoyed have been based on falsehood. Note that his awakening is to himself as a wrongdoer, and not to the kind of person that he is. The focus of remorse, by Gaita's account, "is on what we have become only because we have become wrongdoers,"¹² not on what this says about our characters. An excessive concern as to "what this says about my character" where I am faced with remorse, would divert my response along a path that reduced rather than deepened my moral understanding of it, since it would then become "all about me" rather than what is revealed to me by the wrong I have done.

¹² *Good and Evil*, page 50

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While neither of these cases involves wilful wrongdoing, they each involve facing up to certain realities that would be no less real had they not been brought home by the events that resulted in remorse. One could say that the vagrant is arguably more real while he is begging by the side of the street, where he is alive, and where his reality is scarcely acknowledged, than he is lying dead on a motorway, though it is in the latter capacity that he will end up haunting the person who ran over him. A human being does not *become* a thing of unconditional value in death where he was not in life, but remorse at being the cause of his death uncompromisingly reveals a value that may have otherwise remained hidden from one. And the set of relations upon which Oedipus's regal status depended would have been equally true had they remained opaque to him or for his entire life. Remorse, and the attendant awakening to what it means to harm another, or to what I really am or have become, correspond with such expressions as "his or her moment of truth," or the idea of "facing one's moment of truth." The conception of truth relevant to remorse, however, is not of the empirical kind: one could agree to all of the facts but still fail to meet one's moment of truth, where it involves one's own wrongdoing, with genuine, unalloyed remorse.

Suppose that either person in the above examples experienced the same events without remorse: if the person who ran over the vagrant took the view that it was "only a bum," and that her car's insurance would cover her broken

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headlight, or if Oedipus thought, "So what if the man I killed was my father, and my wife is in fact my mother, I can live with it if that's what it takes for me to stay on as king." In both cases we would suspect something more than mere callousness; we would also consider such an attitude to reveal a failure of understanding. The deficiency disclosed by such attitudes would seem epistemic¹³ as well as ethical. If the people involved shielded themselves in ignorance or immaturity so as to avoid facing up to a demanding truth, then we would count it as ethical failure with epistemic dimensions, where one avoids knowing something one should know because one does not want to know it. If, however, they genuinely saw nothing amiss with these sorts of responses, we would reverse that judgement: we would see epistemic failure with ethical dimensions of which the actor was incapable of being aware: the sort of failure that caused Christ to cry from the cross, "Forgive them father, they know not what they do." The epistemic aspect of remorse involves the penetration of a rift between appearances and a reality, or deeper meaning, which appearances often conceal. One could also frame it in terms of a rift between relative and unconditional value; that one's wrongdoing can tear a gaping hole in relative value, through which an unconditional value is revealed. The vagrant, for instance, may be of little *relative* interest if one is looking for a boyfriend or an IT expert, but his *unconditional* value is undeniable to the one he has brought about his death and faced it truthfully. The person who refuses to fully face up to what

¹³ As is no doubt obvious, I am not using the word "epistemic" in the sense that it is used in reference to empirical facts, but in a sense that is pertinent to moral understanding.

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they have done seeks refuge in relative value, and shields themselves from the thought that there may be more to it, while the person who genuinely sees nothing amiss with what they have done is impervious to the idea that there should even be more to it. But whether their failure to experience remorse arises from wilfulness or blindness, in response to both instances we are apt to say things like, "She really doesn't get it," or "He simply doesn't understand what he's done;" criticisms whose basis is both epistemic and moral.

Now I have said that the pertinent conception of truth here is not of the empirical kind, and Gaita does not present an adequate concept of remorse in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, or similar. Rather, its adequacy for Gaita, in common with other such moral concepts, is understood in terms of lucidity, confusion and corruption:¹⁴ lucid remorse is distinguished from self-pity, say, or sham. A lucid response for Gaita is not a blind, non-cognitive response, which "just happens" to be the right one, rather, it is lucid "because of its obedience to the critical grammar of thought," and by this he means thought that incorporates rather than excludes the response that gave rise to it.¹⁵ What this means may be understood as follows: critical grammar gives intelligible shape to raw experience, while avoiding its distortion or diminution, but does not

¹⁴ Gaita uses the word "lucidity," which might arguably be interchangeable with "clarity." However, "lucidity" may go better with ideas of apprehension and revelation, since it suggests a dimensional depth, involving both emotion and thought, whereas "clarity" might in some cases be understood solely in terms of reason and/or perception.

¹⁵ *Good and Evil*, pages 45 and 46

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part company with the experience itself. One might describe the term "critical grammar" as having two components. Firstly, it involves recognition of and loyalty to the relevant field of meaning, in this case one's remorse at visiting harm upon another, and secondly it seeks a range of concepts that will do justice to the response in light of that meaning.

Drawing on both Aristotle and Plato, Gaita thinks that while remorse is in every instance personal, an adequate concept of remorse, or way of understanding what remorse is, is disclosed to us through our witnessing authoritative examples, rather as justice, for Aristotle, is disclosed to us in the form of the just person.¹⁶ The lucid remorse of another, and its differing in terms of purity from sentimentality, self-pity or sham, will carry authority for me, and require moral seriousness on my part if I am to respond to it honestly, rather as the love a mother may show for her child carries authority *as* love; we cannot encounter a pure version of it and suppose it is something other than love. The critical and exploratory facilities of language are of course brought to bear on things; one does not necessarily "just know," but one's linguistic explorations do not lose touch with the example that has arrested one's attention. In Gaita's words, "Sentimentality needs to be shown up by example. There is too, discussion and argument, but it should be argument informed by the realisation that it cannot, discursively, yield a standard, or set of standards, in the light of which all

¹⁶ Ibid, page 46

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examples are to be judged."¹⁷ Each occasion for remorse is particular, and the lucidity of my remorse for some wrong I have done will not leave me equipped to expound on the conditions that are necessary and sufficient for remorse on all "occasions such as this." Consider Raskolnikov's response to his murder of the pawn-broker in *Crime and Punishment*, for instance. The book shows the long, slow processes of self-deception, self-pity, evasion, and sentimentality, etc, to which Raskolnikov is subject until such time he is able to face his murder squarely, in terms of its moral truth, and what that truth demands of him. Even though this account is fictional, it does offer an illustration as to why one cannot wrap up such a process in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Deepened understanding, however, while it cannot be framed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, depends in large part on clear and relevant concepts being present within the language. Gaita, drawing on a claim made by Rush Rhees, says "...there cannot be love without certain ways of talking about what we love, without argument about what it is appropriate or even intelligible to love, about whether something is worthy of our love and whether what we feel is really love and so on."¹⁸ This also applies broadly to our most important moral concepts; they arise from certain direct responses that we have, and require conceptual elucidation if they are to become part of our lives.

¹⁷ Ibid, page 270

¹⁸ Ibid, page 119

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Gaita explicitly rejects speaking of good and evil in ontological terms. Rather, he regards moral terms as *sui generis*, and considers such concepts as necessary to our most serious ways of speaking. I shall put the ontological question to one side for now, and address it in Chapters Two and Three, when I turn to discussing theistic and secular conceptions of unconditional value. The need for the terms of absolute value in relation to remorse, however, show up if we consider the ways in which the suffering associated with remorse may be expiated. The deepest remorse never leaves anyone entirely as they were before, so that expiation takes the form of healing rather than eradication. The willingness to make compensation, in the case of some wrongs, may be one measure of the seriousness of one's remorse, but will not heal it. A teacher, say, who had a child drown in her care, would not be relieved of her remorse by paying the parents some form of compensation. Gaita lists "repentance, atonement, forgiveness and punishment" as ways in which remorse is healed.¹⁹ Such responses can only gain fullness of expression in relation to absolute concepts. Certainly, there are relative uses of "forgiveness" and "punishment": one thinks of the accepted apology for failing to attend a dinner party, or the child that is deprived of her pocket money for failing to take out the rubbish. However, repentance and atonement are hard to think of in relative terms at all, and forgiveness and punishment cannot be where they involve responses to great wrongs done by one person to another.

¹⁹ Ibid, page 51

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Before moving onto an understanding of Plato, to which questions of the good naturally lead, I shall explain why I have entered into the topic of reading via Gaita's conception of remorse. Weil's notion of reading, as I said in the beginning, refers to our way of interacting with the meanings we derive from the external world. That we have it within us to grasp meaning from a perspective of remorse offers a clue as to what it is to really apprehend the unconditional value of a human being, and to believe it beyond doubt. Furthermore, as is the case with Gaita's account of remorse, my own account depends very much on the relation between direct human responses and the concepts under which they are understood and incorporated into our lives.

(3) Plato: Self-Involving Knowledge and Ethical Concepts

The interpretations of Plato that I shall now draw attention to are pertinent to the notion of reading, and offer an alternative to the more common view of Plato as a speculative metaphysician. I am not setting out here to put forward a thesis that will succinctly encompass the entire Platonic corpus, but rather to show a way of understanding Plato that is not idiosyncratic, if not exactly standard, and which can be deployed to support certain key aspects of what it is to read well. Both Gaita and Eric E Springsted draw fruitfully on this way of reading Plato.

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Gaita takes Socrates' claim at his trial that "nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death," as having perplexed both Plato and Aristotle in different ways: "Aristotle's rejection of what Socrates said is internal to his sense of its unintelligibility," he says, "whereas Plato was bound (we might say he was conscience bound) in testimony to something whose reality he could not deny but whose nature he found essentially mysterious."²⁰ By Gaita's reading, Plato, being convinced and yet perplexed by Socrates' life and the way in which he met his death, sought the conceptual space in which to think and speak of this phenomenon, which nonetheless remained mysterious for him: *essentially* mysterious, by Gaita's account, because "it is not mysterious for us [merely] on account of our limited epistemic and logical powers."²¹ That is to say, the Socrates who could say that the good man could not be harmed did not merely await explanation, but *defied* explanation. In this sense the mystery pertaining to Socrates was such that it would not be dispelled if further information were brought to bear on things, or if logical inferences were more rigorously applied. An essential mystery is a mystery that is open to contemplation *as* a mystery, but not to the sort of explanation that would solve it. A relative mystery, in comparison, is a mystery that is open to being solved, and may be dispelled by further information or greater clarity of thought, like the mystery as to the

²⁰ Ibid, page 201 – "Bound in testimony" is Gaita's term, which will come up again. The notion of "testimony" is familiar in relation to legal cases, where in bearing witness, one is "bound" to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." In this context I take the term to mean under obligation to bear true and faithful witness, rather than to attempt to explain the unexplainable.

²¹ Ibid.

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identity of the murderer in a whodunit. Once one has read the book, the murderer's identity is divulged and there is no more mystery.

For philosophy to leave open space for the essentially mysterious, according to Gaita, three things need to be noted:

First, that the concept of what is essentially mysterious is connected with a certain conception of experience. Secondly, that the concept of experience is connected with that of being "bound in testimony".²² Thirdly, we must give a serious place to the concepts of love, Goodness and purity.²³

If these conditions themselves seem perplexing, one might think of the historic Socrates as he is depicted by Plato: with the first, there is an encounter with an existent man, whose character and comportment, along with his confidently expressed statement that "nothing can harm a good man," seem to Plato to exceed what can be captured by mundane concepts of virtue or nobility. With the second, there is the undeniable conviction that comes with such an encounter: one recognises that one is witness to something both extraordinary and convincing, which places one under an obligation to convey it accurately and faithfully, to oneself as well as to others. Failure to do this would mean that whatever one has witnessed is either lost to, or distorted or diminished by, the

²² See above, page 24, fn 20

²³ *Good and Evil*, pages 201-202

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process of putting it into words. With the third, one reaches, under the pressure of perplexity, for the sort of concepts that will meet that obligation. To sidestep love, Goodness and purity would be to attempt to capture in mundane concepts a phenomenon which exceeds their range. To say that something is *essentially* mysterious, after all, is to say that it exceeds the range of such concepts. The many Platonic dialogues which end in aporia show us how this process does not sidestep argument, but rather *uses* argument to push us to the limits of available information and logical inference, so that the conceptual space for contemplating the essentially mysterious opens up where argumentative resources, having led us in the right direction, exhaust themselves.

The value forms, by Gaita's account, especially the form of the Good, represent the result of Plato's attempt to do justice to his encounter with Socrates: they do not erase the mystery that attends Socrates' comportment, or for that matter, his effect on Plato, but they provide the conceptual space for its acknowledgment. One might put it like this: For Socrates to be an exemplar he must be an exemplar of *something*. And the something that is exemplified by Socrates must have broader application than its manifestation in a particular man; otherwise we would grasp it as idiosyncratic, and not exemplary. If all mundane concepts seem inadequate to expressing what is shown by Socrates' example, then in order to reflect upon or speak of what is brought to light by Socrates' example one must reach beyond the mundane for adequate concepts,

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which turn out to be absolute concepts. Such concepts will allow the phenomenon to be spoken of intelligibly, but will not ultimately erase the mystery of what is essentially mysterious.

Thinking along related lines, Eric E Springsted, in comparing Weil's thought with that of St Augustine, draws attention to the distinction between understanding Plato in terms of speculative doctrine (which is often at odds with religious orthodoxy), and in terms of a mysticism centred not on gaining an experience, but on "the development of a certain inner sense that permeates and configures our knowledge."²⁴ According to Springsted,

Herein...lies precisely the problem that Plotinus and Augustine saw with the Gnostics and Manichaeans, respectively, and the problem that Weil imputes to Aristotle: their search for God by reason alone is a distanced search, one that is not self-involving, a search wherein the thinker stands apart from what is known.²⁵

What is interesting to me here is the distinction made between thought that is self-involving, and thought, whether of God or of something else, from which the

²⁴ Springsted, Eric O, "I Dreamed I Saw St Augustine..." in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, Ed. Jane E Doering and Eric O Springsted, (University of Notre Dame, 2004), pages 211-214

²⁵ Ibid, page 216 - I am not sure that I agree with Springsted with regard to Weil's criticisms of Aristotle. As I understand her, her problem is more that Aristotle does not, in her eyes, give the right sort of significance to absolute value, than that his search for God is by reason alone. For example, "Supernatural good is not a sort of supplement to natural good, as we are told, with support from Aristotle, for our great comfort." – "Human Personality," in *Selected Essays 1934-1943*, trans. Richard Rees, (Oxford University Press, 1962), page 23. This is but one of numerous quotes along similar lines. However, I think that Springsted's distinction between "a distanced search" and thinking that is "self-involving" is an apt one.

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thinker stands apart. If we read Plato as standing apart from what he is considering, then we are inclined to read him as a speculative theoretician. If, however, we read Plato from a self-involving point-of-view, and bear in mind the strong connection he makes between ethics and epistemology, then what we get is an understanding of knowledge that links the objects of knowledge with virtue, and which involves the whole self: to come to know is to be transformed for the better by what is known. Furthermore, the idea of the thinker's involvement with what is thought presents yet another expression of the relationship between real, direct human responses and their conceptualisation, as distinct from theory and its application, as is the case with Gaita's account of remorse.

There is a great deal of evidence supporting the self-involving point-of-view within the Platonic corpus, but here I shall simply suggest that this way of reading Plato sheds a light on the view he expresses in the *Meno* as to how the slave boy's progression, in the field of geometry, from true opinion to knowledge ought to proceed: "These opinions have now been stirred up like a dream," says Socrates, "but if he were repeatedly asked the same questions in various ways you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's."²⁶ One can take this to mean that true opinion becomes knowledge when one is able to offer a full formal account of it, but it can also mean that true opinion becomes knowledge if it is properly internalised, rather as one's

²⁶ "Meno," 87d, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), page 886

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knowledge of a mother-tongue is internalised, or a tradesman's knowledge of his craft. If I have such internalised knowledge, this does not mean that I will never get it wrong, since I can misuse or fail to understand the meaning of a word, but it means that I am equipped with the resources to correct my own mistakes, and am "at home," or oriented, within the relevant field. My capacity to produce a formal account would then arise at least as much from my being "at home" in the field as from my ability to support an account with reasons. Furthermore, to come to know is to be transformed in some way by what one has come to know, rather than remaining the same with a few further explanations under one's belt.

What is interesting about the *Meno* example, in comparison with Gaita's account of remorse, is that the concept/direct response relation runs in the opposite direction. Admittedly, the subject matter is mathematics, so the issue is not morality, but rather than a direct response reaching for the concepts by which it may be understood, we have instead an example of a latent understanding being brought to life by the introduction of as yet unfamiliar concepts. To return to Rush Rhees' claim that "...there cannot be love without certain ways of talking about what we love," what the *Meno* shows, albeit, indirectly, is that certain responses can remain inchoate or mute, or even disappear, where they cannot be brought into language. If Meno's slave had not conversed with Socrates, he may have been blind to mathematics for life, although he was able to catch the conceptual ball of mathematics when it was thrown to him.

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The above ways of understanding Plato are pertinent to the notion of reading for the following reasons. Firstly, our reading of the world is by its very nature self-involving. So if the meaning that is revealed to us in our reading is to become more lucid, this too will necessarily be self-involving. Secondly, if readings such as those revealed under the conditions of remorse, or those revealed to us by exceptionally good persons are to play a part in our lives then they require adequate conceptualisation if we are to give them proper consideration. And proper consideration implies an openness to be changed by what we consider. As McDowell says, with an emphasis on the uncodifiability of moral virtue,

The remoteness of the form of the Good is a metaphorical version of the thesis that value is not in the world, utterly distinct from the dreary literal version that has obsessed recent moral philosophy. The point of the metaphor is the colossal difficulty of attaining a capacity to cope clear-sightedly with the ethical reality that *is* part of our world. Unlike other responses to uncodifiability, this one may actually work toward moral improvement, negatively, by inducing humility, and positively, by an inspiring effect akin to that of a religious conversion.²⁷

Coming to know in such a way that one is struck by humility and "an inspiring effect akin to that of a religious conversion" can surely apply only to knowledge that is self-involving. Furthermore, the relation between "the ethical reality that is part of this world," and "value that is not in the world," point to the connection

²⁷McDowell, John, "Virtue and Reason," in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998), page 73

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Gaita makes between experience, testimony and concepts that extend beyond the natural in order to do justice to certain kinds of experience, such as remorse for the evil one has done, and reflection on the goodness one has witnessed.

(4) Weil's Notion of Reading and Unconditional Value

In this section, I shall begin by elaborating a little on what the notion of reading entails, drawing primarily on two papers written by Weil, "Essay on the Notion of Reading,"²⁸ and "Are We Struggling for Justice?"²⁹ My concern is here with the importance and also the difficulty of getting something of the sense of absolute value into the way in which we read the external world. I shall have much more to say on the difference between absolute and relative value in Chapter Six, but the relation between the two, and how they may be brought together in our reading of the world, is the point of this whole thesis. It is a problem that lurks in the background, even in chapters where it is not the dominant subject.

For now, I start with the claim that in our reading of the world, fact and value tend to be met as one. According to Weil, "If I hate someone, it is not him on one side and my hatred on the other; when he approaches me something hateful approaches me; moreover the perversity of his soul is more obvious to me than

²⁸ Weil, Simone, "Essay on the Notion of Reading," trans. Rebecca Fine Rose and Timothy Tessin, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 13.4, (October, 1990), pages 297-303

²⁹ Weil, Simone, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" trans. Marian Barabas, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 10.1 (January, 1987), pages 1-10

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the colour of his hair."³⁰ The disvalue associated with this man comes across more vividly than the facts concerning his appearance.

Value determines what is salient to our reading, and relative value tends to play a dominant role in it, since our activities depend on conditions, and we are very much interested in what those conditions are. "What is the new boss like?" we ask, and "Will the weather improve in time for the picnic?" as we read the conversation round the water cooler or the sky for clues. A lot of what is meaningful to us is understood in terms of our projects and the conditions that will influence how they will go. However, we are social animals, and so our reading is not purely instrumental in the most selfish sense, since we have it in us to look out for others, cultivate virtue and so on. These social features, however, while modifying and broadening the scope of our reading, will not necessarily extend to the point where we are able to see unconditional value in those who do not strike us as socially, hence relatively, valuable.

I earlier mentioned a vagrant as being of little relative interest if one is looking for a boyfriend or an IT expert, though his unconditional value is undeniable to the one who has brought about his death. If we were to try and squeeze his unconditional value, revealed by remorse, into relativistic concepts, we would be robbing the term "unconditional" of sense. The unconditional can only be

³⁰ "Essay on the Notion of Reading," page 299

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properly understood in terms of absolute conceptions. There are numerous religions which, for theists, uphold and maintain the notion of absolute value, and events that point in that direction cut across almost everybody's path in some form or another. Remorse is one example, finding oneself arrested by pure goodness or by sublime beauty are others. These are experiences that can strike us deeply, even though they do not bear directly on ends that are relative to our contingently possessing certain desires and intentions. But we have lives to get on with, and so these experiences, and sometimes even the absolute values upheld by our formal religions do not always penetrate our reading to a significant degree. This is my central concern then; how to get absolute value, or an orientation to absolute goodness into our way of reading the world, when socially modified, relative value³¹ has such a strong grip on us.

I have already said that with our reading of the world, fact and value tend to be met as one. It follows from this that reading is not identical with perception; the object of a perception is a perceptible, whereas in common with texts, the object of reading is meaning, and meaning for us is informed by value. No one can intelligibly say, "I value x hugely, although x is meaningless to me," or alternatively, "x is fraught with meaning for me, but I do not give any value whatsoever to x." As with the letters that make up a text, the perceptible aspect

³¹ Just in case I have not made myself clear, by "socially modified relative value" I mean relative value that is modified by my status as a social animal. As a social animal I will not disregard others, but my regard for them may be coloured by what I perceive as their social value.

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seems to fall away as the meaning takes hold of us, even though our perception of the text is necessary if we are to read it at all. To go back to the hated man in an earlier quote, his hatefulness is more apparent than the colour of his hair, though we have to perceive the man in order to read the hatefulness. There are, of course, fields of engagement, like publishing, sign writing or graffiti art, where the formations of letters do not fall away but are the focus: a sign writer may cry, upon seeing someone else's sign, "Wow! That is a brilliant Z," but this does not take away from the fact that meaning is what is read; for such a person the formation of the letters in the context of a sign is constitutive of their meaning.

Meanings can strike us with a similar force and conviction as strong sensations do; hence it is difficult for us to doubt their reality. Weil illustrates this claim in a manner that *does* involve a text, with the example of two different women, one of whom is illiterate, each receiving a letter telling her that her son is dead. "The first, upon just glancing at the paper, faints, and until her death, her eyes, her mouth, her movements will never again be as they were. The second woman remains the same: her expression, her attitude do not change; she cannot read."³² The point of this example is to show how the meaning of the letter hits the first woman with sort of force that a strong sensation does, as happens when one is struck by a blow, while the second woman reveals how slight the sensations involved actually are if they are divorced from their meaning, as a

³² "Essay on the Notion of Reading," page 298

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letter is for an illiterate person. In the case of the first woman, the sensations are wholly eclipsed by the meaning they convey: "...as to the colour of the paper or the ink, they don't even appear,"³³ although the content of the letter, taken in at a glance, has affected her physically with the force of being struck.

While a letter is in fact a text, the relation between reading and meaning carries over to such things as reading danger in an unexpected noise, for example, though the noise by itself does not present us with danger, any more than do the sensations associated with a letter explain its effect on the reader. Weil does not seem to allow a gap between appearances and the meanings they convey, a position to which one can certainly find counterexamples: when we impassively ask, "What is that noise?" or "What is that white shape over there on the horizon?" there does in fact seem to be a gap between the sensation and the meaning we take from it. However, the force of her claim lies with the capacity of meaning to push into the background the impressions that gave rise to it, and its ability to have an effect on us which seems as incontrovertible as a strong sensation, like a blow or a burn. The sense of conviction persists, even when the meanings derived from appearances change abruptly: one belief replaces another in a flash, to be entertained with the same level of conviction. For example, a man on a lonely road at night might see what he reads as a man lying in wait, which turns out on closer inspection to be a tree.

³³ Ibid.

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His immediate and unqualified response is to a human presence: the idea that there could be some question as to whether there is a man is an abstract, insubstantial idea, coming from him, not from the outside, having no grip; then it happens like a flash, and suddenly, without transition, he is completely alone, surrounded only by things and plants; the idea that a man could have been standing there where he sees the tree has become, in its turn, insubstantial.³⁴

What we read carries conviction for us because it comes to us from the outside, so we cannot have just imagined it. At the same time, we grasp it in terms of meaning, and meaning for us is value-laden. I believe I see a man lying in wait; I automatically value my life, and my life is not safe, so my muscles tense. I draw closer, see that it is a tree and breathe a sigh of relief. I relax, since my life now seems safe. A piece of new information or a change in perspective shifts us, without transition, from one meaning to another, which we then accept with equal certainty. According to Weil, each meaning, "when it appears and enters us through the senses, reduces all ideas which might conflict with it to the status of phantoms."³⁵ To return to the projected picnic mentioned earlier, as the black clouds disappear and the picnic goes ahead as planned, earlier thoughts of postponement, or a movie as an alternative, etc, lose their grip entirely.

Just as we are able to change appearances by performing certain actions, so we are able to change the way we read appearances. Apprenticeships, for example,

³⁴ Ibid, page 301

³⁵ Ibid.

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teach people to read and respond to the world in ways that they would not have otherwise: a mechanic reads a rattle in an engine differently from most drivers, and is often able to tell at once whether or not it is a matter for concern, while the driver reads it with bewilderment and anxiety. Going by perception alone, it is a merely a noise, but the *meaning* it represents to the mechanic is diagnostic, while to the driver it may represent an opaque and disturbing threat.

We can also consider moral problems in this manner, by trying to determine what it is to read truthfully, in a manner analogous to that of an apprentice tradesperson. Looking at things in this way suggests that the development of one's ability to read the world clearly from a moral perspective should have something in common with the acquisition of virtue. Weil argues that someone who is tempted to keep a borrowed book rather than return it will not necessarily restrain himself because he has read *The Critique of Practical Reason*, but will do so if "the very appearance of the thing cries out to be returned." Inquiring into how we may come to read things in this way is, according to Weil, "more concrete than inquiring whether it is better to keep or return something entrusted to us."³⁶ Reading involves our direct responses and the ways in which we conceptualise and develop them, while the latter involves the application of ethical theory. As with Aristotelian virtue, one is looking at moral goodness, as

³⁶ Ibid, pages 302 and 303

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McDowell puts it, "from the inside out,"³⁷ rather than in terms of constraints or prescriptions that are applied from the outside. A difficulty, however, with naturalistic virtue, as I understand it, is that what is natural is also relative, in the sense of being subject to natural conditions, and so it may prove difficult to get absolute concepts into a purely naturalistic account of goodness. This is a problem which I shall discuss in Chapter Four.

My reason for focussing on the notion of reading is that I think it takes us to the root of the problem which motivates my inquiry, namely, achieving an ethical understanding of the relationship between those who are not naturally comparable in terms of power and status. Firstly, reading is at once self-involving and epistemic: I cannot help but read, and the efficacy of my reading is understood as clear or unclear, true or distorted, in terms of the faithfulness of my apprehension of what is in front of me. Secondly, the fact that the unconditional value of a human being is revealed under the conditions of remorse tells me that there is a value to be read, so far as human beings are concerned, that is non-relative. Hence it would seem that whatever occludes the unconditional value of a human being for me is an impediment to my reading, and differences in power and status seem, *prima facie*, to be just such an impediment. This is not to say they should be eradicated, which is impossible to

³⁷ "Virtue and Reason," page 50

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achieve even if it were true; rather it suggests that adjustments can perhaps be made in the light of this, rather as we are able to adjust a camera lens to relevant differences in visual conditions. In this case, however, the adjustments will be conceptual, since the ways in which we conceptualise things play a large part in how we see those things.

Our status as rational social animals means that power relations, personal relationships and moral value are deeply interwoven for us, and tend in many ways to form the almost invisible background to our reading. Power relations, however, can make immediate and unquestioned claims on us, since we are forced to negotiate with them, as we are forced to negotiate with busy highways and inclement weather; they are not among the things we can ignore. This can occlude for us the moral status of the powerless; they are not among the things that we *have to* acknowledge, in the way that we are forced to acknowledge power, force or challenge, in order to go about our business.

On this subject, Weil makes a rather sweeping statement: "...human action has no other rule or limit than obstacles," she says, "It has no contact with realities other than these."³⁸ Although Weil is inclined to be rather Hobbesian in her observations, one can take from the above the idea that we recognise the external world insofar as we must negotiate our way through it, and insofar as it

³⁸ "Are We Struggling for Justice," page 2

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is able to impinge upon us in one way or another. She illustrates the above claim with the example of a small child spotting his mother at a distance when she has been away for some time, where "he is in her arms almost before knowing he has seen her,"³⁹ so long as no obstacle stands in his way. If there is no object that needs to be negotiated, nothing that impinges on his path (like a table for instance), then there is for him nothing whatsoever between him and his goal, which is his mother's arms.

One might think that the word "obstacle" could be replaced by "means"; that for the child to get to his mother he needs to employ no means except for his flying feet, which he does not in any case feel in his excitement at seeing her. This, however, would not quite encapsulate what Weil is getting at. Her point is more to do with what we notice and fail to notice; if we have to deal with something, in order to go about our projects, then we notice it, whether that something is a human being or an object, or even weather. If we do not have to deal with something, it may well evade our attention. Think of the fellow who thinks he sees a man lying in wait on the lonely road; while he thinks that whatever he sees is a danger to him, it is *something*. But when he draws close enough, he sees that it is only a tree. Hence it is not something he has to deal with, so it is effectively *nothing*. As social animals, we do of course notice other people, but we also tend to be aware of them to the extent that we have dealings with them.

³⁹ Ibid.

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This can mean that people who lack social status can become virtually invisible to those who do not; "as transparent...as is completely clear glass to sight..." since they neither impede nor enhance our projects. Furthermore, "Someone who does not see a pane of glass does not know he does not see it."⁴⁰ It is right at this point that we can see the tension that arises between relative and unconditional value with regard to our responsiveness to our fellow human beings. My automatic, unreflective reading tends to be of relative value, while remorse and certain other direct responses reveal a human being to me in terms of unconditional value, which is for the most part concealed from me in my going about my relative business. And it is difficult for the unconditional value of human beings *not* to be concealed from me if my going about my business renders them more or less invisible to me. Think of the term "a person of no account." It is all too easy in our relative world to think that this is all that can be said for a certain type of person. If however, we are struck with remorse for having harmed this person, we see that there is indeed more to be said for him. This may also occur, though more auspiciously, if we see someone in the light of someone else's love; whether the love of someone close to them or of the saintly type of person mentioned earlier, who "can direct their attention at any human being whatever, placed in any circumstance whatever, and receive from him the shock of reality."⁴¹ Seeing someone in the light of another's love is something to

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, page 4

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which we may be receptive, so that a response is awakened in us that was previously dormant.

Weil describes such exceptional and saintly people as mad, since their engagement with the world is so far removed from the pursuit of anything we normally understand as a natural advantage. Instead, the unconditional value of each and every human being is salient to their reading in just the same way as a man lying in wait on a lonely road may be salient to the rest of us. "The madness of love, once it has seized a human being," she says, "completely transforms the modalities of action and thought."⁴² One might consider here Gaita's account of a nun with whom he once worked, who treated the incurably damaged inmates of a psychiatric hospital without a trace of condescension, and whom he claims has had a profound effect on his approach to philosophy.⁴³ It is true that such people do exist, and it is also true that they are uncommon, but then exceptional dancers, pianists and inventors are also quite uncommon, and we of course have no doubt that such people are relevant to their various fields. One might in one's lifetime encounter such a person, as did Gaita, or one might merely know about them, through historical records or current events; Christ, St Francis of Assisi, Mother Theresa of Calcutta and Mahatma Ghandi are perhaps all examples of people known for being exceptional in the unusual field of genuinely

⁴² Ibid, pages 3 and 4

⁴³ *Good and Evil*, page xiii – there is more than one reference to this nun in Gaita's work, and the full story of his encounter with her is told in *A common humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000)

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loving one's neighbour, and indiscriminately recognising the unconditional value of each and every human being.

Weil speaks of our response to such people in terms of contagion. "...the more madness there is below, the more chances there are that it will appear by contagion at the top," she says, "To the extent to which at any given time there is some madness of love amongst men, to that extent there is some possibility of change in the direction of justice: and no further."⁴⁴ With regard to Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Gaita has this to say; "The wonder that is a response to her is not a wonder at her, but a wonder *that human life could be as her love reveals it.*"⁴⁵ The contagion seems to come less from one's desire to imitate the exemplar as from being convinced by, and hence buying into, a view of things as the exemplar reveals them to be.

A mundane example of this contagion occurs when a person of ordinary sensibility keeps company with an artist or becomes friends with a musician. In each case the person who befriends the artist or musician will often begin to see or hear things that they did not apprehend previously. One starts going for walks with the artist, and all the visual things she is arrested by along the way come up: how deep a particular red becomes as the light changes, a shape that is revealed once a particular building has been completed or demolished, the

⁴⁴ Ibid, page 5

⁴⁵ *Good and Evil*; page 205

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juxtaposition of colours on a poster, and so on. Having been subjected to "contagion" by the artist, one often continues to see such things when one goes for a walk by oneself, where one previously did not. The same happens with music; "I just love that little piano riff," cries the musician, and if one is around such remarks for a while one finds oneself awakened to subtleties in music to which one has not previously paid attention. From such beginnings one comes to listen more attentively.

Contagion of this sort, where it involves the unconditional value of human beings, is most unlikely to turn us all into variations of Mother Theresa, but it may bring something of this way of seeing things into our reading of the world, so that we are less ready to edit out the person who, on the face of it, lacks the negotiating power to enter into our sense of what is important. Concepts that arise in response to things that really do occur and really do affect us allow such things a place in our language. If they have a place in our language, then they are able to have a place in our considerations. And if they have a place in our considerations, then they are at the very least candidates for inclusion in our reading of the external world. So, at this stage we can say that one key to our including the unconditional value of all human beings into our reading, remorse having shown us that this is possible, lies with the contagious effect of those rare human beings who genuinely love their fellow human beings, without discrimination. And a key to incorporating this into our general orientation lies

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with the ways in which such encounters, and other related experiences, are conceptualised.

Now I have earlier said that the most lucid reading of a morally serious encounter will involve an orientation to absolute Goodness, or in Wittgensteinian terms, a religious-point-of-view, whether or not the agent is a theist. In the above paragraph I speak of incorporating absolute value into our generally relative reading of the world. I am not arguing that we can or should replace relative value with the more absolute variety, but nor am I saying that we can simply add a few drops of absolutism to relativism, like vanilla to a cake. The term "moral compass" offers a very good analogy as to how absolute and relative value might be understood in relation to each other. A compass orients me geographically as I go about my relative travels from here to there. In analogous sense I see absolute value, with "G" for "good" standing where "N" for north stands on a compass, as potentially orienting my relative pursuits, so that those who have no relative claim on me may cease to be invisible or dismissible to me.

I have two further points to make before ending this chapter. In my earlier thinking on this topic, I used the term "sacred" to express the kind of value inherent to each and every human being, but have since changed to using "unconditional value." "Sacred" is a religious expression of unconditional value,

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related to absolute conceptions of value through the claim that all human beings are children of God. Gaita, speaking from a nontheistic position, and with some reservations, uses "infinite preciousness" or sometimes "inalienable preciousness" to fill that linguistic role.⁴⁶ As with the religious variant, there is a distinction between unconditional and relative preciousness marked by the word "infinite." While I have a preference for using natural language terms in both their religious and secular modes, I have in this instance gone with the distinction between unconditional and relative value because those terms seem better equipped than alternatives for marking out where the lines are drawn. Without such markers it seems too easy to slip into seeing 'sacredness' etc. just as the highest value on the scale of relative values – as referring to what is valuable relative to that set of concerns which in fact has highest priority. I have reluctantly parted company with natural language to speak of absolute and relative value, so as to more clearly rule out the "best of all relative things" versus "merely relative things" way of interpreting what is at issue.

My second point concerns religious belief, since someone could say, with all justification, "Why all this blather about absolute and relative value? Why not cut to the chase and say what you really mean, that without God there is no goodness worthy of the name? Or if you are reluctant to do that, rule God out altogether, and show us how you maintain realism regarding absolute concepts

⁴⁶ *Good and Evil*, page xv

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without God." This is my answer to that possible charge. Firstly, as I have said from the start, I am interested in the relationship between our direct responses and their conceptualisation rather than theory and its application. While I would agree with my objector that religions by and large have been the most consistent among our institutions at maintaining conceptions of absolute value, there are ways of thinking about religion that obscure rather than elucidate religion's offering in that regard, as well as secular lines of thought that really do shed light on things. Furthermore, if certain of our responses require conceptions of absolute value in order to be properly understood, then this requirement must extend beyond religion. If this is so, then it seems fruitful to seek shared ground between theistic and nontheistic ways of construing the unconditional value of all human beings. That said, in my next chapter I shall compare D Z Phillips' approach to the philosophy of religion with accounts that depend more upon philosophical metaphysics, with a view to showing that the former is conducive to the internalisation and development of a sense of absolute value, while the latter is not reliably so.

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Chapter 2: Meaning, Theistic Metaphysics and Living Faith

(1) Introduction

In my previous chapter, I referred to a nun whom Gaita says has had a profound influence on him, who treated the incurably damaged people in a psychiatric hospital without a trace of condescension. According to Gaita, while the nun's demeanour will have been informed by her belief that the patients were sacred, and perhaps children of God, one need not necessarily share that belief to be certain of what her love revealed, which is the infinite preciousness of each of the patients.⁴⁷ In other words, one may be convinced by what one encounters, such as the sacredness, preciousness or unconditional value of the patients as they are revealed by the nun's love, without being further convinced by whatever beliefs or commitments inform her actions. I shall now set out to show why I think that theism, where it is understood in terms of the relation between religious practice and its meaning, is conducive to finding and occupying much common ground with those who hold positions such as Gaita's, while theistic realism founded on philosophical metaphysics is not.

⁴⁷ Gaita, Raimond, "Love, Reason and Realism," paper presented at the APRA conference, University of Melbourne, 17-18 July 2010.

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In the section below I set out to show, by use of examples, the importance of conceptual clarification to all thought, but particularly to religious thought. I shall then go on, in the following section, to defend D. Z. Phillips' religious philosophy against criticisms made by John Haldane and Brian Clack, ultimately arguing that metaphysical explanations of God that arise from philosophy, purporting to be independent from living faith, are at best redundant for, and at worst antithetical to, the sort of reading that reveals others to us in terms of their unconditional value. Furthermore, such explanations fail to provide the common ground between theistic and nontheistic conceptualisations of absolute value that are relevant to this topic.

(2) Meaning

According to Simone Weil, "...meanings, which would seem like simple thoughts if taken abstractly, come flooding in from all sides, taking hold of my soul and transforming it from one moment to the next so that...I cannot call my soul my own."⁴⁸ Not only do meanings flood in from all sides, but an identical set of facts can mean different things in different contexts, as well as to different people, and can also be the site of multiple meanings, read simultaneously. Weil, though with a different purpose in mind than the one I have here, offers an example which illustrates this point:

⁴⁸ "Essay on the Notion of Reading," page 300

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...the object which engages our attention doesn't form the whole content of our thoughts. A happy young woman, expecting her first child, and sewing a layette, thinks about sewing it properly. But she never forgets for an instant the child she is carrying inside her. At precisely the same moment, somewhere in a prison workshop, a female convict is also sewing, thinking too, about sewing properly, for she is afraid of being punished. One might imagine both women doing the same work at the same time and having their attention absorbed by the same technical difficulties. And yet a whole gulf of difference lies between one occupation and the other.⁴⁹

If anyone were to ask in either case, "What is that woman doing?" the answer will be sewing. But an answer to the question "What does your sewing mean to you?" will reveal the "gulf of difference" between their situations. Within the action of sewing, the meaning invested in the work for each woman forms an aspect of the care taken in doing it; sewing carefully simply *goes with* making a layette for a cherished, expected child, and it also simply *goes with* seeking to avoid being punished in a prison. There is an intimate connection between fact and value: the sentences "This layette is for the child I am expecting," and "If my sewing does not meet the required standard I will be moved back to the laundry," reveal the reasons for sewing properly without the need for further value-based explanation; in each case the reasons go without saying – they are built into the contexts in which the sewing is done.

⁴⁹ Weil, Simone, *The Need for Roots*, trans. A F Wills, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952) page 95

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D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce put forward a clear example of this sort of thing using the offside rule in Association Football; no one says, "Player X is offside, so therefore he is in error," since the very term "offside" within the context of the rules and conventions of football *means* he is in error. To say that player X is offside is a claim that may be true or false: I may be watching the game from a position from which he appears to be offside but is not. In terms of fact he is in a certain position in the field, attended by the factual conditions that we apply to the offside rule. But to declare him to be offside is to automatically declare him to be in the wrong; the facts and the value involved are understood simultaneously. In a similar sense, we may be speaking truly or falsely in proclaiming someone a liar, but it is not a value-neutral thing to say. To describe someone as, tall, thirtyish, interested in gardening and a liar, is to offer a description with an evaluative sting in its tail. According to Phillips and Mounce:

Part of the reason, at least, why we find it difficult to understand the transition from fact to value, is that we tacitly define a fact as something that does not possess moral import. Given this assumption, it follows by definition that from such facts we cannot infer any value conclusions. If it be remembered, however, that we understand something as a fact only in terms of the concepts we have learnt, and that these are sometimes value concepts, the transition from fact to value may no longer baffle us.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Phillips, D.Z., and Mounce, H.O., *Moral Practices*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), page 10

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Even where we are able to purify facts of moral consideration, the fact that this-rather-than-that line of inquiry is pursued tends to arise from notions of value: we seek the facts about a crime because we think it would be good to prevent the person who is murdering women in such-and-such a place from continuing to do so, we seek vaccines that will reduce the incidence of AIDS or cervical cancer because we think we would be better off without such illnesses, and so on. If we valued different things, we would be interested in different facts or the same facts in different ways. Moreover, not only do empirical and moral meanings co-exist within the same events, but so do meanings that pertain to fears, desires, hopes, affections, aesthetic sensibilities and much else. "Meanings come flooding in from all sides," and multiple layers of meaning attend most of the actions and events that are significant enough to us to capture our attention.

To go back to the allegedly offside football player, let us assume that he is in an offside position on the field because he has been injured, and is taking himself out of the game. Firstly, this means, according to the conventions of the game, that the offside judgement is false, since participation in play is one of its conditions. Secondly, such conditions play no part in the range of meanings the medical official engages with in determining whether or not he has injured his Achilles tendon. Beyond those meanings there are meanings that pertain to what the injury means to the player and his career, to the player who replaces

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him on the field, to the rest of the team, the opposing team, the supporters, the punters and so on, and so on.

One can see from such an example a reason for the importance that people like D. Z. Phillips place on conceptual clarification, and also why they view the way we speak of things as key to this. It would not make sense for the referee to say, after conferring with the linesman, "I rule that this player's Achilles tendon is injured," or for the medical official to say, "After thoroughly checking the player's foot I have determined that he was not in fact offside." In both instances the judgements offered would crosswire meanings by purporting to assess each aspect (injury and being offside) in terms of the wrong authority for making such judgements, without reference to the relevant criteria, and so would come across as absurd.

When we bring these and other such considerations to bear on religious concepts, we can see how easily confusions can creep in, especially when we are theorising, in part because the language we use is so similar to the language we use in speaking about the empirical world, but we use it in a different *sense*. I say "especially when we are theorising", because in actual practice we are better at keeping our eye on the target, and if we were not, our utterances would often not make sense, as the above example is meant to show. And even where the sentences themselves are coherent, we can misunderstand their sense if we do

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not pay careful attention to the *kind* of discourse of which they are part. For instance, there is a world of difference between the sense that inheres in telling a child that "Grandma has died and gone to heaven," and that "Grandma has run out of sugar and gone to the supermarket." This shows in the fact that a response to the former that went "Really? How long do you think she will be?" would reveal a misunderstanding on the child's part.

A further problem arises when one line of discourse is overwhelmed by the predominance of another. To return to the football example, imagine a situation where as a society we had come to think that while it was important to play sport, allowing any level of injury whatsoever to happen on the field was seriously reprehensible, a burden on health resources and a dreadful example to others. Alterations would probably be made to the game to accommodate this concern, they may even be seen as needing to be made for football to retain its relevance, and the injury count could eventually trump the score in terms of meaningfulness, with a report on the match going something like, "Three men were bruised and one contracted a sprain in the Arsenal-Tottenham match," followed by a lively discussion as to who was responsible in each case, and as an afterthought, "the score was one-nil in favour of Arsenal." Should this occur, the point of winning or losing would be somewhat occluded by the point of avoiding injury: someone who was solely interested in the score and indifferent to the injury count might be seen as "missing the point."

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While there will be other ways in which we can get the lines of meaning entangled, those mentioned above seem to be two important ones. Firstly, we can overlook the way in which similar sentences are used, or in Wittgensteinian terms, the grammar of their usage, and thus misapply concepts, (like making offside judgements on medical grounds, or treating the difference between the two "grandma" sentences as pertinent to a relation between reasons and destinations, and nothing more), and we can also allow one area of meaning to be absorbed into, or eclipsed by, another, as I have set out to show in the injury-count versus goal-count example.

(3) Religious Meaning and Metaphysical Concepts

Confusions of these sorts can have a bearing on our understanding of religious discourse. Firstly, by disregarding the contexts in which such terms have their meaning, we can purport to measure religious claims against a yardstick better suited to other kinds of inquiry. Secondly, we can allow religious meanings to be occluded by meanings that are more pertinent to a discipline with a louder public voice, such as empirical science. For example, Phillips accuses what he calls "open-door epistemology" of trying to get miracles past scientific objections by employing a context that treats religion rather as a mysterious *extension* of science: "The trouble is that when this different context is invoked it is all too like the context of which miracles are supposed to be independent. The prestige of

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science is such that religion...simply appears as a form of super-science,"⁵¹ he says. A problem with this for believers is not only that the point of the religious claim disappears, but also that the resultant philosophical-metaphysical picture can come to so inhabit what it means to believe in God that its rejection can then come to seem heretical to believers themselves. This attitude I think to some extent motivates Haldane's charge against Phillips that "if religious claims do not have a metaphysical range, but are confined to the world of human imagination and commitment, then what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of naturalism, but only the variety of its expressions."⁵²

I begin my defence of Phillips against this charge firstly by asserting that the above claim expresses at least a partial misrepresentation. In an early paper of his, entitled "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God,"⁵³ which is an important paper in that it underpins much of his subsequent writing, Phillips posits that the question "Is God real or not?" is mistakenly construed when it is construed as a question of fact.⁵⁴ To begin with, there is a high level of agreement as to the sort of thing that counts as an empirical fact, and, as Phillips points out, "refusal to admit something is a fact in the face of maximum evidence might be cause for alarm, as in the case of someone who sees chairs in

⁵¹ Phillips, D. Z. , "Miracles and Open-Door Epistemology," in *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides*, (Swansea Studies in Philosophy, 2000) page 135

⁵² Haldane, John, "Phillips and Eternal Life: A Response to Mikel Burley," in *Philosophical Investigations*, 31:3 (July 2008), page 252

⁵³ Phillips, D. Z., "Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God," in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No 53 (October 1963), pages 344-350

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 344

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a room which in fact is empty."⁵⁵ Disagreement between theists and atheists does not take this form: the theist may be deeply disappointed when a friend ceases to believe in God, but is unlikely to question her friend's seriousness or sanity on that basis alone. However, if the same friend seriously claimed to see chairs in a room that everyone else saw as empty, this would raise concerns of a different kind. If you are a theist you might think that the friend who has ceased to believe in God has lost their way, but not necessarily their marbles. This sort of thing underlines the fact that in practice talk of God and talk of empirical facts are meaningful in quite different ways.

Hence Phillips proposes that it is more fruitful to compare the question "What kind of reality is divine reality?" not with the question "Is this physical object real or not?" but instead with the question "What kind of reality is the reality of physical objects?"⁵⁶ The idea is that the latter "is a question of whether it is possible to speak of truth and falsity in the physical world; a question prior to determining the truth or falsity of any particular matter of fact."⁵⁷ Similarly, when we are asking about the existence of God, we are asking a question about a *kind* of reality, not about the reality of this or that object. In short, if we are to talk about God we need to know what it is we are talking about. The way religious language is used, and what it means in practice, gives us an indication of what it

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, page 345

⁵⁷ Ibid.

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is what we are talking about. This will allow us to see that religious discourse involves a different language game, to use the Wittgensteinian phrase, from the one in which we assess empirical objects. In light of this, Phillips points out that the differences between the discourses in which children learn about God via stories and so on and the theology of the professional theologian are differences of complexity and maturity, not of kind or function: "In each case theology decides what it makes sense to say to or about God."⁵⁸ Not philosophy. "The role of philosophy in this context is not to justify, but to understand."⁵⁹ In response to an objection along the lines of the one put forward by Haldane, that his analysis stresses religious meaning at the expense of religious truth, without indicating which religion is the true one, he asks, "But why should anyone suppose that philosophy can answer that question?"⁶⁰

It is worth noting at this point the role of the philosophy of religion. The philosophy of religion differs from theology in that with the former the existence of God is not presupposed, whereas with the latter it is. Hence, the theist religious philosopher who wants to show that God exists, while avoiding theological presuppositions, must turn to generally accepted epistemic practices to make her case. The problem is that generally accepted epistemic practices provide no context for testing religious claims *as* religious claims, so as a result

⁵⁸ Ibid, page 346

⁵⁹ Ibid, page 347

⁶⁰ Ibid, page 349

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religious claims are treated as propositions to be judged as any other kind of proposition might be judged. However, our use of language has shown us that religious claims are not believed in quite the same way as other propositions are believed. Uprooted from living religious faith, metaphysical explanations produced by philosophers intending to prove God's existence, and reliant on generally accepted epistemic models for producing such proofs, either presuppose the living faith in an "under the counter" fashion, with the assumption that their arguments will carry it along with them, or alternatively affirm a super-empiricist God that bears little or no relation to the God that believers actually believe in. This latter is what concerns Phillips, and his solution to it is to assert that divine reality must be understood as a distinct class of reality, different in character from empiricist reality. He supports this claim with evidence from religious linguistic practices, and concentrates on clarifying religious concepts rather than formulating metaphysical arguments intended to prove or disprove the existence of God. That way one can practice the philosophy of religion without pre-supposing the existence of God, and without distorting the content of religious belief in order to talk about it.

There are lines of inquiry other than the conceptual clarification proposed by Phillips that do meet these standards, such as John Bishop's inquiry into the moral justifiability of religious commitment, based on the Jamesian idea of faith

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as a doxastic venture in the face of evidential ambiguity.⁶¹ Here, the nature of religious commitment is not distorted but left as it is, while what is at issue is an ethical assessment of the content of religious commitment. However, the fact that there are other ways of avoiding both the presupposition of God's existence and the distortion of religious belief in the practice of religious philosophy does not take away from the thinking behind Phillips' project.

Phillips is not asserting that religion is "confined to the world of human imagination and commitment," rather, he is asserting that (1) Divine reality is a different category of reality from empirical reality, (2) Theology, not philosophy, is the authority to which direct questions pertaining to this reality are deferred, (3) Philosophy is qualified to offer conceptual clarifications, but not metaphysical explanations, and (4) it is within the world of human practice and commitment that the concepts standing in need of clarification, as well as the practical usage which provides guidance as to their clarification, are to be found.⁶² This in turn leads to the notion of "knowing where to stop,"⁶³ which involves recognising that

⁶¹ Bishop, John, *Believing by Faith*, (Oxford University Press, 2007)

⁶² Phillips, D. Z. , "From World to God?" in *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides*, page 61 - To say that the meaning of God's reality can be found in the world, is not to deny that God is other than the world in the sense important to religion. It is religiously important to distinguish between God and the world, but to see what this distinction comes to one must give some examples of the ways in which it is used.

⁶³ Phillips, D. Z., "Knowing Where to Stop," in *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, (The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986), page 17

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one must resist the temptation to move beyond clarification into explanations that are not within the scope of philosophy.⁶⁴

This position is taken by some commentators as placing religion beyond criticism from the outside, and while there is not space here to go into that argument, the point seems to be more to do with clarifying the terms under which religious beliefs can be sensibly either endorsed or criticised, rather than shielding religious belief from attack: the idea is that if you are to criticise a religious belief, you need to be clear about the *kind* of thing you are criticising. It is not that there is no question about the justifiability, from an independent standpoint, of commitment to particular religious beliefs: the point is rather that that question is treated fairly only given a grasp of the kind of stance on reality that religious commitment involves. Along similar lines, an atheist in rejecting religious belief altogether would reject, wholly or partially, the applicability of a *category* of truth claims, rather than the idea of God as an implausible factual claim among other such claims. I say wholly or partially, because an atheist or agnostic may, as seems to be the case with Gaita, accept some meanings that are commonly associated with religious belief, without being able to honestly

⁶⁴ The notion of "a stop," at which point one seeks to describe accurately rather than to explain, or to suppose that explanation is possible, is also applicable to those responses that lead us to consider what Gaita calls "the essentially mysterious." It will come up again at different points, since it represents a response to phenomena that cannot be understood in relativistic terms.

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commit to theism. It is possible, for example, to accept the need for absolute concepts, without agreeing to anything further.

One might raise an objection at this point by pointing to the natural theological arguments, which one might take to take to secure the rational foundations of theism, but as Phillips points out:

Consider, for example, the changed status of proofs of the existence of God in enlightenment thought. In Anselm and Aquinas, it can be argued, at least, that their proofs are apologetic attempts from within the faith to meet objections to it from without. We may have our opinions as to how satisfactory these apologetic strategies are. Yet in enlightenment thought, what is demanded of the proofs is very different. Instead of being defences from within an existing faith, that faith itself is said to depend upon them. They become foundations of the faith. The religious category is no longer decisive. It now stands in need of external justification.⁶⁵

Saints Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas were philosophical theologians, living in times when religious authority was deferred to as a fully legitimate public authority, and produced their proofs in *relation* to a living faith. In fact Anselm says, at the end of his ontological argument, "Thanks be to thee, good Lord,

⁶⁵ Phillips, D. Z., "Revelation and the Loss of Authority," in *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides*, page 86

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because I now understand by thy light what I formerly believed by thy gift...,⁶⁶ which makes it quite clear that for him at least religious faith preceded any arguments he made in support of it.

It is not true that, in Phillips' hands, religious belief is necessarily reduced to a matter of imagination and commitment, as Haldane puts it, since in grasping divine reality as a category of reality, one can surely say the creed, or otherwise affirm one's faith, without equivocation. But what one cannot do is justify one's acceptance of the creed on philosophical-metaphysical grounds. And if one thinks that the divine reality to which one then assents can amount to no more than some sort of quasi-realism that is entirely to do with human responsiveness, one might remember that Blaise Pascal, hardly known for his non-realism, after a religious experience by which he was profoundly affected, wrote "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars."⁶⁷ Furthermore, going by the wager passage, Pascal's suggested remedy for non-belief was immersion in religious practice, not the acceptance of arguments intended to prove God's existence. What is in the balance is not realism versus non-realism, but whether or not realism based in philosophical metaphysics, purporting to come from a position of religious neutrality, is a fully legitimate way of dealing with religious claims.

⁶⁶ Hick, J, *The Existence of God*, (The Macmillan Company, 1964) page 27

⁶⁷ Pascal, Blaise, *The Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, (Penguin Books, 1968), page 309

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This raises questions as to what it is we mean when we use the term "real" and here my earlier thought experiment in which the injury-count determined the "real" outcome of a football match comes into play. When one line of discourse is overwhelmed by another, the range of meanings pertinent to the former can get lost in dispatches. When we consider that the neutral or default position is understood as a secular position, and that the scientific epistemic model represents the preferred secular method for testing truth claims, one can see how readily the concept "fact" can come to seem so synonymous with the concept "real," that to say that God's existence is not a fact appears, on the face of it, to assert that God is not real. Haldane, in response to a critique of his paper, "Philosophy, Death and Immortality,"⁶⁸ by Mikel Burley,⁶⁹ says

Burley introduces an opposition between being factual and being evaluatively significant, and identifies being factual with being empirical or physical. But I deny the first opposition: something may be both factual and spiritually significant; and I resist the identification of the factual with the physical (or with the empirical). The notion of facticity is intimately connected with truth as indicated by the mutual entailment of "it is a fact that p" and "it is true that p."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Haldane, John, "Philosophy, Death and Immortality," in *Philosophical Investigations*, 30.3 (July 2007)

⁶⁹ Burley, Mikel, "Phillips and Eternal Life: A Response to Haldane," in *Philosophical Investigations* 31.3, (July, 2008)

⁷⁰ Haldane, John, "Phillips and Eternal Life: A response to Mikel Burley," in *Philosophical Investigations*, 31.3 (2008), page 257

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After all I have said so far, it is clear that I am not going to dispute the claim that something may be both factual and spiritually significant. Moreover, the notion of fact can anyway be used in an extended sense, as is shown when people speak of moral or mathematical facts. There is a difference, however, between knowing a fact, or accepting some factual claim, and "being in truth" in the Kierkegaardian sense, where the latter has an importance that goes beyond merely having a factually correct representation of reality. In Chapter One, borrowing from Raimond Gaita, I spoke of distinguishing lucid remorse from self-pity or sentimentality in terms of purity, a distinction which seems to me interpretable as employing the notion of "being in truth." The difference between being lucidly remorseful over p (e.g. having acted in a certain way) and being sentimentally or self-pityingly regretful over p , is not a difference in what facts are known or believed, but a difference in one's own relation, as believing subject, to the facts. The notion of truth remains central here, but it is truth of a relational nature, and we will fail to capture it if we attempt to speak of it solely in terms of fact.

Haldane could of course reply that there is in this example a factual object, a human being, who is feeling remorse, and there is also a factual God whose attributes include pure goodness; that all I am doing is affirming Burley's opposition between the factual and the evaluatively significant, which is what he is denying. However, there still seems to be a problem, since Haldane confuses

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things further by conflating two senses of the term "empirical." Following on a short passage in which he outlines a disagreement between himself and Burley with regard to the metaphysical status of the resurrected Christ, he says, "Other than by the suggested equation with the physical, Burley does not say what he means by "empirical." One might be able to explain it as "detectable by the senses," but that excludes from the empirical realm objects too small or too remote to be observed."⁷¹ The problem here is this: in applying the term "empirical" to the resurrected Christ, one is talking about things that are available to experience, and people are recorded as having experienced seeing the resurrected Christ. However, in talking about objects that are too small to be detected, one is using the term "empirical" as it is used in the phrase "empirical science." Obviously, objects that are too small to be detected cannot fit into the category of the empirical understood as the directly experienceable, since we do not knowingly experience what we cannot detect. However, where very small or very remote objects are concerned, the scientific method copes well with unobservable theoretical postulates, connecting what it affirms about them with what is directly observable, and bringing them thereby into the broader category of the empirical. On the other hand, we cannot subject the resurrected Christ to that sort of scientific inquiry, although we could not talk about the risen Christ at all had no one claimed to have detected him. What is more, it seems abundantly clear that both Phillips and Burley are using the term "empirical" in reference to

⁷¹ Ibid.

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those things that are open to scientific testing, and not to encounters with religious entities. Conflations of this kind provide the ground for talking of God as a "fact among facts," with a blurred line between empirically testable hypotheses and encountered reality.

Haldane seems to be using the term "is a fact" as broadly synonymous with "true," in which case his disagreement with Phillips may not be as deep as he seems to think, though some level of disagreement would remain, since Phillips would think it misleading or confused to say that God's existence is a fact. However, Phillips *does* allow for divine reality, and attends to the religious meaning of human practices, not because he thinks that religious devotions occur independently of any further reality, but because he sees the religious meaning associated with human practices as a legitimate subject for philosophical discussion. Furthermore, Haldane does appreciate Phillips' religious hermeneutics, but understands him as not allowing for transcendent references,⁷² without seeming to appreciate the difference between not allowing for transcendent references at all, and not considering the affirmation of the transcendent to be achievable through philosophical metaphysics.

If we are going to affirm the reality of religious entities by insisting that their existence is a fact, we should at least acknowledge that they are not open to the

⁷² Ibid, page 253

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sort of testing and checking that is generally applicable to empirical facts. It is also worth noting that, when facticity is applied to God, there is something of a problem with the idea of an infinite fact, understood analogously to an empirical fact, since the concept "fact" assumes a finitude that permits us to delineate the limits of the fact in question, while infinitude means without limit. Furthermore, the definition of God taken from Aquinas and included in the Catholic catechism certainly affirms God's reality but does not sit at all comfortably with the empirical notion of what it is for something to count as a fact.⁷³

Not only are religiously significant claims broadly resistant to empirical methods of verification, in many instances it would make little or no difference to their religious significance if they could be. I say in many rather than all instances, because it is of course important to believers to affirm that Jesus, St Paul and so on are not fictional characters. However, Phillips puts forward a thought experiment in which St Paul has exactly the same experience on the road to Damascus as is described in the scriptures, but responds to it differently:

⁷³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Holy See, 1992, Part 1, Section 1, Chapter 1, 42-43 - God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image-bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God--"the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable"--with our human representations. Our human words always fall short of the mystery of God. Admittedly, in speaking about God like this, our language is using human modes of expression; nevertheless it really does attain to God himself, though unable to express him in his infinite simplicity. Likewise, we must recall that "between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilitude"; and that "concerning God, we cannot grasp what he is, but only what he is not, and how other beings stand in relation to him."

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Let us grant, in the philosophical terms under discussion, that God gave Paul a revelation on the road to Damascus. Let us also grant that the propositional content of the proposition is true and is acknowledged by Paul. He acknowledges that Christ is his Lord. The only divergence from the Bible story is that we are to imagine that after receiving his revelation and assigning a truth-value to the proposition, Saul continued, in full fury, persecuting the Christians. Would anyone, in this event, say that Saul had received a revelation of Christ? Of course not. There is no proof of the spirit and God is spirit.⁷⁴

One might add that if a less dramatic phenomenon, say a dream in which Christ appeared, had brought about in St Paul the complete transformation recorded in the Bible, and the same subsequent actions on his part, that dream would almost certainly have been understood as involving a genuine visitation from Christ, because the proof of the divine reality of St Paul's experience in religious terms lies with the nature of his transformation and its sustained effect on him, not with the metaphysical status of Christ's appearance to him. It is worth noting as well that Phillips says here that "God is spirit," not "God is a concept confined to a world of human imagination and commitment." Phillips also cites St Teresa of Avilla, among whose criteria for determining whether or not her visions were really of Christ were their consistency with the teachings of the church and also their fruits; since "...a revelation from God leads to spiritual fruits, whereas what

⁷⁴ Phillips, D. Z., "Revelation and the Loss of Authority," in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, page 91

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is from the devil leads to an aridity of the soul."⁷⁵ One finds the same sort of thing in *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, where Brother Ruffino has the experience of being told that he is damned by a visitation from the devil, who appears to him under the guise of Christ. St Francis's suggested method for determining the true identity of the apparition is to say something deeply insulting to it, since this would drive the devil off in a huff, whereas Christ, "who never hardens the heart of the faithful man but rather softens it," would not be thus daunted.⁷⁶ In these instances the criteria for establishing veracity are not empirical, they are spiritual, dogmatic and historical, and empirical or quasi-empirical explanations, even where they may be possible, would not make an iota of difference to the relevant kind of evaluation applied to what took place. Rather, the measures for evaluating the truth of such events are to be found in theology and in religious traditions, where distinctions are made on criteria such as those used by St Teresa, or on a historic understanding of the kind of evidential differences that are held to obtain between divine inspiration and mental or emotional delusion, or wilful deception for that matter. One can see an illustration of this by comparing the empirical claim, "He must have been infected by the Hepatitis C virus since his last medical examination, since the relevant anti-bodies now show in his blood tests," with the religious claim, "The

⁷⁵ Ibid, page 92

⁷⁶ Brown, Raphael, *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, (Image Books, Doubleday, New York, 1958), page 112 – The suggested insult was for Br Ruffino to say confidently, on being told by the apparition that he was damned, "Open your mouth and I will (empty my bowels) in it," with "empty my bowels" having been used by Brown to replace an even coarser term. (page 339, note 29)

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experience he describes must surely have come from God, because, despite having been a cheat, a liar and a layabout up until that time, he has led a saintly life ever since." Both sentences assume a relation between evidence and truth, but treat a different kind of evidence as relevant to the kind of truth sought.

As I have said, the problem has its focus in the word "real." Because the "neutral" terms for determining what is real and what is not are secular, and you do not properly qualify as a theist if you do not think God is real, the temptation is to winch conceptions of God into a category of reality that accords with secular terms. "Real" within this framework, tends to mean empirically real (in the scientific sense), while issues of the spirit tend to be relegated to a lesser status, in part because the grounds for determining their reality are neither straightforward nor universally agreed upon, so as to disqualify them from neutrality. Because theists must resist God's being relegated in this way, there is a temptation for them to attribute to Him a reality that reflects empirical reality, with added features like invisibility and infinity understood as incalculable size, along with various omni-properties that reflect super-sized versions of their human equivalents. What we end up with from this exercise is a quasi-empirical conception, which is immune from the sort of scrutiny to which empirical things are normally subject, and which also manages to shift the focus from what is actually important to believers about divine reality. The result is a secular God,

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resistant to secular methods of verification, and uprooted from the field of meaning in which a God can be sensibly discussed.

It is probable that Christ's appearances after the resurrection, and St Paul's experience on the road to Damascus fit *none* of the non-religious criteria we have for determining factual objects, and why should they? As I have shown above, their importance in the field of religious belief lies with *their* transformative power, whose veracity is judged on religious criteria, not with *our* capacity to come up with metaphysical explanations for the phenomena involved: it is very likely beyond us to do so anyway. How indeed do we explain a visitation that appears as Christ but is in reality the devil? Or what St Paul means when he describes the risen Christ using the term "spiritual body" or *soma pneumatikon*, which Haldane agrees is "conceptually perplexing?"⁷⁷ Perhaps we should not try, but rather turn our attention to what the attendant transformations of those who have had such experiences *mean*. After all, there are traditional criteria for distinguishing the true from the false in this field, which are actually relevant to the compelling questions that arise from such occurrences, in a way that metaphysical explanations are not. Furthermore, the non-religious commentator, rather than being excluded from the conversation, is actually better equipped to participate in it in a relevant manner where the kind of meaning that is understood as religiously important is made clear. It may be

⁷⁷ , "Phillips and Eternal Life: A response to Mikel Burley," page 256

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more fruitful, from the non-religious person's point-of-view, to address a question like, "Does this have anything to say to someone who does not share in the religious commitment that St Paul came to embrace?" than "What, if anything, is the metaphysical status of Christ as he appeared in St Paul's vision?"

When we overlook the differences in meaning that underpin empirical and religious inquiries we are apt to seek answers to the wrong sort of question from the wrong sort of authority. This leads some of us to seek concessions from science that accord with religion, thus construed, and vice versa, which is all a bit like asking medical officials to rule on football transgressions or asking for the referee's diagnosis of football injuries: the methodology and authority of one category of meaning is ill-equipped for addressing the questions of the other.

Let us look briefly at the enterprise of trying to get science to accommodate creation. If we decide to treat belief in creation as a scientific theory (the position known as creationism), it offers nothing upon which to base scientific work. As Phillips points out with regard to causation, if the answer "God" were given to all questions of causation, this would amount to no answer at all. "If I ask what caused the window to break," he asks, "and am given as a reply, 'The same thing that made your foot itch, the flowers grow and the mountains crumble,' am I any nearer to understanding what made the window break?"⁷⁸ A

⁷⁸ Phillips, D. Z., "From World to God?" in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, page 47

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similar story applies to belief in creation; it offers no processes amenable to scientific tests, so nothing with which a scientific project might gain traction. This is not to say that there is *no* sense in which one might claim that God made the world, nor that the practice of science is antithetical to the practice of religion, only that such a thesis offers no basis for scientific inquiry, since it is unable to generate testable predictions to which the scientific method might be applied.

We arrive at a similar dead end when place religious concepts in the hands of an authority that is ill-equipped to answer the more serious questions that arise in relation to them. While we are busy trying to establish the metaphysical parameters of St Paul's experience, for example, which seems to be quite beyond our expertise anyway, our attention is taken away from the radical transformation that is the *point* of what happened to him, the reason why we are talking about him in the first place, and the reason why his experience is understood as belonging to the religious category rather than the scientific, sporting, artistic or some other category, each of which will have its own authority and criteria of evaluation.

Perhaps more troubling is the valorisation of the notion of "fact" that attends the metaphysical attempts at establishing divine truths, and the apparent relegation of evaluative significance, especially since, as I mentioned earlier, what we find evaluatively significant largely underpins both the facts with which we engage,

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and the manner in which we engage with them. St Paul offers an excellent example of this, since the evaluative significance that he gave to one and the same set of facts was so radically altered by his experience on the road to Damascus as to cause them to appear to him almost as a different set of facts. The self-same people whom he had previously understood as a scourge he came to understand as his beloved brothers and sisters, and his response to his ex-allies, by then his opponents, was not to seek to kill or harm them, but to want them to see the world as he had come to see it. What this amounted to was not a change of opinion, after due consideration of evidence, but a radical change in orientation, and hence a radical change in what the facts *meant* to him. We see a limited analogy to this, though of much less moment, on a mundane level, when someone who was a drug addict replaces her addiction with more positive pursuits, and we say, "She completely turned her life around." For this person, the facts are no longer organised in terms of drug money, drug supplies, potential arrest, obstacles to drug-taking and so on, but in terms that most of us would think both more clear-sighted and more fruitful. In a similar sense, St Paul, after an experience that culminated in "the scales falling from his eyes," ceased to read meaning from the facts in light of the preservation of a status quo and the worthlessness of those who challenged it, but in light of God's love as it was revealed to him by Christ. When we posit divine reality as a fact among facts, so as to speak of it in neutral terms, we overlook the point that divine reality, for believers, amounts to an orientation toward reality as a whole,

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in which facts are encountered in a particular way, ideally in the light of divine love, and not as an added feature *to* empirical reality. Haldane would very likely accept much of this, but insist that a believer, by definition, believes in *something that exists*, and that along with Phillips I am focussing on belief itself rather than on its referent.

Along similar lines to Haldane's, Brian Clack says, "...for the Wittgensteinian, *belief in God* is not to be understood as *belief that there is a God*. Whereas belief that there is a God would be a theoretical belief, a cool belief in a putative fact (the existence of something), belief in God is more like an affective attitude."⁷⁹ Further, using pain behaviour as an example, he suggests that for the Wittgensteinian, many of our more sophisticated and developed beliefs can be sourced in primitive expressions, saying:

The initial non-linguistic expression of pain is not the result of any intellectual operation, but is an instinctual primitive reaction. Once language has been grafted onto such expressions, a *conceptual space is created* within which a fuller articulation, development, and indeed experiencing of pain can be developed. Similarly, further development of the primitive reaction of tending another brings about medical care, as well as great creative thought, such as the compassion-rooted moral philosophy of Schopenhauer. And here it is essential to be reminded that without the primitive reaction of tending, no hospitals would

⁷⁹ Clack, Brian R, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), page 100

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have been established, no ethical praise for mercy, for such thoughts and endeavours would be entirely alien to us. (my emphasis)⁸⁰

When applied to religion, this way of thinking appears, at face value, to root our religious responses in instinctive human behaviours, while denying anything external toward which such behaviours are directed.

To respond to this it seems necessary to separate the claim that metaphysical speculation, purporting to come from a neutral position, can add nothing to our understanding of the divine, from the assumption that if we abandon metaphysical speculation then all we have is religious language, with nothing whatsoever, of any sort, corresponding to the word "God" apart from the refinement of a primitive response. It is true that there are Wittgensteinian atheists. It is no doubt also true that one can employ this line of thinking in support of a form of non-realism, where "stop"⁸¹ does not just mean "resist the temptation to come up with explanations," but "go no further than describing what is believed". However, Phillips is not doing that; he is not denying God's reality, he is denying that metaphysical speculation, sans religious context, adds anything to our understanding of the divine. His reason for sticking with religious language and concepts is not because he is convinced that there is no God, but because he thinks that the best philosophy can do is to clarify the relevant

⁸⁰ Ibid, page 123

⁸¹ The idea of "a stop," is the idea that one should stop seeking explanation for a particular phenomenon and instead seek to accurately describe it. See above, page 60, fn 64

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concepts while refraining from attempts at explanation. Rather than supporting a non-realist understanding of God, he is attempting to free religious thought from what he calls "philosophical realism infected by empiricism."⁸² To this end he says:

Defences and attacks on belief in God may become defences of and attacks on a philosophical chimera that has little to do with a living faith. We have seen that one influential route by which this epistemic divide is created is the assumption that our epistemic practices are themselves a form of belief which presuppose a conception of reality independent of them...Despite claiming to be realists, philosophers in this tradition can only give us probabilities. They cannot get to grips with the sense of the claim that a transcendent God really dwells in our midst. Their empiricism can only yield philosophical realism. What we need, in religion as elsewhere, is realism without empiricism.⁸³

(4) Conclusion

Four interconnected questions remain to be answered, which I shall attend to in turn: (1) Can one retain a realist conception of the divine without the support of philosophical metaphysics? (2) If so, is our understanding of divine reality clarified if we jettison philosophical metaphysical explanation, or at the very least demand that our understanding follows from a living faith rather than presuming to proceed from a neutral position? (3) What, if anything does Phillips' account

⁸² "Revelation and the Loss of Authority," in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, page 82

⁸³ Ibid.

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add to our ability to apprehend other human beings as sacred, or of unconditional value, that metaphysical conceptions of God do not? And (4) In what, if any, sense does Phillips' account, rather than place religion beyond criticism, in fact provide a basis, that metaphysical accounts do not, for common ground between theists and those atheists and agnostics who share certain theistic sensibilities, such as the willingness to see unconditional value in others?

In response to question (1) I turn to concept formation. Firstly, there is the Wittgensteinian idea expressed by Clack, that conceptual space is created for pain experiences when "language is grafted onto" expressions of pain. Further to this, in Chapter One, section (3), I referred to Gaita's account of Plato's seeking to make conceptual space for Socrates' bold but convincing assertions. I also claimed, and have repeated here, that conceptual space must be made or else retained for concepts such as love, purity and Goodness if the apprehension of others as sacred, or of unconditional value, is to remain a living possibility for us. Expressions of pain and similar are connected with religious expressions, not necessarily in terms of continuity between one and the other, but in terms of what things mean to us; or what is important enough to us to demand articulation from us. According to Wittgenstein, "Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expressions of our interest, and direct our interest."⁸⁴

Underlying the very idea of concept-formation is the attempt to do justice to

⁸⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, German and English in facing pages, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1958), 570, page 151e

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reality through the medium of language; to bring something that is at once private and mute into the realm of the public and intelligible without misrepresentation. At the core of religious life is not metaphysical conjecture, but something more like revelation and witness, initially struggling to find words so that what has been revealed or witnessed is accurately transmitted and faithfully preserved. From a Christian point of view, one can even look at the doctrine of the trinity in this light; not primarily as a metaphysical treatise, but as an attempt to do justice in words to the relation between Christ, God as Christ revealed him to be, and the continuance of divine action in the world, as exemplified by the lives of saints. Concept formation of this sort inevitably precedes theological metaphysics, and does not follow from them. In stressing conceptual clarification in relation to living faith, Phillips' method of dealing with questions of religion cannot be dismissed as non-realist. Neither can it be regarded as arbitrary, or no more than a study of purely affective states, since what can sensibly be said about God is limited by history and theological tradition. But unlike metaphysical conceptions, it is rooted in living faith rather than philosophical epistemology and metaphysics. Phillips in fact rejects both metaphysical realism and anti-realism in favour of what he calls "ordinary realism",⁸⁵ perhaps because realism for him involves attending to what the relation between humans and God actually means. This seems to me rather more realistic than attempting to ascertain theoretically what God must be like from a position of human limitation,

⁸⁵ "Epistemic Practices," in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, page 36

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purporting to approximate a view from outside of history and beyond infinity, equipped with epistemic toolkits that are suited to empiricism and rationalism. This is especially so if we follow this course at the cost of what religion means to believers, whose accommodation would compromise our so-called neutrality.

In answer to question (2), the insight that underpins Phillips' work is that if one were persuaded to believe in God on the basis of metaphysical realism, a God rendered plausible by generally accepted epistemic practices, then it would not be the God of religion by which one was captured, but by a fine argument or brilliant hypothesis. This is because God for believers does not represent an invisible fact added to the world of facts, but engagement within a category of meaning, most often understood as divine love, as it is expressed in the statement that God is love. Furthermore, there is nothing in Phillips' work to prevent one from turning to theology for metaphysical explanations, if one finds them necessary, since there such explanations stand or fall on religious authority rather than on supposedly epistemologically neutral assumptions. In comparison, metaphysical conceptions of God, divorced from a living faith, add an impotent secular feature, posited as an omnipotent feature, to a secular landscape. Since the God that believers actually believe in is no such being, this metaphysical construction inevitably stands in the way of religious understanding rather than facilitating it.

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I shall now address question (3), what, if anything does Phillips' account add to our ability to apprehend other human beings as sacred, or of unconditional value, that metaphysical conceptions of God do not? Where Haldane and Clack see in Phillips' work the danger of belief being reduced to "human imagination and commitment," or "an affective attitude," so long as faith goes unsupported by metaphysical explanations, I see a greater danger in placing too much store on metaphysical explanations that are divorced from religious life, especially those in which God's reality is presented as a super-fact. It is generally agreed by theists that God is a hidden God, whose reality appears to humans as evidentially ambiguous. Metaphysical arguments have not made serious inroads into that judgement, and even where some may claim otherwise, their claims are not so widely accepted as to make their rejection a matter of resisting rationally compelling evidence.

However, the relevant affective attitudes, so readily prefaced with the word "mere", present a place where one might look for effects that follow from the relation between the human and the divine, as is shown in the transformative character of St Paul's conversion. It is worth noting that this emphasis on the affective attitude does not mean an abandonment of reason to emotion, since it is through the application of reason that we distinguish the affective attitudes that may be seen as responses to the divine from the general run of attractions, repulsions, delusions and so on, and it is also to some extent through reason

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that affective attitudes are translated into practical action, as happens when we ask ourselves, "What does this mean I should do?" or "What does this require of me?" In addition, serious thought is involved in the attempt to apply a concept so as to faithfully convey a reality through the medium of language. The point is that reason follows from, rather than produces or replaces, the affective attitude that is understood as a response to the divine. Furthermore, the affective attitude involved cannot be reduced purely to emotion; in the case of religious commitment it is often something more like conviction, or commitment to something whose relevance, for the believer, seems undeniable. But most importantly, it is on the relational level, or the level of the affective attitude, that spiritually significant change may occur, where greed, for example, may come to look pointless and give way to selflessness, or vanity to humility. This is the significant possibility toward which Phillips' account directs us.

In comparison, the metaphysical explanation by itself lacks the sort of force that might re-orientate us in relation to the divine; a God posited as a fact among facts adds an invisible though highly disputable extension to secular reality, but cannot fundamentally alter our orientation within that reality. Even where love is one of the primary features attributed to this God, the secular orientation associated with the concept "fact" implies an expanded version of earthly love, rather than a divine love in relation to which earthly love may be transformed. The acceptance of God on metaphysical grounds alone, without modifying

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influences, puts one at risk of becoming like the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, with an extra metaphysical level of self to preserve, informed by the features attributed to the metaphysical construction, but at the cost of the sort of sensibility that might press us to see the world in an altered light, and which would permit us to properly recognise the stranger, bleeding and broken, by the side of the road. If I, like the Good Samaritan, am able to properly apprehend that stranger, I am not simply apprehending a set of facts: the Levite too apprehends the same facts. What I am apprehending is what it *means* to be that person, under those conditions, from an orientation informed by divine love.

Finally, there is question (4), which pertains to the possibility of common ground between the theist and the nontheist who shares or respects certain sensibilities, commonly associated with theism, such as the claim that each and every human being is sacred, or of unconditional value, or as Gaita has it, infinitely precious. As is shown by Gaita's response to the nun, non-believers as well as believers can be struck by the kinds of events and expressions of sensibility that are understood by theists in relation to the divine. In the face of someone like this nun, or Mother Teresa, perhaps, the nontheist may well find themselves taken aback and sent reaching for adequate concepts. Furthermore, especially in cases where a common historical culture informs the event under consideration, nontheists as well as theists are often quite similarly attuned to the difference between instances such as that between the person who goes to teach in the

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slums of South America because she soberly believes she has been called by God to a vocation, and the person who insists that he shot his neighbour because God told him to do so. In the former case, while the theist will often take the claim in her stride, the nontheist will often at least recognise its seriousness, and perhaps allow that it gives pause for reflection, while in the latter case, both nontheist and theist will assume that the act is informed by madness or deception rather than divine revelation or serious insight. As I have said earlier, historical discussion and theology show what can sensibly be said about the divine, and nontheists and theists often share the references of the former if not the latter. While nontheists and theists also share the secular world into which the concept of God is often drawn in order to have his existence proven, the proofs involved, and the fudged notion of fact that they often rely on, simply fail to meet secular standards. Perhaps more importantly, in relegating religious meaning to the background, they fail to carry with them an adequate account of the important transformative effects that may attend a serious religious orientation. Since we are all, theist and nontheist alike, concerned with the employment of adequate concepts, and orientated within the world of facts in relation to what we understand as evaluatively significant, metaphysical conceptions of God also present a roadblock to the hermeneutical path in which there is some continuity between theistic and nontheistic belief, and hence grounds for meaningful exchange.

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For the reasons outlined above, the theism drawn on in the chapter following this one will be the theism of the living faith, in which religious meaning is emphasised, rather than theistic metaphysics.

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Chapter 3: Unconditional Value: Religious and Non-Religious Conceptions

(1) Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that accounts of religious belief based on the prevailing philosophical metaphysics, are at worst antithetical to, and at best redundant for, our incorporating the unconditional value of others into our reading of the world. Furthermore they do not provide much of a basis for uncovering common ground between the religiously committed and those nontheists who hold or endorse ethical positions that share some of the features of religious ethics, such as a belief in our need for absolute conceptions of value. My reasons are, briefly, that the "neutral ground" upon which metaphysical religious hypotheses are formed does not include criteria for assessing religious claims *as* religious claims. Hence religious hypotheses formed on this so-called neutral basis fail to incorporate the morally transformative affects that may attend a religious orientation. I further claimed that there is a continuum in thought between serious religious believers, who participate in this orientation, and those who hold positions such as Gaita's, who argue that concepts exceeding the expressions of naturalism are necessary to our acknowledgement of the realities of good and evil. This is because people who hold such a view participate to some degree in the morally transformative orientation that is

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commonly associated with religious beliefs, though they may not wholly share in those beliefs.

Raimond Gaita's work in this field, which culminates in a position lying somewhere between non-reductive naturalism and religious morality,⁸⁶ has raised questions as to the relationship between these two positions. Stephen Mulhall suggests that Gaita's "patient sympathy" with religious beliefs which he does not share may in fact miss the very essence of religious forms of the language of love; that in the eyes of many believers a secular variant of this language lacks the conceptual resources to amount to its equivalent. Hence he thinks that Gaita should pay more systematic attention to "doctrinal and theological, as well as liturgical and practical, elaborations on the meaning of religious belief if he is to render compelling the thought that the work of genuinely saintly love can be done by those in whose lives the concept of a saint has no living, full-blooded place."⁸⁷

According to Mark Robert Wynn, Gaita's position "may at points represent a somewhat unstable middle ground between non-reductive naturalism and a

⁸⁶ *Good and Evil*, page 228

⁸⁷ Mulhall, Stephen, "The work of saintly love: the religious impulse in Gaita's writing," in *Philosophy, Ethics and a common humanity: Essays in Honour of Raimond Gaita*, ed. Christopher Cordner, (Routledge, 2011), page 36

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religious-point-of-view."⁸⁸ Therefore he suggests that at points it "invites completion in religious terms, above all in so far as the love of saints depends for its possibility (given the cultural-linguistic traditions that obtain in our world) upon the language of religion."⁸⁹ At the same time, and perhaps more interestingly, he ends his paper by saying, "Gaita's account deserves to be more widely discussed, not least by Christian ethicists, who will find that it throws some familiar thoughts into a new and revealing light."⁹⁰ This raises a question as to whether Gaita's work would have been able to offer familiar thoughts in this "new and revealing light" had it been "completed in religious terms" in the first place, and it is at this point that I shall enter into the conversation.

A possible example of this new and revealing light is perhaps found in Gaita's nontheistic response to the nun who visited incurable patients in a psychiatric institution. For Gaita, it was the non-condescending love that this nun showed to the patients that distinguished her attitude from the attitudes of other kindly and caring people, and the light he casts upon the nature of this love derives at least in part from his non-religious expression of something more commonly spoken of in religious language. Wynn has noted that this example represents an instance of what Christians call neighbourly love, which is not premised on human achievement but "called forth by the sheer humanity of the other." Significantly,

⁸⁸ Wynn, Mark Robert, "Saintliness and the Moral life," in *Journal of Religious Ethics, Inc*, 31.3, (2003) page 484

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

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...Gaita's acknowledgement that this sort of response (the nun's response) is not simply a projection, but tracks some quality inherent to its object, (albeit a quality that cannot be specified without a reference to the response) invites the thought that the object of this sort of attachment is not devoid of value in itself, as certain (surely flawed) readings of Christian agape have implied.⁹¹

The flawed readings of Christian agape that Wynn rejects, according to which love of the kind under discussion does not track a quality inherent in its object, but instead projects love onto an object that is otherwise devoid of value, are quite capable of arising within Christian discourse as well as from outside of it. Now of course one can respond to such readings by offering alternative readings from a Christian perspective, and Wynn cites Robert Adams as having done so.⁹² However, if we assume it is true that each and every human being is inherently of unconditional value, then we must also acknowledge that while some nontheists, like Gaita for instance, register the responses that convince us of this truth, some theists do not. Given that Christianity, despite its cultural linguistic traditions, does not reliably evoke the relevant response in *all* of its participants, I think that we need to be cautious about assuming that a nontheist's insights concerning the unconditional value of others might be improved or clarified by

⁹¹ Wynn, Mark Robert, "Saintliness and the Moral Life," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 31.3, (2003), page 471

⁹² Adams, Robert, "Pure Love," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), as cited in "Saintliness and the Moral Life," page 471, fn 6

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greater attention to religious doctrine or by religious completion. Accounts such as Gaita's very much depend upon personal testimony, and may be occluded rather than clarified by the addition of beliefs upon which the testimony can hardly depend if the person bearing witness in this way is not himself a theist.

For the religious and non-religious alike, it is difficult, from the point of view of one who is not afflicted, to abandon that condescending distance between oneself and the afflicted person because it goes against our psychology: we really want to believe that there is a difference in *kind* between ourselves and the person who is afflicted, shunned or criminalised, as opposed to an accidental difference. We want to believe that our achievements, our virtues and if we are religious our devotions, afford us some protection from the abysses into which people's lives can fall, when in many cases these attributes depend much more upon our power and social standing, which can be lost to us, than on our moral fortitude. To face up to affliction in others in a clear-eyed manner is to face the sort of "vertigo" that McDowell has said attends our recognition, where we are pressed to recognise it, of the uncodifiability of human life, to which he thinks Plato's form of the Good provides not so much an antidote to the required codification as a fitting response.⁹³ If there is no algorithm or formula for living life well, then it follows that there is no formula for ensuring that one does not fall into either affliction or disgrace.

⁹³ "Virtue and Reason," pages 61 and 73

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According to D. Z. Phillips, "In order to renounce one's power one must not fix one's attention on *how* people are: useful or useless for one, desirable or undesirable, morally deserving or undeserving, but on the fact *that* they are."⁹⁴ Fixing one's attention on the assumed value of another from a position of relative power, even with the motive of compassion, is inherently patronising: one has to evaluate people in a relative fashion if one is seeking to employ a new librarian, for instance, but pure compassion can have no use for such requirements. At the very least, where evaluations are relevant, they are contingent upon the compassion, and not conditions to take into account in advance if one is to avoid condescension: there is a difference between approaching a disturbed person with compassion, and determining that one must treat this person with compassion *despite* his being disturbed. In the first instance, the person is acknowledged, and his condition taken into account. In the second, the condition is acknowledged, and the person taken into account. The second version is patronising, because its primary focus is on the condition and not the person, whose value is unconditional.

I shall argue here that the position held by Gaita, and others who think along similar lines, not only occupies a place on a continuum with certain positions based in religious commitment, but also presents an important challenge to any tendencies to complacency on the part of the religiously engaged. At the same

⁹⁴ "From World to God," in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, pages 55 and 56

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time thinkers such as Gaita depend on concepts, and less directly on practices, that have been developed within religious traditions in order to think and speak as they do, as many of them would acknowledge. Their thinking, which shares much in common with religious thinking, is comparatively free of dogma, and hence has the potential to bring a "new and revealing light" to bear on ethical questions for believer and nonbeliever alike. For the non-believer, one is brought up against the limits of naturalism, from a position that does not insist on a supernatural belief that one might find impossible to accept. For the believer, one is potentially reawakened to the compelling aspects of religious concepts that may have hitherto been taken for granted. I shall finally, however, consider what I see as weaknesses in the position, though without seeking to detract from the abovementioned strengths.

My argument is made up of three parts. In the first part, drawing on a paper by John H. Whittaker, I consider an understanding of religious belief in which the emphasis is on a form of engagement, identifiable by its transformative effects. God, by this account is understood as irreducibly mysterious, though because of these transformative effects, not wholly unknowable. I shall go on to compare Whittaker's account favourably with theistic accounts in which these transformative features are either less emphasised or construed within a metaphysical framework that undermines their force.

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In the second part, taking Whittaker's findings on board, I draw on a paper by R. F. Holland, in order to pin-point the kind of continuity that I think exists between religious thinkers such as Whittaker, and non-religious thinkers who hold views such as, and similar to, Gaita's. When a religious believer takes the response of a personal transformation to be properly understood only in relation to God, and a non-believer takes certain of our ethical responses to be properly understood only in relation to absolute concepts of goodness and love, one has to think there must be some common ground between them. I shall identify where I think this common ground may be found in relation to Holland's analysis of Wittgenstein's religious-point-of-view alongside A. E. Taylor's insistence that ethics cannot do without the support of religion.

In the third part, drawing on Christopher Hamilton's critique of Gaita's work, I shall argue that while I think Gaita can answer many of Hamilton's challenges, we cannot get away from the fact that, putting theory to one side, our real-life conceptions of absolute value have largely been nurtured, maintained and refined within the practice of historical religions. This, however, does not take away from the value of Gaita's contribution, since it is perfectly possible for a nontheist to maintain a vital sense of absolute value and for a theist to lack it.

I end my introduction to this chapter by drawing attention to two quotes from Simone Weil that encapsulate a single, apparently paradoxical position. The first

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is, "...we have no Socrates or Plato or Eudoxus, no Pythagorean tradition. We have the Christian tradition, but it can do nothing for us unless it becomes alive in us again."⁹⁵

The second states that:

To gather people behind Christian aspirations...it is necessary to try to define them in terms that an atheist might adhere to completely, and to do this without depriving these aspirations of what is specific to them...One would have to propose something precise, specific and acceptable to Catholics, Protestant and atheists – not as a compromise...Even a professed Christian needs this sort of translation.⁹⁶

I take the idea of Christianity becoming "alive in us again" as something rather more than earnest advocacy or insistent affirmation. Instead I envisage something more like the relevant religious values running deep within the perspective from which we read the world, in the way that our needs, desires, projects, personal affections and so on, do automatically. With regard to the second quote, on the rather daunting task of "defining Christian aspirations in terms that an atheist might adhere to completely," it is possible to read Gaita's

⁹⁵ Weil, Simone, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees, (Oxford University Press, 1968), page 64

⁹⁶ Weil, Simone, *Ecrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris; Gallimard, 1957), pages 169-170, in Pétrement, Simone, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (Random House, 1976), page 493

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work as an attempt to do justice to that aspiration; as the continuation of a task that Weil herself did not live long enough to fully address.

(2) The Religious Orientation and Knowledge of God

John H. Whittaker, in his paper "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries,"⁹⁷ develops a line of thought that is implicit in much of D. Z. Phillips' writing, but not always made explicit, perhaps in part because it might be understood by Phillips as veering too close to theological territory. It addresses an epistemological question that arises from the fact that as religious believers we tend to carry the picture of God as all powerful, eternal etc, "...in our hind pockets even as we say God cannot be known."⁹⁸ The problem is, how can we know something just well enough to know that it is unknowable?⁹⁹ Whittaker broadly accepts Phillips' thesis that metaphysical conjectures about God ought not to be taken literally, in a quasi-empirical fashion, and affirms along with Phillips and Weil, that "the only way to understand God is to understand his essential mysteriousness, not to overcome his mysteriousness."¹⁰⁰ While Whittaker thinks that this is religiously important, he also acknowledges that for many the absence of a literally-construed metaphysical picture can be taken as

⁹⁷ Whittaker, John H, "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 54: (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), pages 137-156

⁹⁸ Ibid, page 138

⁹⁹ Ibid, page 143

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, page 144

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rendering the difference between God's existence and non-existence indiscernible.¹⁰¹ According to Patrick Quinn, St Thomas Aquinas came up with his analogy thesis in the face of similar difficulties with Maimonides' account of God's unknowability,¹⁰² but Whittaker, having put metaphysics to one side, puts recourse to analogy to one side as well.¹⁰³ His response is to turn instead to yet another religious objection to metaphysical literalism: "objective claims, precisely because they are objective and require no self-involvement in their affirmation, carry no large point for one's self-understanding."¹⁰⁴ In the previous chapter I argued that religious claims are properly assessed only in relation to religious meaning; what Whittaker is getting at is the mode of engagement that makes religious claims compelling, and so meaningful, to believers in the first place:

...religious claims about God are non-objective questions, not because they are matters of arbitrary judgement but because their affirmation logically entails internal adjustments in the believer's self-understanding. No objective truths are like this, although some personal consequences can be expected to follow from some by way of inference.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, he says, "...those who affirm these beliefs without undergoing the change of heart that we expect to accompany the religious outlook either do not

¹⁰¹ Ibid – I shall pick on this point again in Chapter Six, in which I shall discuss the importance of religious practice to an apophatic conception of God.

¹⁰² Quinn, Patrick, *Aquinas, Platonism and the Knowledge of God*, (Avesbury, 1996), page 19

¹⁰³ "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," page 155, n3

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, page 144

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

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in fact believe, or do not fully understand what they say they believe,"¹⁰⁶ and also "believing in God requires one to give up the assumption that God's existence might be known apart from or prior to the dispositional or self-involving orientation of faith."¹⁰⁷

The relation between objective truth and evaluative understanding is not necessarily one of inference, since sometimes the apprehension of a fact and value occur simultaneously, and Whittaker is clearly right in saying that recognition of an objective truth *per se* does not by itself entail personal adjustments.¹⁰⁸ His point is that an inquiry of the purely objective kind, where personal adjustment is not considered, is not a possibility where God is concerned. If you inquire into religious claims as if they were about brute facts, you will be left none the wiser; and speculative hypotheses arising from this stance will miss the point from the outset. For Whittaker, rather as for Kierkegaard, there is no determining that God exists objectively and then investing one's faith in him; what is involved is more like "jumping tracks from one conceptual order to another."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, page 145

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pages 144-145- Whittaker here discusses the relationship between the apprehension of facts and their evaluation, in relation to Gaita's writing on the Australian treatment of aboriginals.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, page 145

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The epistemological point Whittaker is making presents a subtle development within a Phillips-style framework: we can say, along with Phillips, that practical usage gives us clues to religious meaning, that the proper criteria for assessing religious claims are found within historical religious meanings and so on.

Whittaker accepts all of this; what he is attempting to isolate is *the mode of engagement that renders religious claims meaningful to believers*. He uses mathematics as an example; we know that mathematical objects are different from physical objects because we cannot make fruitful inquiries into mathematics by way of ordinary sense perception; instead we must enter into calculations, formalise systems, etc: "...one will get nowhere in making mathematical discoveries if one expects to meet numbers outside of the contexts in which mathematics is done."¹¹⁰ There is more to this than identifying a particular kind of reality or field of meaning; what is significant is the sort of *engagement* needed if one is to uncover any meaning at all; to enter into mathematical inquiries one must at the same time enter into calculation, or otherwise make no progress whatsoever. Where God is concerned, "'God is love'...is a grammatical remark. It means that God can be known only as a certain kind of love can be known."¹¹¹ In accordance with this, belief in God carries with it "...transformations in the way one sees oneself and others, the way one regards one's troubles, and the way one's care and concern extends to others,"¹¹² as well as a readiness to

¹¹⁰ Ibid, page 153

¹¹¹ Ibid, page 154

¹¹² Ibid, page 145

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be transformed in the very act of saying 'I believe.'¹¹³ As with mathematics, to seek God in the wrong way; to attempt to know God in a manner other than that by which one knows love, or to assume one can know God without one's view of things being open to radical alteration, is to miss the point.

Armed with this insight, let us return to Whittaker's central question: how can we know something (in this case God) just well enough to know that it is unknowable? With regard to our understanding of religious mysteries, here is a point to which he draws attention about Phillips' response to an image used by Bouwsma: "Bouwsma speaks of a certain door in his epistemological prison opening not outward but inward, and of something new entering the stream of life within the room itself."¹¹⁴ This picture, says Whittaker, can be misleading, since it suggests something beyond the enclosure which reveals itself to us by entering from the outside. We, however, are not third parties, able to see this occurrence from a higher point-of-view. If we were we would not be in the prison in the first place. Hence Phillips reads Bouwsma as saying, "the sense in which we speak of something's being outside the enclosure is given by how we speak within the enclosure."¹¹⁵ The idea is that the concept of what lies beyond the enclosure does not derive its meaning from something beyond our linguistic

¹¹³ Ibid, page 146

¹¹⁴ Bouwsma, *Without Proof or Evidence*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) pages 4-5, quoted by Phillips in *Faith After Foundationalism*, (London: Routledge, 1988) page 264, and again by Whittaker in "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," pages 146 and 147

¹¹⁵ *Faith After Foundationalism*, in "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," page 147

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comprehension, but from the way the concept functions *within* the enclosure.¹¹⁶

Given this constraint, the standard picture of God as an entity beyond time, space and language cannot be taken as representational, but rather as a picture that has a necessary role in religious discourse. Whittaker offers a nice example of how such pictures work in language; "The same people who attribute the death of a child to God's will *also* tell us that no one knows the mind of God."¹¹⁷

We need such word-pictures in order to speak of an irreducible mystery in the face of which we would otherwise be rendered mute, but they cannot be representational for the same reason that we cannot speak literally of things that supposedly lie beyond our enclosure. The seemingly contradictory statements above reveal the use of religious picture-language to meet the challenge of an irreducible mystery rather than to explain it in the mundane terms of causality. I shall go into these apparently contradictory ways of speaking more fully in Chapter Six, but they involve an almost metaphorical use of the mundane language of causation in that they involve statements that sound like explanations, although they are not intended to explain things. What they represent are *end-points in seeking explanation*, attended by a shift in perspective that allows one to accommodate a harrowing truth in a spirit of love tinged with sadness, rather than with unalloyed bitterness and confusion.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, page 149

¹¹⁸ Our propensity to meet certain events with bitterness and confusion itself points to a certain mystery with regard to our relationship with the world, in that it suggests we tend to expect the

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Despite our inability to see beyond the enclosure, and the lack of explanation that attends some events that are harrowing for us, God, for believers, can be understood as an irreducible mystery rather than as a comforting fantasy conjured up in the face of questions to which there is no answer, at least in part because belief in God has a valency that is generally lacking in fantasies: the unicorn, for example, may be entertaining to consider, but plays no part in the way we think about other things and does not compel. The valency of religious beliefs, according to Whittaker, also plays a part in showing the distinction between religious mysteries and mundane epistemological puzzles; "...the valence of religious claims ties their affirmation to dispositional changes. One cannot believe in them *without* being transformed."¹¹⁹ In the case of fantasies, they have no real hold on us, and do not serve to transform the way we see other things.¹²⁰ In the case of mundane epistemological puzzles, their hold on us is one of curiosity, or a desire to get to the bottom of something, but they do not by themselves bring about dispositional changes. As with the detective novel mentioned earlier, the mystery is dispelled once the facts are revealed, and we are thus released from its grip. With belief in God, as with the essentially mysterious, there is no getting to the bottom of the mystery.

world to treat us better than it sometimes does, despite the fact that nothing about the world holds such promises.

¹¹⁹ "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," page 147

¹²⁰ One might think that dangerous fantasies present a counter-example, since they do tend to grip people, such that they think themselves entitled to commit murder and so on. Such fantasies, however, are broadly associated with mental instability or distress, and tend to be seen as problematic by both religious and non-religious people. They are different in kind both from religious belief and the day dreams of the sane.

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So Whittaker's answer to the question that he poses is that God is indeed an irreducible mystery, but that a *kind* of knowledge of God comes with the transformed orientation that attends genuine religious engagement. It is in relation to this transformed orientation that questions arise to which we might seek answers within the teachings of a religious tradition. Having engaged with God under the aspect of a certain kind of love,¹²¹ questions like "Is this inspiration from God, or is it in fact a temptation that only *seems* like divine inspiration?" become deeply compelling, and religious traditions include practical, historical and theoretical resources for addressing such questions. I mention this last because it shows how Whittaker's position is consistent with Phillips', drawing an implicit feature to light rather than posing a real challenge to Phillips.

There are two key parts to Whittaker's thesis. One is the transformed orientation he posits as central to the form of knowledge that results in religious belief. The other is the idea that religious concepts, rather than providing answers to unanswerable questions, in fact provide ways of trustfully addressing these mysteries without reducing their mysteriousness.¹²² Something that emerges from putting these two points together is an understanding of religious faith that does not involve purporting to know more than you can actually know by standard epistemological means, as in the words of James's schoolboy, "Faith is

¹²¹ I would say a love that does not appear to arise from one's psychology, even if one must be psychologically capable of responding to it.

¹²² "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," page 150

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believing something that you know ain't true."¹²³ Knowledge of God springs from the mode of engagement by which love is apprehended. This does not reduce God's essential mystery but instead permits one to enter into relationship with that mystery. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly for my own argument, the relation between an irreducible mystery and a transformed orientation that permits one to trustfully address rather than overcome it, puts us in a position very similar to that evoked by McDowell's conception of vertigo and Plato's suggested way of meeting it in the form of the Good: "Unlike other responses to uncodifiability, this one may actually work toward moral improvement, negatively, by inducing humility, and positively, by an inspiring effect akin to that of a religious conversion,"¹²⁴ says McDowell. According to Whittaker, drawing on Simone Weil:

Instead of clinging to oneself, desperately attempting to control one's fortunes and look after one's selfish interests, one surrenders one's welfare to something that remains silent and unknowable. One entrusts all this to that which remains unfathomable. At the same time, one releases energy that was once spent on oneself onto others.¹²⁵

¹²³ James, William, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (Dover, 1956), page 29

¹²⁴ "Virtue and Reason," page 73

¹²⁵ "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," page 151

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It seems to work like this: there exists an absolute limit to our desire to know, whether we accept it as being so or not. This is shown in the fact that our knowledge cannot extend beyond our enclosure, while at the same time we cannot help but feel the pressure of unanswerable questions from within it. Our response to Divine love eradicates none of this, but orientates us in relation to it. With this process, the self as the illusory centre of all things is displaced, releasing a form of compassion that is based on the understanding that we really are all in the same boat, and that one is the instrument rather than the source of the kind of love that flows from the divinity by which we are now orientated. None of this however, can we understand in the way that we understand the workings of the internal combustion engine, or similar matters.

"Acknowledgement of a spiritual reality," says Phillips, "takes the form, not of a factual assertion, but a confession: 'Thou art God.' The parameters of this confession, though they may be extended from time to time, determine what the believer means by false Gods."¹²⁶ The spiritual reality we are concerned with here is the reality of God as love, in an absolute sense, whose proper apprehension for believers provides the basis upon which to establish a relationship with reality in general. One sees something of this line of thought in *The Republic*, where the soul is like an eye that cannot be turned from darkness

¹²⁶ "Recovering Religious Concepts," page 241

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into light without turning the whole body:¹²⁷ one cannot know the Good independently of engagement with the Good, and engagement with the Good permeates one's relationship with the wider reality. The Good, by this account, is divine love.

There are two problems that follow from Whittaker's paper that are important to the question I am grappling with. I am arguing that there is a beneficial two-way movement between those who hold positions such as Gaita's, whose morality is in many ways a religious morality but who are not theists, and the theists themselves, with regard to seeing others in terms of unconditional value. One problem pertains to how these insights sit with particular religious tenets.

Whittaker says, "Faithfulness, to be sure, involves beliefs about divine things, not only the mystery of God but the mysteries of the trinity, creation, grace, providence and so on."¹²⁸ While he considers how believers respond to these mysteries, he does not give similar attention to the way in which these beliefs are held; a change in orientation, after all, does not by itself equip one with a set of theological tenets, so a question remains as to how such tenets are held, given God's irreducible mystery. Certainly, many of us learn these tenets as children, and most of us live in societies where they are available for our consideration, but the link between religious tenets and a religious orientation is at this stage not entirely clear. I shall revisit this problem in the next section.

¹²⁷ "Plato, "The Republic, VII" 518c, in *Plato: Complete Works*, page 1136

¹²⁸ "Religious and Epistemological Mysteries," page 146

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The second problem is this: the transformed orientation of divine love that permits an unknown God to be knowable under that condition suggests the morality of the religious mystic, or perhaps even the saint. But most people, religious or non-religious, are neither. Whittaker is mindful of this and says in a footnote:

This needs to be qualified of course. Many believers would like to believe more religiously than they do – and yet they still *believe*. True enough; but inasmuch as they regret the worldly character of their lives and *hold themselves responsible* to living as they should (i.e., as their beliefs require) they *have to that extent already been changed*. If they had no such compunctions, they could not be said to believe at all.¹²⁹

For such people the religious orientation is there, but not given regular attention. Whittaker has elsewhere suggested a limited analogy between responsiveness to God and our ordinary loves;¹³⁰ in that field too, one might say, we are sometimes inattentive, even neglectful, toward our loved ones but this does not mean we no longer love them, and the same might be said for one's relationship with God. However, what Whittaker does not consider so directly is that religious belief does not always follow the form he advocates. Furthermore, it can slip away from this form so incrementally that the believer herself may not notice. While he asserts that those who "...affirm these beliefs without undergoing the change of

¹²⁹ Ibid, page 156, n12

¹³⁰ Ibid, page 152

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heart that we expect to accompany the religious outlook either do not in fact believe, or do not fully understand what they say they believe,"¹³¹ and while he also draws attention to the care needed in clarifying certain concepts that are easily taken too literally, (which suggests that this is an easy mistake into which we might fall),¹³² there is a possibility that he does not address. In fact one can agree with Whittaker in form but not in spirit. That is to say, one can be a believer, assent to the idea that a change of heart is necessary to genuine belief, and as well accept a (perhaps qualified) version of the idea that God is essentially mysterious, without the accompanying change in orientation. Whittaker may dismiss such a person as "not really believing" but the person in question would almost certainly not agree.

The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Bible¹³³ tells of just such a case. The story begins, "He (Christ) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others..." For those who don't know it, the story tells of a Pharisee, praying in the Synagogue at the same time as a tax collector, whose prayers express gratitude that he is "not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector," but instead leads an extremely righteous life. Meanwhile the tax collector says simply, "God

¹³¹ Ibid, page 145

¹³² Ibid, page 149 – on the concept of God as the description of a being, who having created us, directs our lives providentially – "...this is exactly the way that God is represented, and so the danger of misunderstanding the point here is high. The point, once again, is not to reject such ideas outright, but to suggest that the meaning of these descriptions does not lie in *taking them as descriptive truths.*"

¹³³ Luke, 18: 9-14

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be merciful to me a sinner." It is the latter and not the former who finds favour with God. However, if we ask whether or not the Pharisee's faith involves a change of heart, we must answer in the affirmative, since he shows it by fasting twice a week, giving tithes and refraining from the sins he lists in which others engage. If we ask whether he considers God to be mysterious, we must also answer in the affirmative, since God is as intangible for him as for anyone else, and his mode of speaking to God is unlike other, more down-to-earth sorts of conversation. Where the Pharisee differs from the believer that Whittaker has in mind lies in the fact that rather than "entrusting all this to that which remains unfathomable," he trusts in his own righteousness; albeit a righteousness informed by his understanding of God, and also of religious teachings and conventions. In comparison, the tax collector does as Whittaker's thesis would suggest or prescribe.

My own take on this is that an overly literal or metaphysical approach to religious belief actually supports this kind of Phariseeism, for these reasons: (1) it is difficult for us to break ranks with what is psychologically natural to us, which is self-preservation and self-enhancement. Hence it is easy to let our religious beliefs drift into a position where they do not conflict with this natural tendency. (2) Overly literal metaphysical accounts tend to add a further conceptual dimension to the natural world, albeit an invisible one. Hence they can provide an imaginary "buffer zone" between the self and the unfathomable, and may

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cushion us from the conditions relevant to the change of heart that leads to a renewed orientation in relation to divine love. Thus they provide us with the framework for following the tendency outlined in (1) while remaining religiously committed. (3) While it is true that we are not all saints and mystics, it might also be true that if we completely lose touch with the mystery at the core of theistic belief, then we may at the same time lose touch with "the very essence of religious forms of the language of love" that Mulhall thinks may be missing from Gaita's secular account, whether we are religious or not. Conversely, Gaita, in accepting the transformative morality and also the mystery, but not the theism, may prove to be closer to the mark.

I do not dismiss the fact that metaphysical picture language, where one is aware of its limitations, often serves as a bridge between the individual believer and God's unfathomable reality, nor do I dismiss a claim such as "God is love" as arguably having a legitimate metaphysical dimension. However, excessive reliance on metaphysical conjectures as a buffer zone can readily serve to "protect" us from the very heart of our faith, thus rendering it a more-or-less empty but comforting convention for the person concerned. In fact the person to whom Whittaker refers, who wishes she was more religious than she is, may be responding to the "twitch on the thread" from the "unseen hook and invisible

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line," of which G K Chesterton's Father Brown speaks,¹³⁴ while the believer who is religiously engaged in the abovementioned manner and confident in her belief, may feel no such promptings.

One might frame what I am saying thus: there is a difference between "supernatural" and what I shall call "super-natural." The former refers to something unfathomable, for which studies of nature cannot deliver an explanation. The latter concept could be compared to the concept of "Superman." "Superman," the cartoon character who is immortal (so long as he stays away from kryptonite) and who can fly, is not unfathomable in relation to the concept "man"; he is instead a super-version of that concept. The super-natural construal of the divine readily follows an analogous pattern, and hence may impede rather than evoke the change in orientation that is relevant to reading others as sacred, infinitely precious or of unconditional value, by adding a religious dimension to one's outlook while leaving one's self-centred, relativistic orientation unchallenged. This is because such conceptions may disguise the boundary between what we can know in the manner that can be readily expressed as assertions, and what we cannot know in that way, and to which we can only respond in wonder, and express in terms of confession.

¹³⁴ Chesterton, G K, "The Queer Feet," in *The Father Brown Stories*, (Cassell & Company Ltd, 1960), page 50

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While I am rejecting "metaphysical literalism," I do not mean to suggest that articles of faith, for believers, need be taken as metaphorical or analogical in the usual sense of these terms. Rather, they can be taken simply as they stand, though not assumed to be understandable in the way that empirical facts are understandable. Simone Weil has said, "The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation,"¹³⁵ which places these matters outside of the range of empiricism without reducing them to "as-ifs", which is consistent with the conception of God as an irreducible mystery, able to be known in terms of engagement rather than exhaustive explanation. Bearing these things in mind I shall now turn to R. F. Holland so as to show how I think the continuity between theistic ethics and ethical positions such as Gaita's can be understood.

(3) Religious and Non-religious Responses to Divinity

R. F. Holland, in a paper entitled "Not Bending the Knee,"¹³⁶ compares certain claims made by Wittgenstein, such as "I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious-point-of-view,"¹³⁷ and "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that is the sum of my ethics. Only something

¹³⁵ Weil, Simone, *Gravity and Grace*, int. Gustave Thibon, trans. Emma Crauford, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), page 117

¹³⁶ Holland, R F, "Not Bending the Knee", in *Philosophical Investigations* 13:1 (January, 1990), pages 18-30 – Holland discusses the difference between Wittgenstein and Taylor largely in terms of the differences between philosophical and religious vocations, which I do not go into here.

¹³⁷ Rhees, Rush, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, (Totowa, N. J.; Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), page 94, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 19

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supernatural can express the Supernatural,"¹³⁸ with A. E. Taylor's insistence that ethics cannot do without the support and completion of religion.¹³⁹ Taylor's thesis is that there are important features of religious ethics, such as the religious sense of guilt, which makes you "cry out 'for a cleansing of the thoughts of the heart' and 'for the remaking of the natural self from the centre,'"¹⁴⁰ that are reliant on "three great otherworldly realities – God, grace, eternal life,"¹⁴¹ and cannot be replicated within the limits of secular discourse. At the same time he rejects attempts to abstract intellectually palatable forms of otherworldliness from the traditional religions, citing as an example "the thin and sentimental devoutness" of eighteenth century English Deism, "which was soon to degenerate into commonplace worldliness."¹⁴² Taylor thinks that a moral life is one of "tension between the temporal and the eternal," in which our character "answers to that of the good to which we aspire."¹⁴³ Hence he sees the abstraction of the intellectually appealing features from historical religions as an attempt to escape that tension; as the opposite side of the coin from a "blind acquiescence in tradition and authority,"¹⁴⁴ which also releases us from temporal/eternal tensions, though in a different way. Furthermore, he thinks that the determinants of the historical religions are channels of the overriding

¹³⁸ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, (Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1977) page 3, in "Not bending the Knee", page 22

¹³⁹ Taylor, A. E., *The Faith of a Moralists* (London: Macmillan, 1932) Vol. 1, page xi, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 21

¹⁴⁰ *The Faith of a Moralists* Vol. 1, pages xiii and xiv, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 21

¹⁴¹ *The Faith of a Moralists*, Vol. II, page 2, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 22

¹⁴² *The Faith of a Moralists* Vol. II, page 11, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 27

¹⁴³ *The Faith of a Moralists* Vol. I, page xi, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 21

¹⁴⁴ "Not Bending the Knee", page 25

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authority which is indispensable to any religion worth having.¹⁴⁵ So he urges philosophers who think that there is something supernatural about ethics to align themselves with a religious tradition.¹⁴⁶ He does not specify which and considers that there is more than one true religion.¹⁴⁷

With regard to the overriding authority of traditional religions, Taylor has a couple of quite interesting things to say, in which he appears to conflate a response to certain perplexing phenomena with a response to religious authority. Holland, pointing to significant differences between the two, suggests "a short-circuit in his thinking" here.¹⁴⁸ However, I do not think we should let the differences between Taylor's examples, to which Holland draws attention, occlude the important point that he is using the comparison to make.

...in any true account of the concrete and individual reality one must somewhere come upon something of which it can only be said, "Why this thing should be so, or even just what it is, is more than I can tell, but at all costs it must be recognised that here the thing is..."

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, page 27

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, pages 25

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, page 28

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, page 27, fn 15 – Holland thinks that Taylor oversimplifies "the complex relation between...the constraints imposed on thought by the recalcitrance of a thing's individuality...and the strength through constraint that we get by respecting authority. We do not take anything on authority when concentrating our attention on the phenomenon in front of us," he says. However, Taylor's claim seems to be limited to the certainty that one has encountered something, and the shared feature upon which the analogy is based is the recalcitrance to thought of both encountered reality and religious authority. Both can be thought about, but neither, where religious authority is accepted, can be thought away.

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He further says,

So far as I can see, the function of authority is just to insist upon the reality and omnipresence in religion, as in all our contact with the objectively real, of this element of refractoriness to complete intellectual analysis which is the stamp of objectivity, this never wholly removable misfit between the real and the categories in which we try to confine it.¹⁴⁹

The link between the two statements, as I read him, is that at least some religious teachings share in common with certain perplexing phenomena "this refractoriness to complete intellectual analysis" – in both cases we are thrown back against the force of what he expressed by saying, "Why this thing should be so, or even just what it is, is more than I can tell, but at all costs it must be recognised that here the thing is." What he is getting at is that, in common with certain encountered phenomena, religious authority presents us with a limit, at which speculation must draw to a halt.

Prima facie, the two Wittgenstein statements ought to slot into the "thin and sentimental devoutness" Taylor attributes to nineteenth century Deism, since they express a religious attitude that is not only divorced from religious practice, but also from belief in God. Holland says, "...he (Wittgenstein) seems to be doing theology in reverse. In theology, goodness is one of the divine attributes; the theologian predicates goodness of the deity. Wittgenstein predicates the deity of

¹⁴⁹ *The Faith of a Moralist* Vol. II, page 212, in "Not Bending the Knee", page 27

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goodness...without even believing in a deity."¹⁵⁰ One could put it like this; the theologian that Holland has in mind *presupposes* God's reality, and sees goodness as his defining characteristic, while Wittgenstein sees our responsiveness to goodness, and the value we place upon it, as underpinning our conceptions of the divine. These conceptions do not confirm for Wittgenstein that there is anything in objective reality that corresponds to them. However, he takes the responses that evoke such conceptions in us as real, and worthy of serious attention.

Holland sums up Wittgenstein's position as follows:

Wittgenstein was all the time looking at his (philosophical) problems from a standpoint outside them, which his treatment of the problems did not discuss and which could not be understood by the methods of that treatment. The fact that the problems were there had the same sort of significance for him as the fact that good and evil were there. That is how it was that the sphere of his work and the sphere of the ethical were both seen by Wittgenstein from a religious-point-of-view.¹⁵¹

Holland defends Wittgenstein against the charge of sentimentalism on the grounds that that he successfully left the problem of God alone, and did not seek to "flatten it with a sledge hammer," sensing the need for other techniques. Nor

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, page 23

¹⁵¹ Ibid, pages 22-23

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did he sanction any of the possible forms of reductionism. Instead he came to what Holland calls "Wittgenstein's "full stop."¹⁵² That is to say, while he did not embrace historical religion, he neither dismissed it nor attempted to appropriate the intellectually acceptable aspects of it. One could say that his position on religion did not allow him to escape the tension between the temporal and the eternal that Taylor found so important to morality, but rather that he accepted a spare and epistemologically cautious version of it. Holland, taking a phrase from Rush Rhees, calls this "going the hard way" and notes that both Wittgenstein and Taylor advocate different versions of the same thing:¹⁵³ to enter into historical religion in the spirit suggested by Taylor is also to "go the hard way."¹⁵⁴ Holland, in responding to the fact that both refer to the supernatural, frames the difference between them thus:

...when Taylor asserts that morality taken in earnest involves the supernatural he uses the term "supernatural" to make further connections. For instance he speaks of 'the indispensability of τροφή from without for the moral life' (τροφή means food and Taylor gave the Greek because the idea is Platonic as well as being found in the New Testament). Wittgenstein, however, makes no connection of that kind or (so far as I know) of any other kind. Instead of using

¹⁵² Ibid, page 24

¹⁵³ Ibid, pages 24 and 25

¹⁵⁴ I should note at this point that if someone argues that Holland is quite wrong about Wittgenstein, this will not make a difference to my argument, since what I am interested in is the position that Holland *attributes* to Wittgenstein: I do not think it is an untenable position, nor do I think that someone other than Wittgenstein could not conceivably hold it.

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the idea of the Supernatural to help him go on, he uses it to bring himself to a stop...¹⁵⁵

What Holland doesn't articulate directly is that Taylor, while he does make further connections in comparison with Wittgenstein, also comes to a stop. His stop is at the feet of religious authority rather than outside of its bounds, but it is a stop nonetheless. The "refractoriness to complete intellectual analysis" that authoritative religious teachings share in common with certain perplexing phenomena forces one to come to a halt and to deal with what is there rather than attempt to explain it away. In both cases, one might say, having thought long and hard about the phenomenon or religious teaching, "Now I think I have a better understanding of what x means," but not, "I have finally seen through x, and there is nothing more to understand so far as x is concerned."

Holland accuses Taylor of combining a strong point with a weak one: the strong point is that no one could claim to be religious in a world in which there were no traditional religions. This may seem at first glance like a trivial point rather than a strong one, since it seems rather like saying that no one could claim to be law abiding in a world without laws. However, the idea is more that there would be no abstracting the truth from appearances, as philosophers who reject religion but accept some form of supernaturalism may do, if the appearances, in this

¹⁵⁵ "Not Bending the Knee", page 23

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case historical religions, were not there in the first place.¹⁵⁶ The weak point by Holland's account is that Taylor assumes that it is therefore impossible for someone to be genuinely religious outside of one of the historical religions. As a counterexample, Holland cites someone, brought up in one of the religious traditions, who rejects formal religion and becomes even more religious than before, though without the support of doctrine.¹⁵⁷ Taylor of course, can answer to this. He can say that the person cited is taking the "sentimental turn" about which he is concerned, in taking what he wants from religion but abandoning formal religious authority. Holland accepts that something like this would be his answer, but thinks nonetheless that Taylor is wrong, since if one is inclined to sentimentalism, one will find plenty of scope for it within religious tradition.¹⁵⁸ However, Taylor has already answered to that charge as well: a sentimental engagement in religious tradition, by Taylor's account, would be one in which the religious tradition was embraced and critical distance abandoned.

As mentioned earlier, Taylor thinks that the "tension between the temporal and the eternal," in which our character "answers to that of the good to which we

¹⁵⁶ Plato's thought could perhaps be read as a counterexample to this claim, and as a reminder that historical religions too seem to have their seeds in the conceptualisation of certain responses. Certainly, there is a polytheistic background to Plato's reaching for absolute conceptions, but that background did not reliably support absolute conceptions, as is shown in the discussion of the gods in the *Euthyphro* dialogue. And for Christ to be understood as the son of God, some people had to respond to him accordingly, and conceptualise his life in those terms.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, page 26

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, page 28

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aspire"¹⁵⁹ is important to moral life. For Taylor, so it seems, philosophical conceptions of the absolute that are separated from historical religions effectively let go of the temporal aspect that is religious practice, while blind acquiescence in religious authority places such store on historical attachments as to lose sight of the absolute that they exist to uphold. One is prey to sentimentality on either count, since in either case one escapes the corrective either of temporal religious authority or of the absolute value that the authority enshrines. While the intellectual upholder of absolute value, sans religion, is familiar to philosophers, an attachment to historical religion that could be construed as sentimental would be one in which religious belief is understood as an almost magical extension of one's temporal values, rather than as a challenge to them. A person in its thrall might be a stickler for religious law at the expense of its spirit, or love the grandeur of ritual at the cost of its meaning, for example.

However, we can find continuity between Wittgenstein's nontheistic acknowledgement of divinity and Taylor's theism if we stick with the thought that what is important to moral life for Taylor is the tension between the temporal and the eternal. Moreover, both Taylor and Wittgenstein express versions of the "full stop," whereby one does not seek to explain away whatever it is that one encounters, but to understand in such a way as to leave it as it is. For Taylor, this includes succumbing to the authority of precise religion teachings, while for

¹⁵⁹ See above, page 112, fn 143

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Wittgenstein it does not. However, what saves Wittgenstein's position from the "thin and sentimental devoutness" which Taylor associates with philosophical religion is Wittgenstein's retention of the temporal/eternal tension that Taylor finds so important. It is retained because the mode of engagement it involves takes the form of a direct human response that is dependent, if it is to be properly understood, on absolute rather than relative or temporal conceptions. This is shown in Wittgenstein's claim, "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that is the sum of my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural."¹⁶⁰ The recognition of goodness is a response that takes place in the world of facts, the relative or temporal world. But its expression requires absolute, or supernatural, concepts. Hence the tension remains.

If we bring Whittaker's account of religious engagement to bear on things, we see how this temporal/absolute relationship works; an engagement with absolute value has the capacity to transform the way in which one engages in temporal life. In fact it is this very transformative effect that renders it recognisable and meaningful. Wittgenstein's "religious-point-of-view," which Holland characterises as "predicating the deity of goodness, without believing that there is a deity," seems to me to be characterised by the same kind of transformative response that a religious believer understands as a God response, but in Wittgenstein's case these responses are understood in relation to absolute conceptions of

¹⁶⁰ See above, page 114, fn 138

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morality rather than God *per se*. The core difference lies with the degree of epistemic caution employed. Importantly, however, while someone holding this position denies themselves the spiritual sustenance that goes with religious commitment, they also deny themselves the materials for building a metaphysical comfort zone into which to retreat.

I understand Gaita's position as lying somewhere along this continuum; seemingly closer to Wittgenstein than to Taylor. It is a position that would not be available if no one at any time practised a traditional religion, although it is arguable that if no one had ever paid attention to the kind of response that can only be understood in relation to absolute conceptions, then religion as we know it would never have gained traction with us. At the same time, religions have historically been the arena in public life in which this kind of orientation has been nurtured, considered and developed.

That said, what I have set out to show here is why Gaita, in accepting the transformative morality and also the mystery that lies at the heart of theism, but not the theism itself, may prove to be closer to the mark than some theists, with regard to such matters as acknowledging the unconditional value of others, without condescension. His acceptance of transformative morality is shown in his willingness to have his outlook altered by the nun's non-condescending attitude to the psychiatric patients, and also by his apprehension of his father's

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unqualified acceptance of a mentally ill friend by name of Hora.¹⁶¹ He also refers to the "essentially mysterious" in relation to our moral responses.¹⁶² He has since questioned his use of such language,¹⁶³ but not the concepts he has used that language to convey. Hence, if we are to believe Whittaker, one might say that Gaita has engaged with the central, essentially mystical, features of theistic orientation without going so far as to embrace theism itself. Conversely, it is possible to embrace theism without engaging at all deeply in what I am claiming are the key features of theistic engagement. No doubt the Wittgensteinian of this stripe is no more immune to slipping incrementally away from this position than is the theist. However, the nontheist, in meeting the abovementioned conditions, may stand a greater chance of being moved beyond a worldly or relativistic orientation, and hence toward genuinely apprehending the unconditional value of others, than the comfortably ensconced, metaphysically cushioned theist.

Wynn asks,

...if the Bible (for example) is revelatory on this point (the moral worth of human beings), will there not be some pressure to treat it as trustworthy in other respects? At any rate, the non-believer may well feel obliged at this point to provide some account of why the text is to be trusted on the question of the

¹⁶¹ Gaita, Raimond, "Love, Reason and Realism", paper presented at the APRA conference, Melbourne, 2010, pages 1-6

¹⁶² *Good and Evil*, Chapters 11 and 12, pages 189-228

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, pages xxx-xxxi

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worth of human life but not to be trusted on the question of God's reality, when the text itself takes these questions to be related.¹⁶⁴

By my reading, this is a reasonable question from a Christian point-of-view, but it is also enough to send many nontheists running from the room with their hands over their ears, since it suggests that recognition of the moral worth of others, in this way, represents "the thin end of a wedge," leading to full-scale religious commitment if adequately considered. It is a strength of Gaita's work that he is able to bring these matters into nontheist consideration without evoking such a reaction. If we think that recognition of the unconditional value of other human beings is central to morality, then there is surely something to be said for asking no more than that, where that is what is at issue.

(4) Theism, Nontheism and Unconditional Value

I accept that compassion which hints of a patronising attitude is very much better than no compassion at all. What a patronising attitude reveals, however, is a failure to recognise someone else in terms of their unconditional value.

Where condescension is present, relative value, modified in varying degrees by our social nature, predominates, whether we are aware of it or not and whether we are religious or not. Relative value has a strong hold on us, which is

¹⁶⁴ "Saintliness and the Moral Life," page 473

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something with which saints and mystics also struggle. As I said in Chapter One, we read the relative value of things pretty much all time as we go about our business, and it is only natural that this tends to carry over quite readily into how we see our fellow human beings. Whether or not they are "useful or useless for one, desirable or undesirable, morally deserving or undeserving," tends to come across to us more saliently than their unconditional value. Iris Murdoch speaks of attempting to "pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is," but also notes that, "It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful."¹⁶⁵

Christopher Hamilton, while finding it laudable that Gaita has brought the notion of sainthood to bear on secular ethics, also thinks that Gaita's conception of sainthood is thin, and that his account of human preciousness is implausible and in some ways sentimental.¹⁶⁶ Some of Hamilton's criticisms, however, fail to take the terms in which Gaita's arguments are framed into account. For instance, Hamilton seems to take Gaita's examples, such as that of the nun, as being prescriptive in tone, when Gaita explicitly emphasises moral depth and integration over prescriptive terms like "ought" and "cannot."¹⁶⁷ What Gaita offers, for the most part, are examples whose understanding cries out for absolute conceptions of good and evil, not prescriptions to be applied to all

¹⁶⁵ Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), page 93

¹⁶⁶ Hamilton, Christopher, "Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice: An International Forum*, 11(2), (April 2008), page 181

¹⁶⁷ *Good and Evil*, page 40

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people on all "occasions such as this one." Hence some of Hamilton's challenges do not quite meet their target. However, Hamilton does draw attention to the comparative thinness of resources for understanding and developing conceptions of absolute value, in the live rather than the theoretical sense, outside of historical religious practice.

One example of Hamilton's missing the target shows up in his critique of Gaita's use of the nun example. He notes that all we see of her is her demeanour with the patients; we do not know, for instance, whether she remonstrated with the doctors on behalf of the patients, sought changes to institutional structures, attempted to contact their relatives, or similar.¹⁶⁸ This to me overlooks the fact that the nun, for Gaita, offers an example of compassion that is non-condescending, rather than a powerhouse of virtuously "getting things done." According to Gaita, "...the way she spoke to (the patients), her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body," contrasted with, and showed up the psychiatrists who were condescending in their compassion, but who presumably were well able to get things done on the patients' behalf, though without fully abandoning condescension. Furthermore, Gaita is concerned that conceptual space is kept open for what was revealed to him by the nun's demeanour.¹⁶⁹ Hence it seems likely that the lack of detail concerning the nun's general behaviour may have been to ensure that the point was not lost. It may be fruitful

¹⁶⁸ "Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness," page 183

¹⁶⁹ Gaita, Raimond, *A common humanity*, (Routledge, 2000) pages 18 and 19

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to look at this critique of Hamilton's alongside the relationship Gaita sees between remorse and compensation. While refusal to consider compensation, where it was applicable, would suggest a remorse that was lacking in depth, compensation by itself cannot end remorse. Similarly, were the nun to have actually avoided doing anything for the patients, this would perhaps have shown up her noncondescending compassion for them as less than sincere. However, the quality of her compassion for the patients cannot be defined solely in terms of how much she managed to do for them, since it depended upon her acknowledgement of their unconditional value, or as she would put it, their sacredness as children of God.

Both noncondescending compassion and remorse involve responses to human beings as things of unconditional value, which can only be adequately understood in relation to absolute concepts. Action, in comparison, whether it means making compensation or remonstrating on a patient's behalf, is relative in the sense of its being conditional. My putting a glass on a shelf, for instance, is conditional on my being able to reach the shelf, and the shelf's being wide enough to support a glass. In moral terms, the precept "ought implies can" is subject to the conditions that attach to "can." My apprehension of another's unconditional value will condition my manner and actions toward them, while their unconditional value is, by definition, without conditions. For example, my making of compensation is conditional on my having harmed someone, while my

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remorse for having harmed them is the form that my recognition of their unconditional value, recognised under the condition of having harmed them, takes. I shall have more to say about how these forms of evaluation fit together in Chapter Six; it is enough for now to say that they are different forms of evaluation, and that compassionate action toward a person, unaccompanied by the right kind of recognition of that person is likely to prove condescending.

What is important about the nun is the unconditional value that her noncondescending attitude revealed in people in whom few could see much relative value, and not her status as an exemplar of moral action. The point of the example seems to be that our receptiveness to revelations such as that exemplified by Gaita's response to the nun can alter our ideas as to what it is to lead a moral life, and that absolute conceptions of value are needed if we are to render such revelations intelligible.

What seems to be going on here is the acknowledgement that uncondescending compassion such as that shown by the nun really does occur, that another person who has been less than fully conscious of the value of such people as the damaged patients may be moved toward a deeper understanding of them by seeing them through the lens provided by the nun's demeanour toward them. Significantly, the adequate conceptualisation of such phenomena allows an important feature of morality, not commonly discussed by moral philosophers, to gain at least some traction within our form of life. Hamilton, however, seems to

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take this acknowledgement of phenomena with the potential to broaden our moral horizons, to be rather more prescriptive than it is:

It goes without saying that Gaita is not arguing that we should all become saints, but I find it hard to make sense of the thought that one might have witnessed the nun behaving as Gaita describes, and that one may have been impressed by her in the way that he explores, and *not* feel that one is called to seek to be as she is. And that is likely to lead, among other things, to a deep sense of *guilt*.¹⁷⁰

Hamilton's idea is that while Gaita does not insist that we all become like the nun, he does seem to insist that to fail to see others as the nun sees them is to fail to see them as they really are:

He *never* says that there are ways of seeing them as they *really* are that would *not* involve thinking of them as precious in this sense, and he repeatedly says that seeing the full humanity of a human being requires viewing him or her as precious (GE: xv; xix), which clearly implies that one cannot see his or her full humanity otherwise."¹⁷¹

Given that Gaita is not asking us to become saints, this suggests to Hamilton that "Gaita wants us to believe that all human beings are precious and yet relieve us

¹⁷⁰ "Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness," page 189

¹⁷¹ Ibid, page 190

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of the burden of living in accord with this belief."¹⁷² According to Hamilton, this means that we are invited to enjoy a certain outlook without paying the price, which renders Gaita's account sentimental. Furthermore, Gaita's privileging of seeing others as precious seems to Hamilton to exclude the wide variety of ways in which we actually see people:

What most of us think....is something like this: that we find some human beings precious, or find some human beings precious some of the time, others we think of in all kinds of ways, ways which depend on our sense of their character, their behaviour, of how these things impact on our life, on what they mean to us as friends, acquaintances, strangers, colleagues and so on. Most people, most of the time, we simply want to leave us alone, although that desire can perfectly well coexist with an idea of sharing with them in one of its many forms a sense of common fellowship of humanity.¹⁷³

The sense of our common humanity can take many forms, which

...jostle with each other, ceding place to each other as they go in and out of focus, or become more or less salient under the impact of our various experiences, and sometimes are altogether eclipsed. Gaita does not give a voice to these ways of seeing human beings, since...he talks as if the only way to see human beings as they really are is to see them as the nun does...¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid, page 191

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, pages 191-192

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There are three deeply related things that Hamilton is not fully taking into account here; the first and most important one is that making conceptual space for something one had witnessed, and to which one feels compelled to do justice, is not a matter of adding a further overriding moral prescription. The second is that so far as the nun is concerned, she herself is not the focus of attention. The patients, revealed in the light of her loving, non-condescending attitude is where the focus lies. The third is that it is possible to have various relative attitudes to people that coincide with the recognition of their unconditional value, including even the desire to be left alone by them a lot of the time. A good parent, for example, does not abandon her unconditional love for her children when she wants them to stay out of her hair so she can complete an important piece of work. Furthermore, the nun whose love revealed the patients in terms of their unconditional value will not have at the same time concealed the fact that they were severely damaged people. What she revealed is that severe damage does not compromise unconditional value, even if it compromises relative value; and that once one has been struck by that unconditional value, one may find it hard if not impossible to deny it. The various attitudes we have to other people can, and usually do, where the unconditional value of others is acknowledged, *accompany* the acknowledgement of their unconditional value. For example, one can imagine the nun thinking, "Oh dear. Old Fred's in a bad way. His new medication must not agree with him," but interacting with Fred as a real person, and not merely as yet another instance of

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someone in a bad way. I shall have more to say about this subject in Chapters Four and Six, but an acknowledgement of the unconditional value of others, along with an acceptance of the wide variety of relative attitudes we have to others, are not mutually exclusive forms of acknowledgement. Moreover, if we accept that each human being is of unconditional value, sacred, infinitely precious, an end-in-themselves, or however we choose to frame it, it follows that if nothing of this enters into the way in which we see other people, then we can hardly claim to be seeing them in their full humanity. There are many occasions where we are not arrested by the full humanity of others, but surely one can accept that on such occasions we are not seeing people properly. One would be hard pressed to see each individual properly, on any criterion, in a busy but otherwise tranquil airport, for instance, and I can hardly doubt that I am seeing but an aspect of the tradesman who repairs my roof where my interaction with him is solely in that regard. This, however, does not rule out the possibility that if I were to see the tradesman properly I would see him in his full humanity. And if I accept that human beings are things of unconditional value then seeing him in less than that light is *not* to see him in his full humanity.

But most importantly, there is a world of difference between allowing conceptual space for something and prescribing something, or pointing to an example and effectively saying, "This is how you should all behave." To give something conceptual space is to give it voice; to allow it into the conversation. By allowing

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it into the conversation, one *invites*, but does not *demand* a response from a morally serious interlocutor or reader, for whom one's conceptualisation has a chance of taking hold, or being extended by their reply, especially in cases where the reader can identify in some way with the experience described. For such a person, they may gain clarity about a response that was previously somewhat opaque to them, and incorporate something of it into their own view of what it is to lead a moral life, while one's own conceptions might be deepened by their contribution. Plato gave conceptual space to his encounter with Socrates, so that all that was revealed to him by Socrates was not lost, and the earliest Christian writers did the same thing in response to their encounters with Christ.

To use a rather trite example of how giving something conceptual space works; up until very recently, my apprehension of the Olympic Games symbol would have registered very low on Plato's divided line. I was aware of how the five circles held together, and that they were coloured, but had no idea of the colours involved, since I had never really focused on it. If someone had asked me, "Is orange included?" I would have been forced to admit ignorance or else guess. Recently, however, a friend with a lively interest in the history of the symbol chatted with me about the array of colours, and the changing interpretation of their meaning over the years. Now I cannot "think" the symbol without awareness of the colours of the circles, and the order in which they appear. One could say that my friend opened up a conceptual space that allowed me to

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incorporate a clear view of the Olympic Games symbol into my grasp of things. So it is to allow conceptual space for a morally relevant example; it is not like pointing to something and insisting "Do thus and so," but more like offering a dialectical contribution that one thinks is telling. Furthermore, what Gaita is seeking conceptual space for is the way in which severely damaged people appeared to him in the light of the nun's saintly love. Hence he is not asking his reader to emulate the nun in all respects. Instead he is inviting his reader to see the afflicted in a different light than they may have before; or to question the nature of their own compassion, rather as my friend invited me to see the Olympic Games symbol in a different light than I previously had. Above all, he is questioning the conceptual range of moral philosophy where it does not allow room for such transformative encounters. Since the conceptual range by which we understand events plays a large part in our grasp of them, Gaita is addressing what he sees as an important omission from much of moral philosophy. Hamilton's claim that Gaita is showing a sentimental desire to get us "to believe that all human beings are precious and yet relieve us of the burden of living in accord with this belief," seems in many respects to rest on his reading prescription into some of Gaita's examples when that is not their point. To open up or to leave open conceptual space for something is to offer that something as a subject for consideration and reflection, which in some cases may evoke an altered moral perspective in another. It is not to prescribe. It almost goes without saying that one's moral horizons can be broadened without one's either

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becoming a fully fledged saint or feeling excessively guilty because one is not a saint. In fact excessive guilt that one is not a saint surely presents a version of the transcendental egoism about which Hamilton expresses concerns.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, some level of guilt can also be a form that the recognition of the unconditional value of others can take, when one registers that one has failed to act in accordance with that recognition. However, just as the point about the nun pertains to how others appeared in the light of her loving attention, so the point of making conceptual space for the acknowledgement of the unconditional value or preciousness of others pertains to the ways in which I see others, and not to the sort of moral figure that I myself cut. The latter, where it counts at all, follows from the former.

That said, one real problem with the transcription of absolute conceptions from religious to secular language, without resorting to abstraction, is finding the right term, and Gaita's using "infinitely precious" to replace "sacred," may well play a part in Hamilton's finding his account of human preciousness implausible and in some ways sentimental. This is because, while a religious person may hold a belief that underpins all other beliefs, that all people are sacred because they are children of God, "infinitely precious" does not generalise nearly so well. I myself have reluctantly broken ranks with natural language in my frequent use of the term "unconditional value," since I am unable to find a natural language term

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, pages 187-188

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outside of religious language that I think will bear the burden of what I want to say, and I do not want to confine what I say within a religious conceptual framework. Gaita has stayed with natural language, but has chosen a term which by my reading does not bear the burden asked of it as well as it might.

For example, one can imagine a religious person adhering to the view that each and every person is sacred, and saying a quick and silent prayer before charging into an important game of rugby: the belief would not inhibit him from playing a fiercely competitive game, but would hopefully rule out his degrading, despising or personally humiliating any of the other players. However, it is difficult to think of anyone charging into a rugby game informed by the belief that all of the other players, including those on the opposing team, are "infinitely precious." Yet a term that would do the job properly ought to be open to such generalisation, because if it is not then it is forced in either unstable or sentimental directions. If "preciousness" only applies to those who are afflicted or outcast and those whom we hold in personal affection, but not those with whom we have no personal connection, but who seem quite capable of attending to their own affairs, then it is at least sentimental and veers dangerously toward the patronising. And if it is forced to include everyone then it potentially becomes incongruous, as the rugby example is meant to show. It is important here to note that the surrounding text makes it clear that Gaita is not making sentimental use of the term; the problem lies with the term itself. "Seriousness" may have carried this burden better – the

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idea that "every human life is a serious life" may arguably serve to capture both the opposing rugby players and the brain-damaged patient, without the failings that follow from basing respect solely on rationality, action, or similar. This term too has its limits though, since things can be serious in both relative and unconditional senses, and "unconditionally serious" is no more at home in natural language than "unconditional value."

However, even the business of reaching for an adequate secular term for "sacred," where no such term may be found, has the potential to send the religious to revisit their own terminology and to reconsider its meaning. For every religious person for whom the belief that "all people are sacred because they are children of God" can be sustained throughout a rugby game, and as well carry weight in their dealings with those who are afflicted, there are many others for whom such concepts occupy a place similar to that of a garment kept hanging in the wardrobe but never worn. Such people may feel the force of the secular terms, even where they are inadequate to the task they are given, simply because religious language has become too taken-for-granted to call them to a renewed vision. At the same time, a person who is quite incapable of theistic belief may well be drawn by Gaita's account to consider the ethical problems with which we are concerned in the light of an orientation that shares important features with theism but does not demand it.

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That said, it is hard to get away from the fact that the conceptual range by which the sense of absolute value is deepened and strengthened is far richer within religion than outside of it. This is largely because religion has been the primary field in which such concepts have been maintained and considered, in a day-to-day fashion, in ordinary language. What is more, the relationship between lived experience and these concepts has historically been more solidly maintained within religious practices than elsewhere.

In order to expand a little on this claim, I turn to another of Hamilton's challenges to Gaita; that his conception of sainthood is a thin one, since he does not go into the psychology of the saint in any detail.¹⁷⁶ Now I do not see anything in what Gaita is saying that requires a detailed account of the saints, their struggles and their sometimes unappealing characteristics. One does not need such an account to make sense of the idea that certain of our moral responses require absolute conceptions if they are to become intelligible to us and take hold. However, something that the stories of the saints do tell us is of historical struggles to retain such conceptions as live considerations. As I have said more than once, most of our reading is of relative value. Within all this relative reading, we are sometimes struck by events whose understanding demands absolute conceptions, but they all too easily disappear under the rubble of the many things of relative importance that stake their claims on us, whether

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, page 183

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or not we are religious. Saints are not uniform in either character or example, but the kind of saint we are interested in here is the kind of saint who is known for their seriousness about absolute conceptions of value and their recognition of the sacredness or unconditional value of others, including and perhaps even especially the most wretched and broken of others. And where they differ from the rest of us is that they struggle more than most of us do to retain their sensitivity and receptiveness to the unconditional, or to God, if we are to speak of them in their own language, which is religious language.¹⁷⁷ The fact that such people are known as saints and are uncommon tells us just how hard it can be to retain a sense of unconditional value in a largely relative world, even if certain of our insights and experiences point us in that direction.

While we do not have to thank religion *per se* for those responses that send us reaching for conceptions of absolute value, we do have to thank religion for maintaining such conceptions in relationship to real life, through the medium of religious practices. While it is true that formal religion can provide one with a metaphysical comfort zone within which one can rest in moral complacency, it is

¹⁷⁷ Hamilton challenges Gaita's claim that love such as that shown by Mother Teresa is not an intelligible object of human effort (Good and Evil, pages 203-204), by pointing to the struggles to which saints such as St Augustine subjected themselves in their yearning for pure love – *ibid*, page 186. However, Hamilton allows that St Augustine did not think he could achieve pure love without God's grace – *ibid*, fn 4. So while St Augustine did contribute toward his own purification by making efforts, they were not the kind of efforts that we make in order to render ourselves more courageous, etc. Instead his efforts were toward making himself receptive to, and co-operative with, God's grace. Hence, while it is true that St Augustine and others really did struggle with themselves, it is also true that the love in question was not, in their own eyes, the result of human effort, but of God's grace. The effort is aimed at receptivity to, rather than the cultivation of, divine love.

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also true that the maintenance of our sensitivity to absolute value is central to religious practices, even if we often fail to meet the mark. People fast in Lent or in Ramadan, for example, with a view to reducing the hold that relative value has on them, and the prayers and rituals of formal religions direct the attention away from worldly concerns, toward the absolute, understood within religions as the divine. Such actions are accompanied of course, by conceptual resources by which they are understood, which have been refined by a long history of insights and experiences, including those insights and experiences of religiously acknowledged saints. If the sense of absolute value were to take hold in the practical life of a secular world, then the necessary conceptualisations would of course accompany such an event. But as things stand, the relevant concepts, except where they have been thinned down by theory and so not wholly helpful to projects like Gaita's, are in short supply.

In this sense Mulhall and Wynn may be right in pointing out that "...in the eyes of many believers a secular variant of this (religious) language lacks the conceptual resources to amount to its equivalent,"¹⁷⁸ and that "...the love of saints depends for its possibility (given the cultural-linguistic traditions that obtain in our world) upon the language of religion."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ "The work of saintly love: the religious impulse in Gaita's writing," page 36

¹⁷⁹ "Saintliness and the Moral life," page 484

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They may not be so right, however, in thinking "...that Gaita should pay more systematic attention to "doctrinal and theological, as well as liturgical and practical, elaborations on the meaning of religious belief..."¹⁸⁰ or that Gaita's account "...invites completion in religious terms..."¹⁸¹

While I am sure no one would want to deny Gaita religion if he was brought to his knees by some event or other in his life, what is central to both authentic religious engagement and the religious-point-of-view sans theism is the tension that is maintained, in both instances, between the temporal and the eternal, or in Taylor's language, or between the relative and the absolute. While formal religion is better resourced than secular alternatives for discussing such matters, it is also replete with distractions that may occlude its own point. In comparison, the secular variant is short on resources but also short on such distractions. From this latter position, Gaita has proved able to "throw some familiar thoughts into a new and revealing light" that he may not have been able to do so well had his thoughts been subject to religious completion, despite the greater conceptual range with which such completion would have provided him.

¹⁸⁰ "The work of saintly love: the religious impulse in Gaita's writing," page 36

¹⁸¹ "Saintliness and the Moral life," page 484

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(5) Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out to show where there is continuity between the mystical aspect of theistic morality and the thinking of those who share some of the features of that morality without accepting theism. I have done this firstly by drawing on Whittaker's account of religious engagement, and then by bringing something of this to bear on Holland's discussion of Wittgenstein's nontheistic approach to divinity and Taylor's insistence that one cannot be religious without the support of a traditional religion. I argue that continuity can be found in a shared acceptance of the tension between absolute and relative value, while differences lie with the degree of epistemic caution, which is greater on Wittgenstein's part than is the case with the engaged and committed theist. Raimond Gaita, whose work I have been discussing throughout, holds a position that lies within this continuum, but which does not extend to theism.

Finally I have drawn on a paper by Christopher Hamilton, concluding that while the nontheist who adheres to this moral position is well-positioned to bring things into focus for theist and nontheist alike, it is theism which has historically taken these matters seriously and hence has both the conceptual and practical resources to offer support for the position.

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The form of morality I am espousing here, understood in religious terms, attaches to the idea of "dying to the self." The self is a contingent thing, whereas the highest value, by this account, is absolute, against which the contingent self cannot compete. While this conceptualisation would seem, *prima facie*, to conflict with naturalistic morality, it cannot conflict with it in all respects, since it is within the natural world, and no other with which we are acquainted, that morality occurs. In a nutshell, if we want to genuinely include the afflicted and the outcast, we need a living sense of unconditional value, which means the morality of the mystic. And if we want a world in which the afflicted and the outcast are to be included, then we must attend to naturalistic morality, since that is the predominant morality that by and large makes up the common world. In my next chapter I shall inquire into ways in which these seemingly incompatible positions may be brought together, if not reconciled.

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Chapter 4: Dying to the Self and the Concept of Flourishing

(1) Introduction

In my last chapter, drawing on the work of John H. Whittaker and R. F. Holland, I argued that nontheists may share something of the sort of orientation that we commonly associate with the religious mystic. I argued that while the nontheist's position is in some ways less stable than that of the theist, being divorced from religious practice, it may also bring a clarity to bear on things for the theist herself. This is because nontheists are unencumbered by theistic conceptual apparatus with the potential to occlude the deeper meanings of important theistic concepts when they become confused with empirical claims. I shall now look at this sort of orientation, which I take it Wittgenstein was referring to when he spoke of "a religious-point-of-view," in relation to non-reductive naturalistic Virtue Ethics. I shall argue that although there is a conceptual gap between the "religious-point-of-view" and Naturalistic Virtue ethics, due to the differing criteria upon which judgements are made, each is impoverished to some degree by the neglect of the other. The interplay between the two has the potential to bring a depth to our ethical understanding that either by itself may not provide.

That there is a conceptual gap between these two ways of thinking about ethics is shown in the fact that self-renunciation, or at least indifference to the

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consequences for oneself, tends to play a key role in the ethics of the mystic, while the flourishing of the agent is generally of teleological importance to naturalistic virtue. The tension between them goes back to Plato and Aristotle, and is discussed at some length by Gaita in *Good and Evil*,¹⁸² where he deems Aristotle's reaction to Socrates' claim that the good man cannot be harmed, "the most serious in the history of philosophy."¹⁸³ What is at issue is well summed up by Stephen Mulhall:

...to deny that great or protracted misfortune or double-dyed wickedness could irredeemably crush and maim a person's capacity to lead a meaningful or flourishing life... is to cheapen everything that human beings hold precious... That is why Aristotle – despite going to the limits of any accommodation with it that nonreductive humanism permits - ultimately rejected Socrates' astonishing, transfigurative assertion that a good man cannot be harmed. Whereas, of course, from the perspective created by that transfiguration, the Aristotelian perspective appears shallow in comparison.¹⁸⁴

The positions held by Plato and Aristotle involve different starting points and are difficult to hold in the mind simultaneously; to try to do so is a little like trying to perform the children's trick of patting your head and rubbing your stomach in a

¹⁸² *Good and Evil*, pages 189-206

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, page 192 - For Gaita, it is the most serious "reaction" rather than "criticism" because, by his reading, Aristotle does not meet argument with counterargument, but instead asks several rhetorical questions before suggesting an alternative point of view, in which the relation between virtue and *eudaimonia* is used to "show up" the extremism of the Socratic position.

¹⁸⁴ "The work of saintly love: the religious impulses in Gaita's writing", pages 26 and 27

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circular motion at the same time. Going by Gregory Vlastos¹⁸⁵ account, this is at least in part because the term "real" for Plato is grounded in the idea of genuineness, and for Aristotle in existence. For Aristotle, what is fundamental to reality is the τοῦδε τι, or "the this," which answers the question "τι ἔστι;" or "what is it?" whereas Plato's use of terms such as "οὐσία ὄντως οὐσία," which translates as "the really real reality,"¹⁸⁶ suggests "real" as meaning something more like "genuine," "authentic" or "pure." "Real" understood in this way admits of degrees. A piece of gold, for example, may be "purer" than another piece of gold, in relation to "really real" gold that is unalloyed, 100% pure gold. The distinction between existence and non-existence, in comparison, involves an exhaustive disjunction, and a term like "the existingly existent existence" simply does not make sense in either Greek or English. Vlastos uses the distinction between the statements "Unicorns are not real," and "These flowers are not real,"¹⁸⁷ to illustrate this difference: there is no existent "this" that is a unicorn, whereas plastic flowers do not meet the standard for genuine flowers, although plastic flowers do in fact exist. "What could these forms or ideas (of Plato's) have in common with real gold, real coffee, real courage, real beauty...?"¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Vlastos, Gregory, *A Metaphysical Paradox*, from *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays*, ed Richard Kraut, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 1997, page 182

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, page 186

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Vlastos asks. He suggests two answers; the real F (the form, F-ness) is at once *cognitively reliable F* and *reliably valuable F*.¹⁸⁹

When we bring these considerations to bear on ethics, "the this" in question for Aristotle is a human being, the rational social animal, and a good human being is one who possesses the virtues appropriate to the sort of "this" that a human being is. A good action is the sort of action that such a being, acting in character, would do under the relevant circumstances. Plato, in comparison, seeks a measure for goodness in that which is good beyond perspective, eternal and unchanging. As Andrew Gleeson, equating the form of the Good with God, says, "He is Goodness itself in a sense that has love as central to it. And as Plato realised, from the perspective of this goodness our illusions and pretences and rationalisations – the shadows of our worldly cave – are stripped away: thus God is also Truth itself."¹⁹⁰ For a human being who lives in the light of this perspective, harm is not earthly injury or death, but the kind of adulteration that diminishes or occludes the reality (understood as Plato uses the word) of his or her goodness.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid -While this may seem on the face of it to be at odds with McDowell's claim that Plato's "Good" is not an answer but a fitting response to the uncodifiability of human life, ("Virtue and Reason," pages 61 and 73) this is not necessarily the case, since in the cave passage, the Good is barely glimpsed. Hence "cognitively reliable F and reliably valuable F" may form a focus for inquiry rather than a result of one.

¹⁹⁰ Gleeson, A, *A frightening love: Recasting the problem of evil*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), page 136

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Even if we reject both theism and life after death, we can say that the goodness of the good man, where it is able to withstand the loss of "illusions, pretences and rationalisations," cannot be properly understood as something other than goodness, in life or in death. Hence, on a measure of purity or perfection, as opposed to existence, the good man is not harmed, even by the loss of his life, since if he is a truly good man, his death will not reveal his goodness as mediocrity or sham. What would count as harm would be the loss or distortion of his relation to the Good, and so long as that is intact, *he* is not harmed, even where he is racked with pain and about to lose his life. However, in comparison, even the most exemplary human "this" can most certainly be harmed since its goodness or lack thereof is contingent upon its existence. What this all comes down to is goodness or virtue being both necessary and sufficient for a life that can only be understood as the life of a good man, but necessary, though not sufficient, for a life that can be understood as a good life for a man to live. Judgement depends upon where we turn for a criterion: unqualified goodness that transcends all instantiations, or goodness as it is manifest in an existent, exemplary human being. On the one hand, we do not want to say that someone's life was less than good if her allegiance to goodness led her to a cruel fate, but on the other, a cruel fate, even where it results from goodness, has at best an attenuated link with the sort of life that we think of as one that manifests characteristically human enjoyment and freedom from pain: the sort of life that one would wish on one's children or one's friends, for instance.

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To bring these considerations to bear on the concern that is central to this thesis, namely, the ethical relationship between people who are not comparable in terms of power and status, I repeat a comment of Phillips' that I mentioned in a previous chapter; "In order to renounce one's power (a precondition of compassion) one must not fix one's attention on *how* people are: useful or useless for one, desirable or undesirable, morally deserving or undeserving, but on the fact *that* they are."¹⁹¹ What is interesting about this statement is the order of things. I do not renounce my power *so as* to turn my attention to another's existence; instead, by giving the proper sort of attention to another's existence it follows that I renounce my power in relation to them.¹⁹² Now where "proper attention" is concerned, purity is surely its measure: attention alloyed with impatience, self-congratulation, high-handedness, sentimentality or other such things is attention laced with condescension at *best*. If Phillips is right then the presence of such features is evidence that my attention has not proved sufficiently pure to bring about my renunciation of power, which is the precondition of compassion. This aspect seems best understood in terms of the Platonist deference to the pure or genuine, since the measure involved is the purity of the attention. At the same time, the person with whom I am confronted

¹⁹¹ "From World to God?" in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, pages 55 and 56

¹⁹² One can find reflections of this line of thought in Murdoch's claim that in learning Russian "...I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect...(that) leads away from me toward something alien to me, that my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal," (*The Sovereignty of the Good*, page 89). While Murdoch is here discussing the humility involved in learning, the right sort of attention given to a fellow human being also precludes the impulse to psychologically "swallow up, deny or make unreal." The difference is, the Russian language, being an authoritative structure closed to my manipulations, will pose a challenge to me where an afflicted human being might lack the necessary force to do so.

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is always "this person," and where they are afflicted I recognise them as such because I perceive that their flourishing is in some way compromised. This aspect is best understood in relation to Aristotle's account. I do not think these two ways of thinking about ethics are open to being collapsed into a unified whole, since we cannot at once say that the good man can and cannot be harmed. Even if we try to break it down so as to emphasise that the good man cannot be harmed in respect of his goodness, but can be harmed in respect of his flourishing as a man, in trying to unify the conceptions we end up with a question of prioritisation, by which something must be lost to compromise. What is needed is *both* perspectives, working together to permit an ethical depth and richness that either by themselves may not provide. One could alternatively frame it thus: that naturalistic virtue concepts are more likely to retain their depth where they are orientated in relation to a religious point-of-view, and the religious point-of-view needs something of naturalistic virtue if it is to have practical application.

In the next section I shall look into the commonalities and differences in the thinking of two 20th century philosophers, Simone Weil and G. E. M. Anscombe, the first of whom turned to Plato's schema, and the second to Aristotle's, in order to address modern problems which they each conceived of in closely related ways. Both Weil and Anscombe share a common concern about what becomes of our ethical thinking when we depend upon concepts that have lost their

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authoritative force.¹⁹³ The works that I am primarily drawing on, Weil's essay "Classical Science and After" and Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy", were written respectively early in 1941, when the Second World War was well underway and the "final solution" was imminent, and in 1958, after people had had a decade or so to consider its unimaginable horror, and the challenge it brought to any lingering assumptions that moral progress would be the inevitable result of increased scientific understanding. As I understand both Anscombe and Weil, they are concerned about our tendency to slip into what I shall call "complacent relativism", in which a genuinely ethical perspective no longer has a strong enough hold on us. Complacent relativism is not the same as egoism, however, and we can trot along in this mode feeling like, and in most regards being, quite decent people. I use the term "complacent relativism", in reference to our tendency to conform to prevailing standards that may not be reliably moral, while treating them as if they were moral standards. Anscombe sees this potential in the conceptual structure of a strain of Utilitarianism which she refers to as Consequentialism, Weil sees the same potential in a situation where science privileges instrumentalism over truth. While I acknowledge that there are sophisticated forms of Consequentialism, and perhaps instrumentalism also, that address some of the problems that Anscombe and Weil bring up, I shall follow their arguments without branching out in these directions to any degree.

¹⁹³ The following analysis owes something to my reading of James Conant's essay "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility" in *Religion and Morality*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, (Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), pages 250-298

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But before going any further into this subject, I shall draw attention to a quote from Wittgenstein, leaving it to hover in the background of the following discussion, to be picked up again in due course:

Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me and said, "Well you play pretty badly," and suppose I answered, "I know I'm playing badly, but I don't want to play any better," all the other man could say would be "Ah then that's all right." But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said, "You're behaving like a beast," and I were to say, "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better," could he then say, "Ah then that's all right."? Certainly not; he would say, "Well you *ought* to want to behave better." Here you have an absolute judgement of value, whereas the first instance was one of relative judgement.¹⁹⁴

By this account inept tennis playing and preposterous lying are both fact-descriptions that bring forth very different responses; one relative and the other absolute, or one conditional and the other unconditional: if I do not want to be better at tennis, then there is no requirement that I should improve my game, that is entirely up to me, whereas the requirement that I should not acquiesce in being a thoroughgoing cad, faced squarely, is not conditional on what I happen to want.

¹⁹⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, "Lecture on Ethics" (transcribed from notes by Friedrich Waismann) in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74, No1 (Jan 1965), page 3

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(2) Anscombe and Weil: Commonalities and Differences

The concern which underlies Anscombe's suggestion of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics as an alternative to ethics based on law without a law-giver arises from a development within Utilitarian thinking, which she attributes to Sidgwick and terms "Consequentialism."¹⁹⁵ It is the idea that "it does not make any difference to a man's responsibility for an effect of his action which he can foresee, that he does not intend it."¹⁹⁶ What this means, by Anscombe's account, is that under such a description the goodness or badness of an action must take a back seat to the foreseeable consequences of that action, and she uses an example to illustrate this. Suppose a man ceases to maintain a child because he no longer wants to maintain it, and compare this to a case in which he ceases to maintain the child due to his refusal to perform a disgraceful act knowing that his refusal would land him in prison. The foreseeable consequence in each case is that his contribution to the child's maintenance will end. However, where the focus is solely on foreseeing the consequences of an action, rather than the man's intentions, bad actions are not ruled out of moral consideration: perhaps, the foreseeable consequences being what they are, it might be thought *better* to perform the bad action and so avoid prison but continue to maintain the child. Where the effect on the care of the child is the consequence under consideration, the man's refusing to do the disgraceful deed makes him indirectly

¹⁹⁵ Anscombe, G. E. M., "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, No 124, (Jan, 1958)

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, page 11

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responsible for ceasing to maintain the child. The locus of judgement is not the value of the action, but the foreseeable consequence of performing it or refraining from doing so. Should he refuse to do the action, and consequentially fail to maintain the child, then it is *his fault* that he does not maintain the child. Anscombe does not appear to think that Sidgwick would endorse such a result, but rather that his ethical theory offers no conceptual tools for ruling it out.

One can imagine a journalist being faced with prison for refusing to betray a confidential source of important information. It is a foreseeable consequence of going to prison that her maintenance of a child in her care will be interrupted, so the betrayal of the source must, on the Consequentialist criterion with which Anscombe is concerned, enter into calculations rather than be rejected out-of-hand as unworthy of consideration. This she thinks is a significant departure from Mill's Utilitarianism, where "there is no question of calculating the particular consequences of murder or theft,"¹⁹⁷ and opens the door to a situation in which there are no grounds for insisting that it is not right to kill the innocent as a means to any end whatsoever, and that anyone who disagrees is in error.¹⁹⁸ Certainly, there is a difference between murder and theft and the betrayal of journalistic sources, but I have used the example to illustrate how such a prescription might work in practice, whatever the morally questionable act is that is not ruled out but weighed in relation to the foreseeable consequences.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, page 9

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, page 10

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The concern of Simone Weil's in which I am interested has more to do with a slide toward instrumental rationality, *sans* moral context, than Consequentialism. However, Consequentialism, as Anscombe has it, can also be understood as a significant step along the slippery slope *toward* instrumentalism, as is shown in the above claim: if the killing of an innocent cannot be ruled out as a means to any end *whatsoever*, and if an action can only be understood as instrumental if it is an action toward an end, then there is very little to distinguish between Anscombe's worry about Consequentialism and Weil's worry about instrumental rationality. One might point out that Anscombe's concern is that the Consequentialism she is attacking is put forward as an ethical position, while instrumental rationality, *per se*, makes no such claims. However, both Anscombe and Weil are looking at situations where moral concepts, or concepts upon which morality has previously depended, have lost the grounding that gave them authoritative force, and are deployed in support of a weaker ethos, which I have called "complacent relativism," so as to encompass both the weakness that Anscombe sees in Consequentialism and that Weil sees in instrumentalism. That is to say, consequences and the idea of "what works" both present us with criteria for judgement, but they are not, without further elaboration, criteria for moral judgement. However, where these forms of evaluation prevail, we may well mistake our conformity to them for moral conformity.

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We find evidence of the commonality between their positions in Anscombe's discussion of borderline cases and in certain aspects of Weil's discussion of modern science. On the subject of borderline cases, Anscombe says:

...if you are an Aristotelian, or a believer in divine law, you will deal with a borderline case by considering whether doing such and such in such and such circumstances, is, say, murder, or is an act of injustice, and according as you decide it is or it isn't, you judge it to be a thing to do or not. This would be the method of casuistry; and while it may lead you to stretch a point on the circumference, it will not permit you to destroy the centre.¹⁹⁹

In comparison, the Consequentialist of the kind she is attacking has no equivalent place to stand - no centre, so to speak:

...the most he can say is: a man must not *bring about* this or that; he has no right to say he will, in an actual case, bring about such-and-such unless he does so and so. Further, the consequentialist, in order to be imagining borderline cases at all, has to assume some sort of law or standard according to which this is a borderline case. Where then does he get the standard from? In practice the answer invariably is: from the standards current in his society or his circle. (Hence)...they (the Consequentialists) have nothing in them by which to revolt

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, page 12

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against the conventional standards of their sort of people; it is impossible that they should be profound.²⁰⁰

Anscombe, as is well known, is concerned that the concepts "right" and "wrong", and other moral concepts associated with the idea of "law", when they are not grounded by their religious meaning, tend to mislead us. When the religious grounding is missing, we are apt to accept actions as morally justified on the basis of nonmoral criteria, since the word "right" continues to be used as the justifying term.²⁰¹ I shall return to this subject shortly.

Weil's focus, in the passage with which I am concerning myself, is on the relation between scientific authority and the concept of truth. Weil's thoughts on science are not easily summarised, but I shall try to outline her position in broad brushstrokes, so as to contextualise the aspects upon which I am drawing. In the background of her thinking is the idea that the way in which we represent the world to ourselves reflects our aspirations at any given time. This in turn reinforces the aspirations themselves: we build our concepts, you could say, according to our view of what is important to us, and then our concepts build us, since they render what is important to us intelligible, and thus permit its development and refinement. Greek science, she thinks, for the most part sought

²⁰⁰ Ibid, page 13 - By "he has no right to say ... so and so" what Anscombe must be taken to mean is that the consequentialist has no right to say that he will bring about some good consequence, provided this does not require, in the actual case, a certain kind of action.

²⁰¹ Ibid, page 1

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to understand the right relation between human beings and the universe, and was not separated from other fields of knowledge and endeavour: "...science, art and the search for God were united for the Greeks and they are separate for us," she says.²⁰² Science from the Renaissance through to the nineteenth century focussed largely on the universe as a mechanism, with an emphasis on technological development, utility and mastery over nature, but nonetheless retained a respect for truth in terms of scientific law. I find her quite hard to understand on the subject of twentieth century science, but the gist of her argument seems to be that the challenges that discoveries like quantum physics posed to the Newtonian system, and the way in which they were met, left science without the sort of orientation toward truth that would rule out arbitrariness or license. This line of thought seems to be informed by the fact that within the recent history of physics, some philosophers of science took the view that science should no longer be understood as trying to describe (within the limitations of fallibility) what the world is really like, but rather, as providing useful descriptions for successfully predicting (and managing our interactions with) the real world. This is a controversial, anti-realist view, and it is also controversial as to whether quantum physics support it. But even if realism is retained, there is a significant shift involved in accepting that fundamental physical laws may be statistical. The problem with regard to truth, she thinks, is further exacerbated by increased specialisation, whereby the scientists

²⁰² *On science, Necessity and The Love of God*, page 48

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themselves are laymen outside of their specialist fields, and pursue areas of inquiry that no longer contribute to a unified picture. At the same time, she thinks, the lack goes unnoticed because "they (the scientists) are still carried along by the impetus of earlier generations."²⁰³

Now even if we find her sweeping historical assertions questionable, and think, as does Rush Rhees, that she may well have amended her views on quantum theory had she lived longer,²⁰⁴ Weil's idea seems to be that truth stands to scientific inquiry as morality does to our interactions with others, and that the demotion of truth in favour of usefulness as the end to which data is interpreted, opens the door to license in just the same way as does the relegation of the moral assessment of actions to the valuation of their foreseeable consequences.

So soon as truth disappears, utility at once takes its place, because man always directs his effort toward some good or other. Thus utility becomes something which the intelligence is no longer entitled to define or judge, but only to serve. From being the arbiter, intelligence becomes the servant, and gets its orders from the desires. And further, public opinion then replaces conscience as sovereign mistress of thoughts, because man always submits his thoughts to some higher control, which is superior in value or else in power.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Ibid, page 62

²⁰⁴ Ibid, page vii

²⁰⁵ *Science, Necessity and The Love of God*, pages 63 and 64 - I take "utility" in this passage to mean something like "usefulness" or "function" rather than in the technical sense in which the word is used in Utilitarianism.

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In the modern secular world, science is the authority to which many sorts of truth claims defer: a medieval deferred to the church, and considered that something was wrong with his thesis if heresy could be derived from it; we in turn tend to see something wrong with our theories if they come into direct conflict with science. So there is also a social and moral aspect to Weil's concern, since "the disappearance of scientific truth appears to our eyes as the disappearance of truth, thanks to our habit of mistaking the one for the other."²⁰⁶ Science is, after all, the identified authority in such matters.

Now by "the disappearance of truth" Weil does not mean that any old thing can now count as a fact; rather she is concerned with the conceptual apparatus by which factual data is interpreted. Huey-li Li seems to be thinking along similar lines, with regard to ecological ethics, when she argues that "in order to redress the on-going ecological degradation, environmental education must therefore attend and attest to the interrelations between the cosmic order and human morality, as suggested by Platonic cosmology."²⁰⁷ The idea is that ideally, facts are interpreted in the light of a higher conception of truth, and that where they are not, the uses to which they can be put fills the breach. For Weil, this has broadly moral implications, because the world view in which we are embedded at least partly shapes the framework in which our moral decisions are made.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, page 63

²⁰⁷ Li, Huey-li, "Platonic Cosmology: A Terrestrial Pedagogy," in *Philosophy of Education: Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society*, (2004), pages 130-138

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Anscombe and Weil begin from quite different standpoints and their suggested remedies differ, which I shall get to in due course. Anscombe is attacking a particular feature of the academic ethics that prevailed at the time of her writing, and suggesting an alternative. Weil is tracking what she sees as the gradual weakening of science's connection with an overarching conception of truth while retaining its position as prime authority on the subject. The problem each sets out to address though is quite similar: an authoritative term, robbed of the authority that gave it content, in one instance "law" and in the other "truth," retaining a certain psychological force but divorced from the conceptual framework that anchored it; "God" in Anscombe's case, in Weil's something more like the assumption of a "cosmos," which can perhaps be understood in terms of the world as God's creation, or something very similar.²⁰⁸ Weil does not go into conceptual analysis in these instances as Anscombe does, but the terms involved, "law" and "truth", are roughly in the position of deposed kings, or chickens continuing to fly with their heads cut off; still in evidence, but lacking the force of a ruling king or a live chicken. Anscombe's attack is logical, and Weil's existential or psychological. But they both resist the relegation of binding values to merely instrumental concerns and of standards of judgment to popular opinion. And they recognise that these shifts occur under the deceptive umbrella

²⁰⁸ To add to what I have already said about Weil on science, without such a conception, by her account, intellectual efforts in various fields become fragmented, less able to contribute to the whole, and hence are judged on the basis of technical expertise rather than the value of their contribution to understanding the truth.

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of concepts that continue to be used, yet without the absolute grounding they once had.

We can gain a glimpse into what these worries amount to by looking at them alongside the Wittgenstein quote, mentioned earlier, where not telling outrageous lies is an unconditional demand in that I cannot seriously say "I know I tell outrageous lies but I don't want to do any better than that." By Anscombe's account, where a person's actions are evaluated in terms of their foreseen consequences, the telling of an outrageous lie cannot be ruled out unconditionally; whether or not it is told is instead conditional on the expected consequences of either telling the lie or refraining from doing so. What is more one may, under this prescription, blamelessly tell the lie and have it lead to terrible consequences, provided one can make a case for having failed to foresee them. The relation of Weil's position to the Wittgensteinian claim is a bit less straightforward, but we can see a similar split between truth and usefulness as criteria for determining the value of an action or pursuit as we see in Anscombe's account between the value of action and its consequence as the point of moral decision. Where facts are no longer seen in relation to a higher conception of truth, but in relation to their usefulness only, then there is nothing to curb me

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from fudging the facts should it seem useful to do so. Hence telling the preposterous lie may well be accepted as the thing to do on such grounds²⁰⁹.

This is what Anscombe is getting at when she speaks of "a corrupt mind:" it is a mind that is able to think *in advance* that "such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration" is open to question.²¹⁰ Where the force of the unconditional is lent to foreseen consequences, reluctance to perform a disgraceful action that would nonetheless bring about desired consequences may even be derided as evidence of squeamishness or a lack of realism. Divine Law, in comparison, makes the sort of unconditional demand to which Wittgenstein alludes: I must not murder, lie or steal, etc, whatever threat may loom or benefit beckon. And should I allow my concern with an outcome to function as an unconditional "must" to the extent that I fail to adhere to these constraints, then I have given in to temptation and have sinned.

²⁰⁹ I acknowledge that classical Utilitarians, such as Bentham, did suppose that objective measures of utility were possible, and Anscombe does distinguish the kind of "Consequentialism" she criticises (and derives from Sidgwick) from "old-fashioned Utilitarianism."

²¹⁰ Anscombe does allow that circumstances that *sometimes* include expected consequences will have a bearing on the justice of an action, and uses the example of using someone's machine, foreseeing its destruction, to avert a flood or fire. The emphasis, however, is on the idea that one does not think *in advance* that it is alright to destroy someone's property for this or that reason. Such exceptions, while open to illustration by example, are resistant to formulation, and perhaps can be understood as "stretching a point at the circumference," within the bounds of reason, without destroying the centre – "Modern Moral Philosophy," pages 15-16

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Where Anscombe speaks of "corrupt minds" in relation to such matters, Weil points to a situation in which "utility becomes something which the intelligence is no longer entitled to define or judge, but only to serve,"²¹¹ but the state of affairs each is worried about is fairly much identical; the relegation of judgement to means-end reasoning toward nonmoral ends, while authoritative moral concepts remain in the language, divorced from the authority that once fixed their meanings, and hence able to add a patina of justification to licence.

By Anscombe's account, if we retain the concept of a moral law while rejecting the idea of a lawgiver, not only does the concept itself lack grounding, but a host of other concepts, notably "should," "must," "ought," "right," "wrong," and so on, which when taken unconditionally are themselves grounded by the concept of a moral law, lose their grounding along with it. Should we employ these terms in the abovementioned manner while proclaiming ourselves nontheists, then we are treating as authoritative terms that lack moral authority within the conceptual range in which we are using them.²¹² However, when we turn to Aristotle, we find action descriptions that are pertinent to the human being as a rational social animal, framed in the terminology of virtue and vice, rather than right and wrong. Furthermore, we can get from "is" to the virtues via "needs:" the rational

²¹¹ For a serious Utilitarian, the mind is meant to *assess* and *judge* utility, and not merely to serve it. Weil's claim, however, suggests a situation in which desires have triumphed over judgement.

²¹² Anscombe does consider Kant, but dismisses the idea of legislating for oneself as absurd - "Modern Moral Philosophy," page 2. Contemporary Kantians (e.g. Korsgaard) will obviously suppose this dismissal to be too swift.

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social animal that we are has need of certain features, the possession of some of which can be expressed in terms of virtue and the absence or distortion of others in terms of vice. From within this conceptual range we can describe the action of one who would subject another to unjust punishment in order to achieve a certain outcome as "unjust." If we were to agree to ethical naturalism, thus understood, then in deciding that on this-or-that occasion it might be "right" to perform an act of injustice, we would be trespassing on territory that consistency required us to abandon: we would be reaching beyond the limits of nature into terminology whose grounds for making sense we have rejected. "Right," when used in this way is parasitic on an authority to which we are no longer deferring, so lends the word an artificial moral legitimacy, which would potentially allow us to go ahead with the unjust punishment with a false sense of moral justification.

To be consistent, we should instead understand something like injustice as a defect in a human being, rather than a matter of right or wrong, rather as failing to participate in the hunt but seeking to share in the spoils is a defect in a wolf:²¹³ the wolf that refuses to participate in the hunt is bad *qua* wolf, and the man who acts unjustly is bad *qua* man. An act properly described as "unjust" is an act that someone who is devoid of the virtue of justice, so at least somewhat bad *qua* person, may typically perform. The identification of a good human being harbours more complexities than the identification of a good wolf, but the virtues

²¹³ Hursthouse, Rosalind, *On Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), page 201

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themselves and their practical application, as opposed to popular opinion at any given time or place, form the benchmark. For example, someone trying to get us to accept an action whose claim to justice was controversial would be required, by this account, to try and convince us of its worth on the *grounds* of justice, rather than by pressing the claim that his proposed action was the "right" thing to do under the circumstances, with nothing grounding his use of the word "right" within a moral terrain.

Weil's response to the problem with which she is concerned, the displacement of the moral constraints associated with the concept of truth by instrumental reasoning, is suggested by her claim that, "...man always submits his thoughts to some higher control, which is superior (to him) in value or else in power."

Her focus is less on the individual forming the intention than on the role and legitimacy of the standard to which that individual turns. Where we submit our thoughts to value, understood in terms of truth and goodness, we submit our thoughts to a standard that has the authority of moral legitimacy, whereas the submission of our thoughts to power harks back to Thrasymachus's assertion that justice is the advantage of the powerful. While it seems silly to call the advantage of the powerful justice, and even Thrasymachus reverses his terms within the passage, so as to end up defending injustice, it is true that power relations play a big part in the lives of all animal species, including our own, since those superior in power (whether institutions or individuals) are in the position to

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help or harm us, and have a grip on us via our hopes and fears. Deference to superior power goes with the orientation of utility (understood as usefulness), since it is useful to me, and whatever projects with which I am involved, to be in good stead with power, and potentially harmful to me and my endeavours to be on the outer. What is more, hope and fear have an immediate psychological grip on us that ethical values do not have with similar levels of immediacy and reliability. Importantly, while power and some sorts of authority concur (the police, for example, have both the power and the conventional authority to arrest people who break the law) they are not the same thing; a tyrant may be powerful but devoid of moral authority, retaining his position entirely by his ability to grant or withhold favour, or to punish severely. Because of these capacities, power can feel very much like authority when one is in its thrall. Furthermore, popular opinion is very much informed by power-relations, as so many of Plato's dialogues show, since whether we are good or wicked, we all experience hope and fear. Deference to power by itself, however, is deference to a non-moral standard. The Aristotelian way of addressing the problem of deference to nonmoral standards in lieu of moral ones lies with early training, and one can see an analogy in the way sports training works. Rather as the trained football player internalises the constraint of not touching the ball with his hands, the person well-trained in virtue does not allow hopes and fears to bypass a virtuous response to a given situation. That eruptions occur in both cases (the

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"hand of God" incident springs to mind²¹⁴) does not take away from this, since such incidents are seen as out of order rather than par for the course.

Weil, however, gives greater attention to clarity about the standard to which we submit ourselves. Essentially, Anscombe says, "If you don't believe in God, then you need to derive your standards from an account of ethics based on human nature, and Aristotle offers a promising account along just those lines," while Weil says, "Human nature is always orientated in relation to a standard greater than itself; in the absence of competitors, the default standard is popular opinion. Popular opinion, being informed by the arbitrariness of power relations, and the conditions of prestige at any given time, cannot reliably lend our actions moral legitimacy. Hence we need to *regain* the standards of truth and purity associated with theism, even if we do not think there is a God."

The difference between their recommendations corresponds to the difference between Plato and Aristotle, discussed in the first section. For Anscombe the criteria for moral judgement lie with the characteristic virtues of a good human being, for Weil what is important is the kind of value to which one's thoughts are submitted, or as Gaita puts it, the focal concept that determines one's ethical

²¹⁴ "The hand of God" incident refers to an Argentinean goal in the 1986 World Cup, in a quarter final match against England. While the goal in question appeared to come from a header by Diego Maradona, video footage showed that he had also used his hand. He responded to criticism by claiming that the ball was guided into goal by "the hand of God."

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perspective.²¹⁵ For the theist, the focal concept that determines one's ethical perspective is God, for the nontheist who shares in this sort of orientation, the purest goodness of which one can conceive.

In the next section I shall explore these positions further and go on to look at how they may be brought together, so as to have a bearing on the problem with which I myself am concerned; the full inclusion among us of those people whom life has rendered wretched, vulnerable or outcast.

(3) Character and Concepts

To get down to the aspect of Anscombe's position in which I am most interested, firstly and most importantly there is the method of moral understanding she is advocating, as it pertains to action. To ask, "Would doing x amount to an act of injustice?" is to ask whether x is what a person with the virtue of justice would do under the circumstances in regard to which the question is asked. Strictly speaking, this is consistent with the idea of a naturalistic yardstick for determining the rightness or wrongness of an action: "to do x under circumstance y would be an act of injustice, human beings who are not deficient *qua* human being, and who are acting in character, do not perform such actions,

²¹⁵ Gaita. Raimond, *After Romulus*, (The Text Publishing Company, Swann House, 2011), pages 74 and 75 – Gaita distinguishes between Plato's and Aristotle's accounts of virtue by describing Plato's focal concept as goodness and Aristotle's as honour - *Good and Evil*, pages 88 and 89

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so, not wishing to court deficiency in ourselves and degradation in our actions, we will not do x under circumstance y, and will instead seek a solution to our problem that accords with justice," offers a rough skeleton of how an argument might go on this basis (real arguments, where real concerns are at stake, are never so reduced, but may follow something like this sort of line). A question might arise at this point as to why we should mind about being deficient human beings. Yes, one might ask, we are social animals and perhaps need to maintain the *appearance* of virtue, but why bother about the vice or virtue involved in actions that will go unnoticed? If we allow that we are no more likely to convince an immoralist that she should avoid such deficiencies than we are likely to convince her that she should always treat another as an end and never as a means, or that she should obey Divine Law, then the answer lies with the features of human life that are encapsulated by the virtue concepts, which are broadly understood as worthwhile characteristics for members of our particular species to have.

However, if we are to use character as a criterion for action so as to keep our ethical judgements within a framework consistent with naturalism, then we must pay attention to character and its place in human nature if such action judgements are to be grounded. The case for this is fairly much self-evident; we would not base our ethical judgements on God's will without paying attention to the sort of thing God might will, and neither would we base them on character

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without giving thought to character traits. With the latter, as I have already mentioned, the bridge between human character and a naturalistic ethics is need: as rational, social animals with a typical set of general characteristics, we have need of certain qualities, such as the virtues, if we are to flourish in the manner appropriate to our species, rather as a plant needs water and sunlight or shade, or other conditions pertinent to its kind, if it is to flourish as plant. It is through this move that we get *eudaimonia*, whose direct meaning is "good daemon" or "good spirit", translated as "flourishing" rather than "happiness," the word which has been used as the primary translation in the past, and still is in those passages of Greek where the concept of "flourishing" simply would not make sense.²¹⁶ That said, the "flourishing" translation does sit well with Aristotle's τοῦτέ τι, since whether "this particular living x" is a human being, a sheep, or a rose bush, it must manifest certain features if it is to thrive in the manner typical of the sort of thing that it is. As a social animal, a human being needs the capacity for co-ordination, and those social animals such as horses and dogs that work with human beings toward largely human-centred goals share that capacity. As rational social animals we have need of virtues such as justice, temperance, compassion and so on if we are to function well within a human world. Other social animals do not share this need insofar as it involves

²¹⁶ Gaita draws attention to Aristotle's concern as to whether or not one's *eudaimonia* should be affected by what happens after one's death. Although he decided that it was not, he did take the question seriously. He (Gaita) notes that it would be a sick joke to say that someone was not flourishing whose dead body had been thrown to the dogs, though we might, if a little poetically, call him "unhappy," and that Solon's saying translated as "Call no man flourishing until he is dead" does not sit so well either.- *Good and Evil*, pages 129-130

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the sorts of conscious choices that humans *qua* humans make. Perhaps because we view our fellow humans from the perspective of our sharing the same social species, it is significant that while human flourishing does involve qualities other than the virtues, such as health, the virtues inform our conception of a "good human being" whereas the other features of flourishing do not. We do not say that someone is good *qua* person because she is healthy, or can run fast, or can play the piano well, but we do say that someone is good *qua* person when she is courageous, generous, honest, etc. So on the understanding of the Aristotelian approach suggested by Anscombe, in choosing injustice over justice I am not acting against a God whose existence I reject, nor against reason taken in isolation, but against my humanity, properly understood.

The Weilian position, in comparison, is based less on character than on orientation, or as Gaita puts it, the focal concept that determines one's ethical perspective, since according to Weil, "Man always submits his thoughts to some higher control." Examples of bad orientations taken from literature come up in Hans Christian Anderson's *The Snow Queen*, where the little boy Kay gets a splinter from the devil's mirror caught in his eye, so that he is unable to apprehend goodness or beauty in anything he looks upon, and in the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon, under the influence of Delusion, alienates his best soldier Achilles

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by taking his beloved Briseis from him.²¹⁷ In each case the character in question is in the thrall of a distorted perspective, which alters for the worse the way they view and treat others, and in each case there is a conceptual distinction between character and perspective. When little Kay weeps and the splinter of glass is washed from his eye by his tears, he is able to love again, and when Agamemnon emerges from the thrall of Delusion he publicly assures Achilles that he was blinded and robbed of his wits when he instigated the quarrel that had cost his army so dearly, and would therefore "make amends and grant immense compensation."²¹⁸ One might say, from an Aristotelian point-of-view, that these fictional persons each had good characters as the base to which to return from their distorted perspectives, but nonetheless, character and perspective are able to be thought of separately, and given different emphasis in different accounts.

Socrates' assertion that no one would knowingly do evil, and Christ's cry from the cross, "Forgive them father, they know not what they do," presuppose that there is an orientation towards the good from which the evil of what has been done would be plain: *if* those delighting in Christ's crucifixion were not subject to a distorted view of things, they would not have thought and acted as they did, and similarly, *if* tyrants and the like could see the value (or disvalue) of their actions in light of their relation to pure goodness they would find themselves

²¹⁷ Homer, *The Iliad*, 1.411-413 and 9.80-95, trans. Peter Jones and D C H Rieu, (Penguin, 2003), pages 15 and 340

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 19:136-146, page 341

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plunged into remorse. A true perspective, as it accords with this line of thought, is expressed by Kierkegaard when he says, "There is only one end: the genuine Good; and only one means: this, to be willing only to use those means which genuinely are good – but the genuine Good is precisely the end."²¹⁹

While the positions held by Anscombe and Weil involve different criteria for ethical judgement, the good human being in the former case, and in the latter a focal value of goodness, they are not so far apart as might seem at first blush. This is especially clear when we take into account the implications that go with our being "rational animals," that Philippa Foot has referred to in terms of a "sea-change,"²²⁰ whereby human virtue is not reducible to "mere" nature, but is a complex development *within* nature that is consistent with nature. At the same time, their different criteria do give rise to certain differences.

With regard to similarities, both are setting out to clarify a perspective in which moral values are clearly distinguishable from non-moral values, and to offer a case for returning that perspective to the forefront of our thinking. While Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is linked to nature through "need," we must remember that virtue is a precise *sort* of need, pertinent to the human being as a rational,

²¹⁹ Kierkegaard, Soren, trans. Douglas Steere, *Purity of Heart*, (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1956), page 72, as quoted by Phillips, D. Z., *Interventions in Ethics*, (Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992) page 122

²²⁰ Foot Philippa, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), page 52 – ...human beings are rational beings. It is part of the sea change that came at the point of transition from plants and animals on one side to human beings on the other that we can look critically at our own conduct and the rules of behaviour we were taught.

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social animal. Virtue Ethical claims to objectivity derive from the relation between human ethics and the sort of thing that a human being is, which involves paying attention to the sorts of desires and interests that human beings have.²²¹ Charles Taylor has a nice analogy between perception and ethical realism, thus understood: "The...quality 'red,'" he says, "would not be there if we sighted beings were not part of the universe, but granted that we are there are right and wrong attributions of it."²²² While disagreements about ethics arise more often than disagreements about colour (which *do* in fact arise on the boundaries) attributions of "just," "kind," "courageous," etc. can be right or wrong in much the same way as colour attributions can. "I missed the turnoff because you said to turn left at the green fence, when the fence in question was in fact blue," presents a challenge to an attribution of colour, while "You told me she was mean when from what I have seen of her she is rather generous," challenges the attribution of a vice to someone who is seen by the speaker as exhibiting virtue. The concept of virtue depends on a human ethical perspective rather as our perception of colour depends on human sightedness.

²²¹ *On Virtue Ethics*, page 230

²²² Taylor, Charles, "Ethics and Ontology," in *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 100, (June 2003), page 307 - One might put what I take to be Taylor's point by saying that "what that quality – redness – is makes essential reference to what sighted beings such as ourselves would experience on encountering it." Whatever constitutes "redness" (differential reflectance of light on a surface) would still be there with or without sighted beings, but there would be no right or wrong attributions of "red" if the physical basis for the colour were not correlated with certain experiences of sighted beings who encounter it.

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Rosalind Hursthouse lists four ends that are pertinent to social animals, with which the standard list of virtues is said to be consistent: individual survival, continuance of the species, characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain, and the good functioning of the social group,²²³ and also quotes Aristotle as saying, "We have the virtues neither by nor contrary to (our) nature...we are fitted by (our) nature to receive them."²²⁴ Hence we cannot say that the virtues are *reducible* to nature via the four ends, but rather that character traits that run counter to these ends are at the very least questionable as virtues.

Weil's measure is, as I have said, a conception of absolute goodness rather than goodness in human nature, but when we consider that virtue is an ethical development that we, as rational animals, are fitted by nature to receive (which sits well with Wittgenstein's pointing to the relation between ethics and our primitive responses), and remember that a concept like "deference to the absolute good" can only arise in a thing with our capacities for language, thought and wonder, the line between the applied judgements to which these positions lead seems very slim indeed.

Differences come up, though, when we return to the differing criteria for judgement, on the one hand to human nature at its best, on the other to absolute Goodness. Gaita characterises the difference between Plato and

²²³ *On Virtue Ethics*, page 208

²²⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a24-6, as quoted in *On Virtue Ethics*, page 251

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Aristotle in terms of focal concepts: Plato he thinks, has the focal value of Goodness with a capital "G" and Aristotle the focal value of nobility, and he uses this to explain, among other things, Aristotle's rejection of the form of the Good as being beyond human achievement even if it were to exist.²²⁵ Of this he says,

In his (Aristotle's) criticism he revealed a deep misunderstanding of Plato, for whom the Form of the Good is not an object of pursuit, but in the light of which we and all our pursuits are judged. One reason why Aristotle failed to see that was because his sense of the ethical is limited to virtues whose focal concept is nobility, and he failed to see the distance between an ethics centred on nobility, and an ethics centred on the Good and the love of it.²²⁶

I myself am inclined to place the difference, as I have mentioned earlier, between the τοῦτέ τι as fundamental to reality for Aristotle, and the οὐσία ὄντως οὐσία as the measure of perfection or purity for Plato, although it does seem to be the case that for Aristotle the best human life is a noble one. But whichever way you cut it, the former turns for a criterion to human life, flourishing according to its kind, and the latter to the sort of goodness that transcends life, as expressed in Socrates' claim that the good man cannot be harmed, a variation on which Gaita quotes from a letter Thomas More sent to his daughter, prior to his execution;

²²⁵ *Good and Evil*, page 200 – I take this to mean that even if the Good were to exist, its transcendence would place it outside of the arena of human character and action.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

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I thank God that my case was such in this matter, through the clearness of mine own conscience, that though I might have pain I could not have harm. For a man may in such a case lose his head and not have harm.²²⁷

I must note before going on that you might sacrifice your life on Aristotelian grounds too, only you would not claim on the same grounds that you could do so and remain unharmed: for Aristotle, virtue is a necessary, though not sufficient condition for a good life, and an Aristotelian, where forced to choose between a serious betrayal, say, and death, may well choose death over a life that she judged could no longer be good were its integrity so badly violated. However, a dead "this" is not an unharmed "this," for Aristotle, which is why he may well have understood Socrates' claim that the good man cannot be harmed as "cheap high-mindedness."²²⁸ At the same time, as Mulhall has noted, the Aristotelian perspective can seem comparatively shallow alongside the perspective that permitted More to calmly affirm that "a man may lose his head and not be harmed" immediately prior to his execution.

Essentially, the difference lies with the distinction between a life that cannot be judged as other than good, and what we mean by a good life when that is what

²²⁷ More, Thomas, "Letters to Margaret, June 1535," in A L Rowse (ed), *A Man of Singular Virtue: The Life of Sir Thomas More by his son-in-law William Roper and a Selection of More's Letters*, (London: Folio Society, 1980), page 126, as quoted in *Good and Evil*, page 199

²²⁸ *Good and Evil* page 192

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we would wish on our loved ones. On the criterion of absolute goodness, the good man may lose his head and not be harmed because on this criterion goodness is both necessary and sufficient for a good life. Wickedness or sin, by this account, can render the life less than good, but not death, and certainly not an unjustly inflicted, but well met, death at the hands of others. On the criterion of a human being as a natural kind of living thing however, beheading most certainly harms, since in getting beheaded one ceases to *be* a living thing. One could crudely characterise these position as distinguishable on the grounds that the *telos* of one is a happy death and the other a happy life.²²⁹

This brings us back to the distinction between the concepts of "dying to the self" and "flourishing according to one's kind," and one sees the reflection of this in the lists of virtues given by Plato and Aristotle. Plato has just four: wisdom (of the intelligence), courage (of the spirit), temperance (of the appetites), and justice, in which the virtues of each part of the soul are integrated. In comparison, Aristotle's list includes such virtues as magnanimity, liberality, and proper ambition; virtues applicable to a happy and fruitful life. When we take the moral position that involves dying to the self, the moral features that retain their value are those that continue to hold in the light of the infinite good, where

²²⁹ While "death" *per se* cannot count as a *telos*, a "happy death" may, with the emphasis on "happy." While death is not sought as a *telos*, it is inevitable, and can be "happy" in the sense that it does not involve a departure from goodness, or goodness revealed as sham.

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our "illusions and pretences and rationalisations" are stripped away"²³⁰, the key feature of a happy death. Under these conditions, a virtue such as "proper ambition" may not count for much, whereas in naturalistic terms it forms part of the difference between a life that flourishes and a life that does not. There is of course, a continuity between the virtues that are pertinent to the good life and those that retain their value in the face of death, just as there is a continuity between living and dying, but their salience differs in accordance with the criterion to which we turn for judgement.

Within Christianity, a split between natural and transcendental perspectives is expressed in the distinction made between "the world" and "the spirit:" with the worldly life, thriving in terms of wealth, power and prestige are the focus, whereas with the life of the spirit goodness and love are the focus. Christ rejected the "world" as a focal value when he resisted temptation in the desert, and reiterated this stance by saying "My kingdom is not of this world." This is not to say that worldly concerns are absolutely neglected (Christ himself, after all, trained as a carpenter), but rather they are subject to morality as "an absolute measure to which any activity is said to be answerable,"²³¹ according to Phillips, or by Gaita's account, "judged in the light of the absolute Good," along with the rest of our actions. Hence such matters are not strictly speaking a *part*

²³⁰ *A frightening love: Recasting the problem of evil*, page 136

²³¹ Phillips, D. Z., "In Search of the Moral 'Must'", in *Interventions in Ethics*, (Macmillan Press, 1992), page 146

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of morality, although they are answerable to it. This follows from the idea of goodness as an orientation; if my focus is the world, then I am centrally concerned with how things go for me in the world, whereas if my focus is the Good, worldly matters are not devoid of interest for me, but they are answerable to a higher control, which is goodness.

In comparison, Aristotelian Virtue Ethics offer, for most modern adherents anyway, a morality that is humanistic, and so some of the vital concerns of a human being must inevitably be included as moral concerns. Being the complex things that we are, "individual survival" does not capture what a human being will consider a rich and fulfilling life, nor does it capture what a life of any kind may mean to its possessor, but both a fulfilling life and a life rich with meaning are contingent on the survival of the individual concerned. Furthermore, our contribution to Hursthouse's four ends²³² may in some instances be indirect: aunts, uncles, educators, doctors and so on may contribute indirectly to the continuance of the species through their positive engagement with the upcoming generation, though they do not have children of their own. Not to mention, in having a character that is virtuous, it follows that I will very likely be willing and able to extend my concerns beyond the group with which I am affiliated, so as to lend assistance to the same four ends being achieved by perfect strangers in foreign lands, for example. In being a virtuous agent, I will understand and

²³² *On Virtue Ethics*, page 208

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respond to the importance of the four ends to others who are not part of my group, perhaps even to the point of counting the human race as the group to which I owe this allegiance. I mention these things in order to show that deeming some life-enhancing features virtues insofar as they contribute to individual flourishing does not mean the diminishment of other moral characteristics, such as generosity, compassion, and sensitivity and so on, which will tend to be present in the virtuous agent to a high degree. Furthermore, naturalistic virtue is well able to accommodate much of what we naturally are; the joyous and harmless displays of power that go with spectacular feats in sport, art and dance, for example, and the fact that we actually *do* for the most part seek lives of "characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain," even if it is also true that death awaits us.

With regard to the relationship between people who are not comparable in terms of power and status, however, I think that religious ethics, or ethics based on an orientation toward the Good has resources that naturalistic Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, by themselves, do not have to equivalent degree. This is because the distinction made between the life-enhancing virtues and the virtues that retain their value *in extremis*, brings us down to what is most basic to our common humanity: at bottom, we are contingent creatures, every one of us open to the possibilities of physical or moral failure, rejection by our fellows and the certainty of death. Naturalistic virtue is not able to replicate this without putting pressure

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on its claims to naturalism, since naturally, whether we are virtuous or not, we shrink from all of these things, even though we are subject to them. Whereas under the conceptualisation that privileges the Good, and places the entirety of my worldly life as answerable to it, all that I consider myself to be is understood as radically contingent, and even the goodness that orientates me is felt as something external to me, more like a light that guides my actions than a light of which I am the source. This is what "dying to the self," in contrast with flourishing, amounts to. Hence the difference between me and my afflicted sister, or alternatively between my afflicted self and my flourishing sister, even and perhaps especially moral differences, can be more readily understood in terms of accident, chance or luck. According to Weil,

To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself, "I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.'...To be aware of this in the depths of one's soul is to experience non-being."²³³

If this sounds rather morbid and far-fetched, imagine a situation where universities were, almost out of the blue, broadly decried as havens of evil and

²³³ Weil, Simone, "Human Personality," in *Selected Essays: 1934-1943*, trans. Richard Rees, (Oxford University Press, 1962), page 27

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degeneracy and the academics therein beneath contempt. And I mean seriously: one might see a letter to the editor along these lines that does not amount to much, and could not unseat anyone. I am talking about contempt of the unseating variety. I would add also that the level of disapproval might be such that the taint of *having been* an academic would be enough to preclude uncomplicated career changes. Some would reject this description and fight back of course, but their voices may come across to the general public as insubstantial or dismissible, as tends to happen to people who are thus relegated. Some might claim to be barbers in response to small talk from checkout operators, or do a little drain-laying so as to legitimately include an acceptable occupation on their passports. But whatever the responses, the plank on which their confidence rested would be at least badly shaken, and at most severely damaged. My point is that by and large, people who are afflicted are people *to whom something of this sort has actually happened*, for whatever reason, and to whatever degree others may see fit to attribute blame to them.

If I am able to bring the radical contingency of everything in my life, including what I count as my moral attributes, to bear on the character of my exchanges with those who suffer affliction, then common ground is found in our shared humanity, and any greater strength I have, which I may use to be of help, becomes something that I have at my disposal, and not something that I am and

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that the other is not. Even my virtues by this account are not strictly mine;²³⁴ a time may come when I no longer have such attributes, which goes with the territory. This is what it means to die to the self, and to encounter another in terms of the fact "*that* they are" rather than "*what* they are."

However, to return to the imagined group of vilified academics of a couple of paragraphs back: academics, if they are worth their salt are concerned with truth, and may in many cases be more concerned with truth than the average man in the street. However, if one were to say to them, "Would you like to face real public vilification and persecution? It will bring you very close to the truth of the human condition," one would be surprised if one had many takers, and might well doubt the sanity of the takers one had.

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, as it was introduced to modern thinking by Anscombe, is able to offer a far fuller account of what people, including most religious people, *do* want their lives to be like. Weil's Christian-Platonist account is better resourced for dealing with the situation where lives are not as people would ordinarily want them to be. The place of the life-enhancing virtues in each scheme reflects this: the Aristotelian version seeks to include the more earthly virtues and the virtues that hold their value on one's death bed in a unified

²³⁴ A Christian expression of this is to say, "Not me, but Christ in me."

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whole, the Weilian version offers a response to those situations where they come apart: in affliction, in evil, in death, and in goodness beyond sense or measure.

Hence I think that an adequate account of ethics, of the kind I am interested in anyway, requires a depth of vision that can only arise from *both* perspectives, sometimes working in unison and sometimes pulling against each other. After all, it is true that we die as well as live. I do not think that they can be made coherent as a whole for the reasons that I have outlined at the beginning of this chapter, but I also think that neither account offers enough by itself, that each needs the corrective influence of the other.

If we return to Anscombe and Weil, we see that while Anscombe recommended a form of ethical naturalism for those who do not accept a religious ethic, this was not out of rejection of religious ethics, but out of her rejection of concepts that make sense only when they are given a religious grounding. And we also see that while Weil endorsed a supernatural basis for ethics, she certainly concerned herself with human need. Neither is inclined to reduce the moral terrain in the light of their central conception, but rather each allows room for reaching beyond it. In criticising the Consequentialists, Anscombe claimed that "it is impossible that they should be profound".²³⁵ Evidently, then, she saw in Aristotelian ethics the potential for depth. The relation between those who are

²³⁵ "Modern Moral Philosophy," page 13

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afflicted and those who are more fortunate, requires above anything else moral depth, and this is the subject I shall finally explore in support of the idea that these two conceptions of morality can and should be brought together.

A criticism of the kind of morality espoused by Weil has been put forward by Thomas Haddan Hamilton, within a Christian context,

The Christianity described by Phillips and Weil is a hard-edged, highly serious religion which contains many hardships and few benefits save the dubious one of living without any illusions either that one deserves better or that things will improve – in effect, it poses a stark theological choice between being happy and being right.²³⁶

While I think that Hamilton is pushing his point a little too hard here, and also that a choice between “being happy and being right” fails to capture what is at issue, it is true that Weil in her most extreme moods seems to recommend a morality that is austere to say the least. And we should also bear in mind that even within religion, where people are often reminded on Sundays that Christ's kingdom is not of this world, extreme or desperate versions of other-worldly morality do tend to be looked upon with suspicion and concern. It is a morality that is easy to get wrong, and hard to get right. In a similar vein of thought to Hamilton, Rosalind Hursthouse has said,

²³⁶ Hamilton, Thomas Haddan, *Dying to the Self: Self-Renunciation in Wittgensteinian Ethics and Philosophy of Religion*, (PhD Thesis, Dept. of Theology, University of Durham, 2004), page 99

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If we brought (our children) up exclusively on stories in which the virtuous lost their lives when they risked them, and those who aimed to save their own skin always survived, if those were the only cases in the newspapers to which we drew their attention, I doubt that (again within secular households), we would succeed in instilling virtue into them.²³⁷

One must be wary, however, of using the morally familiar as the measure for the morally exceptional, and dismissing the latter due to its seeming, *prima facie*, to have little to say to our everyday concerns. According to Phillips,

It is the exceptional that commands our attention. It is not something to wonder at and pass on. On the contrary, the moral purity it reveals casts its light on more familiar cases. We have to ask in moral philosophy whether we should devote our attention to the logic of the morally familiar, noting that what we say does not fit a few exceptional cases, or whether our attention should be devoted to the moral excellence revealed in the extreme, in the conviction that it is from this point of view that the familiar is best understood.²³⁸

By Phillips' account, our considerations of the morally exceptional may reorientate the way in which we see our everyday moral concerns, bringing a depth to bear on our understanding of these concerns that would not be there if

²³⁷ *On Virtue Ethics*, page 184 - Hamilton also makes use of this quote in *Dying to the Self*, page 55, noting that Hursthouse challenges Phillips and McDowell on their Wittgensteinian home-ground by referencing the conditions of early childhood under which the virtues are learned.

²³⁸ "In Search of the Moral Must," page 146

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we were to concentrate solely on the mundane, dismissing the exceptional as being, well, exceptional, with little to say to us about such matters.

Naturalistic Virtue Ethics is quite capable of pulling away from the depth that Anscombe sought from it, mainly inadvertently, through defending itself against objectors and keeping its place in the broader ethical conversation, which readily descends to the trite. This may be because the "logic of the morally familiar" is understood to show up better where emotionally challenging examples are kept at bay. Hence Aristotelian Virtue Ethics can find itself in discussion of the vices involved in such activities as indulging my first order desire to eat ice-cream when I have a second order desire to lose weight, which better accords with my individual survival; or my failing to either keep an appointment or explain myself, which would go against the good functioning of the social group, and other similar matters.

Such matters may in some way reveal "the logic of the morally familiar," but one wonders, with examples like those above, whether what is being discussed has more to do with smooth coordination between assumed equals than the kind of moral seriousness that is capable of evoking depth. And as rational social animals we do coordination rather well anyway, albeit with a few hiccups here and there. Certainly, there is plenty of room in this field for subtle distinctions between blameworthy and praiseworthy actions and omissions, but little room for

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deepened moral understanding. Moreover, while Aristotelian Virtue Ethics depend upon a moral point-of-view, as mentioned earlier, they have their link to nature through function; the good functioning of the group and so on. Trite considerations readily pull thought away from the heights of that moral-point-of-view toward function at its most mundane, which to my mind opens the door to the very dangers that Anscombe reintroduced Aristotelian Virtue Ethics to combat. Without the moral-point-of-view clearly in place, the modern conception of function can sit quite comfortably with complacent relativism, in relation to which the virtue terms might well be robbed of their rich content just as religious terms were before them.

Moral depth requires an engagement with moral concepts that goes beyond their facility as problem-solving devices. Take the Christian call to love my neighbour as myself for instance. I can, over the course of a lifetime, live in relationship with that precept: sometimes challenged by it, sometimes comfortable with it, on occasion being struck by an insight that makes me think that until this day I have not understood it at all. I cannot, however, acquire a depth of intimacy with such matters as first and second order desires, appointment-keeping and the like. A term like "justice" is similar in effect: I can gain an ever-deepening appreciation, as to what the concept involves, and of what it requires of me. It is too valuable a concept to be wasted on the types of things that we mainly deal with by whinging for five minutes here or there, which are sources of minor discomfort

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when they go wrong and unnoticeable to us when they go well, and which have little hope of ever inspiring anyone to virtue or goodness. I do not say that dealing with petty injustices, and organising institutions in such a way as to reduce their incidence, has no place in our discussion of morality, only that an over-emphasis on such matters can draw our attention away from the deeper questions involved in leading a moral life. As social animals we have a tendency to mistake good coordination for morality, and our concentration on the morally familiar can reinforce this tendency, which is the subject of my next chapter.

The distortive drift to which an orientation to the Good, or the morality of the mystic, is vulnerable is an austerity that one might live with willingly if one feels, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that one is thus claimed, but which can lead to a barren and self-obsessed selflessness if one gets it wrong. It is not a morality you can broadly recommend to someone who simply wants to be a better person. In fact this way of understanding ethics is mainly communicated to us through examples and first person utterances rather than prescriptions. Socrates, in saying that the good man cannot be harmed was the one facing death, as was Thomas More when he asserted that a man can lose his head and not be harmed. And as Gaita remarks on Wittgenstein's saying that he felt absolutely safe, whatever happened, "...he said that he was speaking personally but he did not mean that he was merely expressing a personal opinion. He meant that what

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he said...can only be said in the first person singular."²³⁹ I can say that *I* feel safe whatever happens, but I cannot, without being callous, say that *you* should feel safe whatever happens, or that *you* can lose your head and not be harmed. Whereas I can say quite freely in the second person to the niggardly man who is trying to skimp on his daughter's wedding, "Surely you could find it in your heart to be a little more generous."

As I have said earlier, we build our concepts and then our concepts build us: the rare persons who genuinely live according to the principle of dying-to-the-self, and who are able to offer others their pure attention, regardless of their moral or societal standing, push the conceptual boundaries of what it means to live a moral life. Such people do occur in nature, even though their characters and acts cannot wholly be explained in reference to nature, and it is within our nature, from the moral-point-of-view, to extend our conception of morality because of them. What is most important about them, due to the quality of their attention, is that they make visible to us people who were previously peripheral to our vision, and so outside of the orbit of our virtuous responses. As Gaita has said of Mother Teresa, "The wonder which is in response to her is not a wonder at her, but a wonder *that human life could be as her love revealed it to be.*"²⁴⁰

²³⁹ *Good and Evil*, page 198

²⁴⁰ *Good and Evil*, page 205

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Furthermore, the natural conditions in which humans find themselves inevitably inform the actions of such people; St Martin's giving his cloak to the beggar during the winter resonates with us because humans are subject to the cold, and it would be meaningless to us if they were not. However, what is revealed to us by the image of St Martin giving his cloak to the beggar, or by the love shown by Mother Teresa, cannot be captured by naturalistic or psychological explanations, and we feel that we degrade them if we attempt to explain them in that way. In religious language they can only be understood in terms of the divine, or in Gaita's language, the essentially mysterious.

The distortive drift to which naturalistic virtue ethics is vulnerable is mundanity clothed in the rich terms of virtue, mainly because of the kinds of conversations in which it finds itself embroiled. At the same time, it does refer to the sort of life a human being generally prefers to live. Conceptually the Platonist and Aristotelian versions of goodness are in one sense incompatible, since one is based on perfect goodness and the other on existence. However, they can be brought together to form a perspective that is three dimensional, rather as the sight coming from two eyes gives us three dimensional vision. In that sense they can each provide a corrective to the other's weaknesses, bringing the "enjoyment and freedom from pain" that people naturally seek to bear on the austere Platonist view, whose demands are met in their fullness by very few

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people, and raising the naturalist view above the mundane, thus creating space for the moral depth that Anscombe seems to have been seeking.

An orientation to the Good is able to reveal the broken individual as one's equal on a human level, without altering the fact that the person in question is a broken individual. And to genuinely understand what it means for a person to be broken I must also be able to grasp something of what it is for a person to be whole and to flourish, which at the very least speaks to me of that person's need, and which in most cases, and in some form or another, is what they would want for themselves and their loved ones.

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Chapter 5: Complacent Relativism and the Moral Perspective

(1) Introduction

In this chapter I shall argue that the relation between our direct moral responses and the conceptual range by which we render them intelligible, plays an important part in our developing a morality that can be described in terms of depth and understanding, as opposed to mere compliance. Such a morality is more likely to ground an attitude that includes proper attention toward the afflicted, and to prove resilient under pressure. I shall develop this argument in relation to the Wittgensteinian claim put forward by Gaita, that "any intelligible conception of the subject (the thinker), the object of thought (what he is thinking about), and the range of critical concepts under which he thinks well or badly are mutually interdependent."²⁴¹

In a previous chapter I quoted Gaita as explaining Plato's response to Socrates by appeal to the essentially mysterious, understood in the following way (1) It (the essentially mysterious) must be connected to a certain conception of experience, (2) the connection to experience must be bound in testimony, and (3) we must give a serious place to the concepts of love, Goodness and purity.²⁴²

²⁴¹ *Good and Evil*, page 329

²⁴² *Ibid*, pages 201-202 – As I have earlier explained, (page 24, fn 20) I take the term "bound in testimony to mean under obligation to bear true and faithful witness, rather than to attempt to explain the unexplainable.

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I repeat this remark of Gaita's because it illustrates the relation between raw experience and the concepts that permit its intelligibility and so affirm and clarify its meaning. I have also expressed this general idea previously by saying that "we build our concepts and then our concepts build us." It follows that if we build ethical concepts that lack the right sort of relationship to our direct moral responses and their ordinary language expression, then the risk is that we come to confuse ethical values with other kinds of value, and that our ethical responses in turn become weakened through a diminished relationship between the responses themselves and the concepts by which they are understood. There are at least two ways in which this problem can arise, which I shall discuss in the following two sections. (1) The problem can arise because the range of concepts to which we submit our ethical concerns may have ceased to be reliably ethical concepts, without our fully appreciating the fact; and (2) Our ethical theories are sometimes too far removed from ordinary language to connect with our direct moral responses in a way that would deepen our understanding of them. While many ethical theories do provide us with bases for ordering important aspects of our lives, for the above reason they may not serve to deepen or strengthen our moral engagement. But before further developing this line of thought, I shall recall the steps that have brought me to this point.

In Chapter One I broadly outlined my understanding of Simone Weil's notion of reading, and offered reasons as to why I think it has much to offer to our

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thinking about ethics, especially with regard to the relationship between those who are not comparable in terms of power and status. Simone Weil's notion of reading gives rise to a line of thought that seems promising to me because of its potential for drawing the unconditional value of human beings into the lens through which we ordinarily view the outside world, and so others. Our reading of the external world, especially other people, understood in this way, seems to me to depend at least in part on an orientation described by Wittgenstein as a "religious-point-of-view," so in Chapters Two and Three I have set out to distinguish what is meant by this, firstly, in reference to works by D. Z. Phillips, by drawing attention to the distinction between religious meaning as it occurs within religious practice and the kind of religious metaphysics that seeks to emulate empirical metaphysics. Following on this, and drawing on work by John H. Whittaker and R. F. Holland, I have sought to show where there is a continuity between the "religious point-of-view" taken from theistic and from nontheistic perspectives, so as to outline an understanding of the religious orientation that does not necessarily depend on belief in God, even though it is perhaps more often than not accompanied by such a belief.

From there, drawing on the work of G. E. M. Anscombe and Simone Weil, I have gone on to argue that Plato and Aristotle approach ethics from different perspectives, and that while it is hard to unify them conceptually, paying attention to both the tensions and the compatibilities between their two

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perspectives bring a depth to our ethical thinking that neither by themselves may provide. Plato, I claim, approaches ethical considerations from the perspective of a religious point-of-view, and Aristotle from a more naturalistic position.

Toward the end of the last chapter I claimed that while the concepts upon which Aristotelian Virtue Ethics depend contain a capacity for evoking moral depth, this can be seriously diminished when neo-Aristotelian Virtue ethicists devote their efforts to showing how virtue concepts can hold their ground in debates concentrated on "the logic of the morally familiar." This is because trite considerations readily pull thought away from the heights of the moral point of view toward the modern conception of function, which readily becomes equated with "what works" and to my mind opens the door to the very dangers that Anscombe reintroduced Aristotelian Virtue Ethics to combat. Without a perspective that holds the virtue concepts in place, the modern understanding of function, applied to neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, can sit quite comfortably with complacent relativism,²⁴³ in relation to which the virtue terms might well be robbed of their content just as religious terms were before them. By my thinking the "religious-point-of-view" or in Platonist terms, "the orientation to the Good" pulls in the other direction, and hence, in combination with Aristotelian Virtue,

²⁴³ As I explain on page 150, I use the term "complacent relativism", in reference to our tendency to conform to prevailing standards that may not be reliably moral, while treating them as if they were moral standards.

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reinforces rather than diminishes the fullness and depth which virtue concepts are capable of encompassing.

The "religious-point-of-view," is effectively an orientation that attends a mode of engagement. It encompasses the Plato of Springsted's reading, in which there is "...the development of a certain inner sense that permeates and configures our knowledge,"²⁴⁴ and it is expressed in religious terms by Whittaker when he says, "...the valence of religious claims ties their affirmation to dispositional changes. One cannot believe in them *without* being transformed," and by Chesterton when he speaks of Flambeau's responsiveness to a "twitch on the thread" from an "unseen hook and invisible line."²⁴⁵ The "religious-point-of-view," where it is not accompanied by explicit religious belief, I have earlier claimed, shares a common orientation with the sort of religious belief that takes the abovementioned form, but involves a level of epistemic caution that is unable to go so far as to affirm a divine reality. My contention here is that the religious-point-of-view, even where it is held with such caution, plays a very important part in our ability to retain our hold on a moral perspective. One could say that the point of engagement with the natural basis of our ethical responses finds its flowering in the Aristotelian conception of virtue, and the conceptual range that is able to raise this flowering above social usefulness, or too close an equation of value with success, lies within an orientation that can be described as "a religious-point-of-view."

²⁴⁴ "I Dreamed I Saw St Augustine..." in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, page 214

²⁴⁵ "The Queer Feet," in *The Father Brown Stories*, page 50

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I have previously quoted Phillips as asking "whether our attention should be devoted to the moral excellence revealed in the extreme, in the conviction that it is from this point of view that the familiar is best understood."²⁴⁶ Not only does the exceptional extend our conception of what it means to live a moral life, it is in cases that involve "moral excellence revealed in the extreme" that moral value is most clearly distinguishable from nonmoral, or morally neutral functional value. Another way in which moral value often shows up in sharp relief is in the past tense, where the goodness or badness of characters and actions tend to lie like bones when the flesh of day-to-day life has disappeared. It can be instructive to watch how this works in the television show, "Who do You Think You Are?" which involves famous people discovering their ancestry. In one episode an actor called Sarah Jessica Parker had an ancestor's name come up in relation to the Salem witch trials, and was terrified of discovering that this woman had either made accusations against her neighbours or been put to death as a witch herself. As it happens, she was lucky – her ancestor had been accused of being a witch, but the trials had been brought to a halt before her case was heard, and so the ancestor was spared both future moral ignominy and an early, unjustly inflicted death. In another episode, the comedian David Mitchell discovered ancestors who had been farmers in Scotland in the early nineteenth century. While he was pleased that his family had been middleclass for some time, he was also afraid that they had acquired their farm through the

²⁴⁶In Search of the Moral 'Must', in *Interventions in Ethics*, page 146

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land clearances, and was much relieved to find that the clearances had occurred well before their time. Overall, the people on this show tend to appreciate resourcefulness in their ancestors as well as moral goodness, but not such resourcefulness as would include morally disturbing acts and involvements.

Someone might think that it is the family relation doing the work here, and not the distance in time from the relevant events. Certainly it is the idea that "I" may have descended from someone who did some vile thing a long time ago that makes the question compelling in each case. However, if we think of the events in question; the denunciation of others as witches, and the seizure of land from peasant farmers, they would probably have seemed necessary or sensible to those involved. The friends and relatives of those involved, who were alive at the same time as them, may very well have understood what was necessary or sensible in the same light as they did. It is often only when the perceived "need" to ensure that a town is witch-free, or that land is in the hands of those who will make greatest use of it (wealthy Englishmen), has lost all currency that the immorality of such acts and attitudes shows up in sharp relief.

In the present tense, in the thick of things, the moral perspective does not reliably show up with the same level of clarity. Much of the time, when we are not being faced with daunting moral challenges, and lack a compelling reason to feel "the twitch on the thread," it is quite hard for us to tell whether our morality

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is in fact complacent relativism or not. There are many claims made on us in any given present, and not all of them are unambiguously moral claims. Troy Jollimore, who argues that we cannot defend morality on the grounds of rationality alone, but must instead make a distinction between rationality and good judgement if we are to preserve morality's authority, says,

...even those who claim that moral considerations in themselves can never give us reason for action will acknowledge that morality and instrumental rationality may sometimes happen to require the same thing. One might refrain from cruelty or injustice in order to avoid the opprobrium of one's neighbours, out of fear of legal penalties, or even because one simply desires not to be cruel or unjust. But if this sort of position is right, then one's reason for acting will not ultimately be a moral reason; rather, an instrumental reason is required to make an action rational. One might say that on such a position, morality loses its authority, and the only truly authoritative source of reasons for action is instrumental rationality, and all reason must ultimately stem from this source.²⁴⁷

Now while we do sometimes consciously act or refrain from acting so as to avoid penalties, saying such things as "I had better slow down or I might get a fine," or "I had better pay that bill before they add a penalty," most of us, most of the time are simply pursuing the sorts of lives that people like ourselves lead. We do not often consider whether we are avoiding the opprobrium of our neighbours,

²⁴⁷ Jollimore, Troy, "Why is Instrumental Rationality Rational?" in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (June 2005), page 290

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or desiring to be persons of a worthy kind, we just do the sorts of things that we do, rather as we wear clothing that is within the range of clothing commonly worn in a certain time and place. Even our most extravagant and unusual dressers will be easily categorised in terms of time and place 100 years from now, and so too will many of our moral practices. In common with other social animals our functionality is dependent on coordination and a reasonable level of trust. Like other social animals, we are annoyed by cheating and error, but are able to withstand *some* cheating and error without such a loss of trust as would bring about social breakdown. This includes a few people who regularly cheat or make mistakes, and a smattering of cheating and error spread among the population at large. And like other social animals we both compete and co-operate within this framework of coordination. Permeating all of this of course, for humans, is the notion of morality.

My contention is that when we concentrate too much of our attention on "the logic of the morally familiar" we can readily blur the distinction between smooth coordination and the sort of policy that facilitates it, and a genuinely moral perspective. While they do overlap, and we do have good reason to be vexed with the person who reaps the rewards of others' efforts, or who regularly misleads us to his own advantage, etc, morality and good social coordination are not identical. The postman who flings the mail he is meant to deliver into a creek and goes to the pub shows moral immaturity and also disrupts good social

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coordination. The whistle-blower who bravely reveals a concealed horror may seriously disrupt social coordination while nonetheless acting from a moral perspective. And the person who acquiesces in someone else's unjust punishment may be helping to maintain social coordination while falling short of what a moral perspective would require of them. If our discussion of morality concentrates too much on why we are justified in blaming x or praising y in mundane terms, our thinking can readily constrain itself to that area where good coordination and good morality overlap, so that the former risks displacing the latter in importance.

It may shed a light on what I have just said if we reflect momentarily on a suggestion made by Charles Taylor: "Maybe some day social science will show that having a society of tubby people contributes greatly to mutual tolerance and well being. Tubbiness will then be seen as useful and desirable, but it will not win admiration."²⁴⁸ My question is less about whether or not tubbiness would be seen as admirable, and more about whether it would contribute to a genuine morality as opposed to a benign orderliness, and whether these tubby people would be able to find in themselves the resources to respond morally to a serious glitch in the food supply that contributed directly to their tubbiness, and indirectly to their tolerance.

²⁴⁸ *Ethics and Ontology*, page 310
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In this chapter I shall argue that a morality worth its salt depends upon a moral perspective for which other values cannot consistently be mistaken; and whose theoretical concepts are not too far removed from ordinary language and the moral intuitions it expresses. We are vulnerable to the blunting and even loss of this perspective. This places us in danger of becoming bland, inadvertent participants in evil, such that our descendents would find us deeply troubling in a future version of a show like "Who Do You Think You Are?" I do not think that concentration on "the logic of the morally familiar" can reliably raise our sights much above the level of good coordination, of the sort that Taylor's tubby people enjoy. Such a concentration gives us little defence against the diminishment or loss of our moral perspective, especially since the conditions that permit our good coordination may change in a way that disrupts it. However Aristotelian Virtue, reinforced by the "religious point-of-view" or alternatively put, the religious-point-of-view substantiated by Aristotelian Virtue, seems more promising in that regard, understood in terms of the relation between the thinking subject, what is thought about, and the conceptual range within which thought takes place.

(2) Moral Concepts: Stretching a Point and Missing the Point

I begin this section by reiterating a point made by Anscombe, which I drew on in the previous chapter:

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...if you are an Aristotelian, or a believer in divine law, you will deal with a borderline case by considering whether doing such and such in such and such circumstances, is, say, murder, or is an act of injustice, and according as you decide it is or it isn't, you judge it to be a thing to do or not. This would be the method of casuistry; and while it may lead you to stretch a point on the circumference, it will not permit you to destroy the centre.²⁴⁹

A belief in God by itself does not offer proof against anyone or any group lapsing into complacent relativism, but historical religions contain the conceptual resources with which to challenge such lapses. If we look at the above claim alongside Pascal's *Provincial Letters*,²⁵⁰ we see that he too is concerned about complacent relativism, and thinks that it is being encouraged by the Jesuits at the expense of genuinely Christian morals. However, so long as the Jesuits remain under the umbrella of Christianity and at the same time court the morally complacent on their own terms, they are forced to *stretch a point* with regard to the moral concepts with which they engage. For example, they cannot say that a murder is permissible, since that would be to break ranks with Christian law, but what they can do is stretch a point as to what counts as murder. In Pascal's satirised version of Jesuitical thinking, the point is stretched almost to breaking point, so that the term "murder" not only excludes killing to preserve one's honour, but also killing to prevent an attack on one's honour, where "one may even, to forestall a slap, kill the person intending to give it, if there is no other

²⁴⁹ "Modern Moral Philosophy", page 12

²⁵⁰ Pascal, Blaise, *Provincial Letters*, trans. A J Krailsheimer (Penguin Books, 1967)

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way of avoiding it."²⁵¹ What is more, while Pascal's Jesuits do not lose touch with the source of meaning which makes sense of concepts to which certain words refer, as Anscombe thinks has happened to words such as "law" and "ought," they and the Dominicans, who are trying to avoid getting embroiled in the quarrel,²⁵² do deliberately toy with the meanings of words, in some cases to the extent of divorcing words from any meaning whatsoever. The Dominicans, for example, stand accused of inserting the term "proximate power" in order to uphold two contradictory claims; "that one must have efficacious grace in order to pray, which is not given to all," and "that the righteous can pray without efficacious grace." Pascal has them defending their position by insisting, "You must say that all the righteous have *proximate power* (to pray), leaving aside all question of meaning." Furthermore, the doctrine of double effect (which goes unmentioned but seems to be the basis here) is stretched to the point where in the case of seeking revenge, "...it is only a question of deflecting one's intention from the desire for vengeance to the desire to defend one's honour, which according to our fathers (the Jesuits) is lawful."²⁵³

The difference between Pascal's attack on the Jesuits and Anscombe's attack on the Consequentialists is this: Pascal and the Jesuits have at their disposal a host

²⁵¹ Ibid, page 110 – this, according to Pascal, is given justification by a trick argument that goes, "Honour is dearer than life itself. Now it is lawful to kill in defence of one's life. Therefore, it is lawful to kill in defence of one's honour." – ibid, page 213.

²⁵² Pascal seems to see the Dominicans as taking an each-way-bet on the controversy that raged in France between the Jansenists and Jesuits in the seventeenth century, so as to avoid being deemed heretics whoever ended up winning.

²⁵³ *Provincial Letters*, page 104

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of shared concepts, which still in large part retain their meaning, whereas Anscombe thinks that this is no longer the case insofar as words like "law" and other associated terms go. Pascal, it is true, is battling to protect religious moral concepts from the loss or distortion of meaning, by reminding the Jesuits of what the relevant terms are traditionally taken to mean, but at the time of his writing this was something he was still able to do. His letters were also able to speak to a wide audience of readers for whom these concepts retained their vitality and their meaning. So for both Pascal and his readers, a common moral basis is assumed, and the argument rests on such matters as how far a point can be stretched without breaking its connection with the moral concept at issue, and whether the letter of the law, construed to one's own advantage, goes anywhere near meeting the demands that submission to the spirit of the law would require.

For Anscombe in comparison, simply saying "this is not lawful" or "this is not right" could not guarantee that one's charge would be met within a genuinely moral frame of reference. One can imagine a time and place where the sentence "What you are planning is not right," would have moral rightness, based on divine law, as its central referent, with the word applying in a secondary sense to technical accomplishments or morally neutral means-end activity. That is to say, simply saying "That is not right" would be assumed to be a moral judgement. Think of the term "the righteous," taken earlier from *Provincial Letters*. This term has largely fallen into disuse, but even now can only

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refer to the morally good, or in ironic tones, to the morally pedantic. It cannot be used to speak intelligibly of the technically competent or the proficient.

Nonmoral judgements of right and wrong, under conditions in which divine law still held sway, would come with a qualification. "That is not the right way to saddle a horse," for example, or "This is the right time of year to plant radishes." One might not always say the whole sentence, but the meaning of "right" or "wrong" would none the less be fixed by the context in which the sentence was said; someone trying to put a saddle on a horse the wrong way round, for example. However, if we turn to the interdependence between the thinker, the thing thought about and the range of concepts under which he thinks, we can see where confusion may slip in with words like "right" and "wrong," once divine law ceases to hold sway.

Suppose, for example, I am tempted to set out to get my elderly neighbour put into care, so that I can purchase his property cheaply from his relatives, who do not appear to me to be up with the play where such negotiations are concerned. I am living in an area that is being gentrified perhaps, and I consider that the tennis court I intend to put where his modest house now stands will benefit the whole neighbourhood in terms of property value. So I figure that this is not just about me, but rather than I am acting on behalf of my neighbours as well.

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However, in order to achieve this end I must bear false witness against him by creating an impression that he is no longer fit to live independently in his house. In the case where divine law fixes the primary meanings of "right" and "wrong," when someone says "What you are planning is wrong," it is pretty clear that they are challenging me on moral grounds. Now it could be that I take advice from one of the more accommodating of the Jesuits that Pascal is so worried about, or someone of similar ilk. And my advisor suggests that I turn my attention from the means I plan to employ to the end I have in mind. "It is perfectly lawful to have a tennis court," he says, "and so long as you maintain this as your intention, rather than the uprooting of an old man by misrepresenting his behaviour, you are morally in the clear." It is apparent that neither I nor my advisor would count as righteous, and that rather than seeking genuinely moral advice I am seeking to get away with something questionable. However, I am still trying to get away with something in relation to concepts that hold their ground as *moral* concepts, and not in relation to concepts that are more pertinent to some other criterion of value. So while I myself am morally unreliable, the range of concepts to which I purport to defer retain their reliability. I certainly do sidestep the real moral issue; that of bearing false witness against my neighbour, but the idea that it is "wrong" to bear false witness, and "right" to be honest is not undermined by my sidestepping.

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However, where divine law no longer grounds the word "right" within a moral terrain, other usages, which would normally come with a qualification, can take centre stage unchallenged, since the divine law that would once have underwritten such a challenge is no longer accepted. So given the same circumstances, someone saying to me "What you are planning is not right," could just as well mean, "You are going about things in a way that will not bring about the result you are after," (like the person putting the saddle on backwards) rather than "You are planning something wicked." "Right" however, retains a psychological force that it has inherited from the divine law that once grounded it. Hence I may feel *justified* even in upping the ante on my attack on the old man, by seeking out an even nastier option that has a greater chance of success. My justification is not a moral one, but I might well receive it much as I would a moral justification because it carries with it a rationale to which the psychologically charged terms "right" or "wrong" are applied,²⁵⁴ especially with my projected tennis court looming large in the foreground. In this case it is not just me that stands outside of the moral realm; the conceptual range to which I defer has surreptitiously shifted from the moral realm as well. Someone might think that this example is implausible; that the context of the conversation would make quite clear the use of "right" that was in play. However, where the concept

²⁵⁴ These terms are psychologically charged even without the removal of divine law, since we do not like to get things wrong, and can be taken aback when someone says, "What are you doing planting radishes now? It is the wrong time of year," when we thought we were planning them at the right time. However, in the absence of divine law, it remains that moral questions can still be redirected toward a conceptual range that is more appropriate to questions of effectiveness, etc.

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has lost its moral mooring, the meaning can readily shift, during the course of a conversation, from "right morally" to "right in terms of its effectiveness"²⁵⁵

Anscombe's brilliant move was to reach for the virtue terms, which are alive and current within the language, and are far more resistant to being transplanted into non-moral territory while retaining the ghost of their morally-charged past than terms like "right" and "wrong." If someone were to say to me "What you are planning to do to that old man is neither honest nor just," I may well look for wiggle room, by claiming to be afraid of the man, or by coming up with some form of faux charity so as to bring "caring about his wellbeing" to the fore, but I will still remain subject in my response to a range of moral concepts. As with divine law, I will be stretching the point rather than missing the point. What is important about this is that however much I twist things to my own advantage, when I defer to divine law that is accepted, or to virtue, I defer to concepts that have not lost their status as *moral* concepts. "Right," without divine law underwriting it, is not nearly so reliable.

Now there is no moral theory that has no relationship whatsoever with our ordinary language talk of morality; moral theory sometimes has a problem

²⁵⁵ One could even imagine such a shift occurring during a meeting in a philosophy department, among people who are trained in conceptual clarification. It is easy to see how a lengthy discussion could begin with the idea of a course being "right" to keep because it offers a fine introduction to philosophy, and incrementally change its focus, so that the "rightness" of retaining the course ends up being considered in terms of the number of students the course will bring in to the department, without a deliberate change of criterion taking place.

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returning from abstraction to ordinary language, which I shall discuss in the next section, but moral theory can only arise from considerations that are understood as at least glancingly moral already. For example, we can find the seeds of Virtue Theory, Deontology, Consequentialism, etc, in the range of suggestions and commands that parents make to their children. "You are going to need to be brave about this," "The rule is, you have to be home by six, and it is now seven," and "If you do this thing, what do you think is going to result? Is that really what you want to see happen?" are all sentences of the sort with which parental instructions to children are peppered. The one I am concerned with here, one that gets surprisingly little attention on the theoretical front, is "When are you going to wake up to yourself?" often said with a sigh.

Suppose that I, the woman with the tennis court in mind, wake up to myself. Sometimes, though not always, waking up to oneself morally involves waking up first and foremost to the independent existence and meaningfulness of people who are not oneself. Various things could happen that might wake me up to the reality of the old man next door. Perhaps he is visited by someone such as Gaita's nun, so that I see him in the light of the uncondescending love of another. Perhaps there is a major earthquake, and my McMansion, having been built in a time of lax building standards, is brought to the ground, while the modest house next door is left standing, and the old man takes me in and kindly provides me with water and shelter for several days, so that not only am I

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beholden to his kindness, I am also exposed to who he is from his perspective, rather than my own. Perhaps a friend who is made of sterner stuff than some of my previous advisors drives the moral point home to me regarding the old man, so as to make me really see what I would be doing to him if I were to follow through on my plan.²⁵⁶ Whichever way it happens, let us just say that I wake up to myself morally, and that in this case it involves waking up to the independent reality of someone else's life.

Now if this change in perspective is to retain its moral valence and deepen my understanding of what it can mean to lead a moral life, it needs reliably moral concepts in relation to which it can be understood. Where the concepts to which I turn for understanding are diverted toward some other criterion of value, such as effectiveness, etc, then the direct moral response from which my change of heart springs is at risk of not realising its potential. This is especially so if I find myself conflicted rather than wholly morally transformed by my new insight, since the concepts that would render my response intelligible would hopefully reinforce my moral response against competing but strongly felt temptations.

²⁵⁶ An Australian television show (done by the ABC) recently took a group of people who believed that "boat people" deserved the harsh treatment to which they were subjected, to view the places that these people had come from, and to see for themselves the conditions under which they had left. All but one of the group of about five completely changed their tune on the refugees, one woman going to far as to become a volunteer worker for their benefit. The one man who was not won over, retaining in the face of what he had seen a belief that a nation state ought to protect its way of life and its borders, did nonetheless drop his contemptuous attitude to the refugees. Hence he at least ceased to see his stance as a moral one. I mention this to show that we can be "woken up" when we are pressed by others to face certain truths, on whose suppression some of our attitudes depend.

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Religious moral terms, where they are grounded by something like religious practice or divine law, do manage to hold their place as moral concepts, but as Anscombe has pointed out, they cannot be guaranteed to do so where the divine element is severed from them. And virtue terms, being terms that pertain solely to human goodness (or badness when it comes to vice) are able to do so as well. Hence they are both able to offer a set of concepts in which my renewed attitude to the old man next door has a chance of developing into a deepened moral understanding, through personal reflection or conversation with others.

However, virtue terms too can be diminished in their scope where they are given their measure in relation to efficiency, coordination and so on. For example, one might come to see that the truest expression of a particular moral response would be generosity, but then go on to construe that generosity in light of a range of terms that have more in common with policy formation²⁵⁷ than human responsiveness.

To explain what I am getting at here I shall first turn to an outline of Pascal's position, given by Leszek Kolakowski, with which I am in agreement, and follow this with a real-life example. Kolakowski is talking about Pascal's thoughts on

²⁵⁷ By "policy" I mean primarily a course of action based on an overarching principle, taken with the intention of bringing about a desired effect. Setting a minimum price for alcohol with the intention that young people will drink less is an example of policy from public life. There is an overarching principle; that young people drinking a lot is a bad thing, and the practical action of setting the minimum alcohol price is intended to reduce the incidence of the bad thing.

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religious belief, but I think his insights can be carried over into moral considerations as well.

He (Pascal)...knew that sacraments and prayers do not necessarily bring miraculous responses from heaven to satisfy our wishes and whims. Science and technique have been increasingly trusted because of their efficacy and predictive power. But communication with God was mistrusted not because of its mundane inefficiency alone – in this respect it had always been so – but because whatever was not thus efficient was regarded with more and more indifference. In other words it was a profound mutation in human mentality that brought about contempt for everything that was not beneficial in the sense that science and technique were.²⁵⁸

Our moral responses, even where they pause at virtue concepts on the way, can be redirected in much the same way as Pascal thinks can happen to our religious responses, where technique and results dominate the conceptual range to which we defer, and I shall put forward a real-life example that may serve to illustrate this. There was a retired sea-farer living in a small brick cottage in a seaside suburb of this city. He increasingly disdained the values of the modern world, to the point where he had his electricity turned off and demanded that the supplier remove their meter. He also let his garden go unattended, apart from a small vegetable patch out the back. One day he caught the attention of a local youth group, who decided they should do something generous toward him, and took it

²⁵⁸ Kolakowski, Leszek, *God Owes Us Nothing*, (University of Chicago Press, 1998), page 190
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upon themselves to help him by tidying up his garden. When he emerged from his house one morning, he was outraged to see the young men attacking his hedge with clippers, and chased them all off of his property with bloodcurdling shouts and threats. Going by the tone in which he told the story to others, he felt at once patronised and violated, and was extremely angry about it.

Now there are plenty of morally pertinent remarks to make about this, first and foremost perhaps being why on earth didn't they ask him if he would like his garden tidied up?²⁵⁹ A Virtue Ethicist will quickly put their mistake down to the lack of practical wisdom that goes with callow youth: they were not employing the right virtue, at the right time, with the right emotions, for the right reasons, etc. One might say that for these reasons they failed to meet their target. The Virtue Ethicist will be right of course, but there may also be a conceptual problem involved. It may be that the boys' initial moral response did not attach to a conceptual range with the capacity to deepen their appreciation of the man and his particular situation, but to a conceptual range that gave rise to their forming what they hoped was an effective policy on how to go about helping him or making him happy, a policy with which he emphatically did not agree.

Notably, the policy that the young men formed overrode the man himself as an individual human being: the "generosity" they hoped to show him was generosity

²⁵⁹ One might also wonder whether the old man himself might not have thanked the boys, and explained to them politely that he did not need help. I have put this line of thought to one side, since it raises a different sort of question, (a question of tolerance, patience or self-control, perhaps) and would mean a too-lengthy sidetrack from the point I am making.

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on their terms, while the man and his terms did not come into their deliberations. And even allowing that the policy of tidying up the garden of a man who preferred it untidy is a better policy than one of robbing him or belittling him, it still remains that the initial moral response is stunted rather than developed by the move toward policy, even where the virtue terms are consulted and the policy is well-intentioned. After all, a policy of theft or belittlement would not spring from a moral response, but from some desire or other that eclipsed or overrode a moral response.

There is certainly a relationship between morality and policy: "honesty is the best policy" is a moral claim, and we abhor and challenge public policies that permit such wrongs as slavery, racism or sexism for example. But effective policy is not the be-all and end-all of morality, and a direct moral response that leaps straight to something like policy-formation for conceptual elucidation will very likely remain limited in its scope to the "logic of the morally familiar." Not only does this risk inhibiting the full-flowering of our moral responses, it also keeps them contained among the various moral and morally neutral claims which everyday life makes on us, often with the morally neutral claims grasping us with the greater urgency. Hence our moral responses may become dulled to the point where we are actually practising complacent relativism without being cognisant of the fact. As Iris Murdoch says, "...we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty...Knowledge of a value concept is

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something to be understood, as it were in depth, and not in terms of switching to some impersonal network."²⁶⁰ This of course, depends upon the concepts to which we turn for understanding being unequivocally moral concepts, which are not subtly diverted toward some other criterion of value.

Pascal's thoughts on the waning of religious belief in the seventeenth century have something to say to us about morality as well as religious faith, insofar as the attainment of moral depth is not compatible with "contempt for everything that is not beneficial in the sense that science and technique are." Science and technique are by themselves morally neutral and are moral only insofar as they are *answerable* to morality. They may certainly provide us with facts that morality must take into account, but they cannot provide us with a conceptual framework for moral understanding. Perhaps more importantly, there is more to morality than what Phillips calls "getting things done," or forming and implementing effective policies. Moral depth, as opposed to mere moral compliance involves, among other things, a noncondescending responsiveness to others that begins with attentive recognition. The virtue terms, and certain religious formulations like "you must love your neighbour as yourself," are conceptualisations of forms that this recognition may take. That is why these concepts are so important to moral understanding and moral depth; they allow our responses to become intelligible to us by making them truthfully available to

²⁶⁰ *The Sovereignty of the Good*, page 29

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language and so to thought, reflection and discussion. Such responses may at times demand the abandonment of efficiency or policy, or even seem degraded if thought of in relation to such terms. Sitting quietly through the night at the bedside of a dying loved one is not normally the result of a policy on the dying, and is not done in the spirit of efficiency, even though one may make a cup of tea at 3 a.m. in the same night as quickly and quietly as possible.

Virtue concepts, while being unequivocally moral concepts, are not immune, unfortunately, from their authority being diminished. Roger Crisp, in a paper entitled "Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue," in which he endorses Utilitarian Virtue as the best practical application of what he calls Biographical Utilitarianism, offers an example of how this can happen. I shall list the relevant definitions from this paper, so as to make what I am saying easier to follow:

The Global Historical Principle (GHP): Of two possible histories of the world, the better is that in which there is a greater amount of utility overall.

The Biographical Principle (BP): Of two possible histories of the life of an individual, the better is the one which is lived in such a way that the history of the world contains a greater amount of utility overall.

Biographical Utilitarianism (BU): Any individual ought to live in such a way that the total amount of utility in the history of the world is brought as close as possible to the maximum.

Subjective Biographical Utilitarianism (SBU): Whenever a person acts, he or she ought consciously to assess, by the lights of BU, the various courses of action open to him or her, and choose the actions which maximise utility.

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Utilitarianism of the Virtues (UV): An agent ought to live virtuously, consulting the BU criterion only on special occasions.²⁶¹

Crisp's idea is that UV offers the best practical expression of BU, since it avoids the counterintuitive aspects of the decision making procedure entailed by SBU. What is more, "...for some of us, the virtues are already established. Radical revision of our practical reasoning, which would be dangerous and unlikely to succeed, is not required."²⁶² On this last point, given what I have said so far about the relationship between our direct responses and natural language, I of course agree with him. He also thinks that the close personal relationships endorsed by virtue theory form a benevolent basis which can be extended outwards to include care for those to whom we are not personally related. In comparison, trying to rise above our attachments may leave us too apathetic for the benevolence we are hoping to achieve.²⁶³ In this way UV would overcome a self-defeating feature of Utilitarianism in general. This too is plausible, and I have made a similar observation in the previous chapter. However, what I would question is BU as the overarching principle in relation to which the virtues are understood. With regard to the question of the primacy of evaluative meaning between BU and UV in this arrangement, Crisp says,

²⁶¹ Crisp, Roger, "Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No 167, (1992), pages 159-160

²⁶² Ibid, page 155

²⁶³ Ibid, pages 157-158

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If one is not ready to describe a virtue, or a virtuous action, as bad or wrong, one may make the evaluative meaning of the virtue in question primary, so that an act could not be say, unjust and right, or just and wrong. Alternatively one may be ready to offer such descriptions, and thus alter the evaluative meaning in a certain case. My inclination is to take the latter course. Whether a virtue is a genuine virtue depends on whether it meets the BU criterion, and the same goes for the rightness of particular virtuous acts.²⁶⁴

Crisp takes note of the fact that his inclination goes against Anscombe's stance on the matter,²⁶⁵ but does not seem to fully appreciate the implications of his break with her position. First and foremost, it undermines a central strength of the virtue terms; that they are not readily transferable into nonmoral realms. Now adding to the amount of utility in the world is of course for Crisp a moral activity, so that the virtue terms are not subjected to a nonmoral criterion, but in fact to the best moral criterion. However, utility is in a sense a morally neutral concept, a placeholder for whatever will, on any particular occasion, fill the relevant role. And while the virtue terms themselves seem to be meant to rule out nonmoral role-fillers for Crisp, they are considerably weakened in their capacity to do it by their having BU as their measure. If BU can override or determine the status of any given virtue, even when limited to special occasions, then the virtue terms are robbed of their moral teeth.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, page 156

²⁶⁵ Ibid, fn 47

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Let us go back to my earlier thought experiment, where I justified my bearing false witness against an old man because I thought that by removing him and replacing his house with a tennis court, I would improve the value of property in my neighbourhood. If I follow Crisp, when my virtuous friend cautions me, "What you are planning to do to that old man is neither honest nor just," I might well reply, "This is true, but when you consider the few years that old man has left against the wellbeing of my whole neighbourhood, and what I might contribute to 'the total amount of utility in the history of the world,' by replacing him with a tennis court, then honesty and justice must be put to one side." I may, given the narrowness of my conception of utility, consider this just the sort of special occasion where BU trumps UV. Most importantly, I will no longer be defending myself in relation to terms like "honesty" or "justice," or "rightness" supported by the acceptance of the divine, but in relation to what I see, from my limited perspective, as the "amount of utility in the history of the world." Even if someone brought up to be virtuous might not construe BU as I have here, the moral authority of the virtue terms would be seriously weakened, where BU determines the status of the virtues, by the door being left open to BU-style rationalisations of this kind.

In reference to the case of the Sheriff preventing a riot by shooting an innocent man, Crisp thinks that people brought up to be virtuous will not, by and large,

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succumb to this sort of thing.²⁶⁶ This may well be true, but virtue terms that are robbed of their authority are weakened in their ability to affirm or support the development of virtue, since when tempted, instead of seeking wiggle room around an unassailably moral term, I may slip over to a conception of BU such as the one outlined in the above paragraph; as an extension of my perspective on what I think constitutes utility at the time of my deliberation. Crisp thinks that affirming UV as the best practical expression of BU will ensure that utility equates to such values as universal benevolence, rather than unjust sacrifices for some supposed greater good and the like. But this cannot reliably be the case where virtues may be jettisoned or modified to meet the BU criterion. Grounding UV on BU leaves open the possibility of making fundamental assumptions about utility that are not adequate to ground a morality with the depth that virtue requires.

I return now to the claim made by Gaita and mentioned earlier, that “any intelligible conception of the subject (the thinker), the object of thought (what he is thinking about), and the range of critical concepts under which he thinks well or badly are mutually interdependent.” If my direct moral response sets me thinking, then in order to understand that response, I need to turn to unassailably moral concepts. If these moral concepts are either up for grabs or measured in relation to a conceptual range that is open to being understood in morally neutral terms, then their potential for deepening my moral

²⁶⁶ Ibid, pages 156-157

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understanding will be jeopardised. Should my moral responses find their measure in virtue which is in turn measured by a result such as "the amount of utility in the history of the world," then their development may well stop short at social usefulness, or an equation of value with success. This will hardly be noticeable in times when social coordination and so on are functioning well. Under such circumstances I may well lead "...a valuable life – a life of...accomplishment, understanding, deep personal relationships" as opposed to that of a "stunted maximizer..."²⁶⁷ However, because of confusions within the conceptual range in relation to which my moral responses are understood, my virtue may not go deep enough to see me through times of disruption, where circumstances would render it ridiculous to claim that I should tailor my actions to "the amount of utility in the history of the world." This lack of moral depth may also render me less sensitive than I might have been toward those who have slipped through the cracks of social coordination. It is quite possible for me to happily send money to those who are starving in foreign lands (as BU would have me do) while failing to notice the afflicted person on my doorstep, or alternatively responding to them in terms of policy, like the boys with the old sea-farer, rather than as my fellow human being and moral equal.

I do concede that getting the relation right between a direct moral response and the range of concepts by which it is properly understood will not *guarantee*

²⁶⁷ Ibid, page 159

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moral depth on the part of any individual. I may still look for excuses to get away with things, as I did in my earlier thought experiment, or take a detour into shallow, judgemental moralism, which does not depend on nonmoral terms. These problems, however, are pertinent to whether I think well or badly in relation to the relevantly moral concepts, rather than arising from shortcomings in the concepts themselves. Challenges made within their conceptual range remain *moral* challenges; my shallow moralism, for example, may be challenged by someone else with a deeper appreciation of what the relevant terms mean within a common conceptual range. In this way an unambiguously moral range of concepts provides the linguistic conditions under which moral depth is made possible, if not assured.

I end this section by returning to Gaita's claim about Plato's response to Socrates' saying that a good man cannot be harmed. Plato found this claim essentially mysterious, and according to Gaita, if philosophy is able to leave room for the essentially mysterious, these three things need to be noted. (1) It (the essentially mysterious) must be connected to a certain conception of experience, (2) the connection to experience must be bound in testimony, and (3) we must give a serious place to the concepts of love, Goodness and purity.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ *Good and Evil*, pages 201-202
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As to the question as to whether our direct moral responses are "essentially mysterious," I assume that what Gaita means is that they cannot wholly be explained in terms of consequences or rationality or similar. What he is getting at are the sorts of concepts that are needed to do justice to certain sorts of experience; to bring them into language, as far as possible, without distortion or remainder. A direct moral response that enters into our conceptual map under the umbrella of such concepts as love, goodness and purity, is done justice in this way, since these, understood in absolute terms, are our highest moral concepts. In relation to such concepts the transformation of my direct moral responses into virtues will hopefully result in a growing moral depth that would not be the case where my virtue is hostage to an evaluative principle such as BU, which without further elaboration is not unambiguously or unconditionally moral.

(3) Moral Theory: The Return from Abstraction to the Cave

In *Good and Evil*, Gaita looks at a couple of ways in which philosophical theory, especially Kantian theory, can be parodied when tested against our ordinary language expressions. *Prima facie*, this may not seem fair, after all, one might ask, why should such theories be asked to measure up in this way? But bear with me for a moment. Gaita considers the result of replacing Falstaff's "mortall men" with "rational beings," in the passage of King Henry IV in which Falstaff presents the prince with a rag-tag bunch of men as conscripts for the Welsh wars, having

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released the fit from military duty in exchange for bribes. Under Kantian reconstruction, "Tush man, mortall men, mortall men (...they'le fill a Pit, as well as better)," becomes "Tush man, rational beings, rational beings,"²⁶⁹ which does not come anywhere near conveying the tone of pity with which the original is imbued. The tone of pity lies in Falstaff's acknowledgement in this passage that death does not play favourites; whether rag-tag men or troops that would do a prince proud, the pit is their fate.

In another instance, Gaita points out that a murderer's horrified realisation of what he has done is reduced to absurdity by expressions like, "My God, what have I done? I have been a traitor to reason. I have violated rational nature in another!" or in more generally theoretical terms, "My God, what have I done! I have violated my freely chosen and universally described principle that one shouldn't kill people under circumstances such as these."²⁷⁰

Such considerations inform Gaita's claim that

Any explanation of...our 'moral capacities' must clarify the attunement of moral response to the kind of seriousness that is internal to our sense of good and evil. It is, I think, fair to require that the deliverances of a theory that is intended to reveal (though not necessarily to explain) the character of that seriousness – the

²⁶⁹ *Good and Evil*, page 28

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, pages 33-34

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kind of seriousness it is – should be substitutable for more common, untheoretical expressions of it....such as those in which we find characteristic expressions of remorse. On the face of it, theories that fail to meet this requirement will either be unashamedly reductive or yield parodies of moral seriousness, as the Kantian account is revealed to do when put to this test. Is it silly to say this of a philosopher as great as Kant? I fear it is not.²⁷¹

At the same time, Gaita takes note of an important objection to this claim: “the discontinuity between the results of ordinary reflection and philosophical reflection which I have been trying to expose,” he says, “is precisely what Kant had in mind when he said:”

Everything that is empirical, is, as a contribution to the principle of morality, not only unsuitable for the purpose, but is even highly injurious to the purity of morals; for in morals the proper worth of an absolute good will, a worth elevated above all price, lies in precisely this – that the principle of action is free from all influence by contingent grounds, the only kind that experience can supply. Against the slack, or indeed ignoble, attitude which seeks for the moral principle among empirical motives and laws we cannot give warning too strongly or often; for human reason in its weariness is fain to rest upon this pillow and in a dream of sweet illusions (which lead it to embrace a cloud in mistake for Juno) to foist into the place of morality some misbegotten mongrel patched up of limbs of very varied ancestry and looking like anything you please, only not like virtue, to him who has once beheld her in her true shape.

²⁷¹ Ibid, page 33

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"That he had a point," Gaita goes on to say, "can be seen when we notice that it seems that no amount of lyrical improvisation on the love of neighbour or on a sense of human fellowship, on our common mortality or on compassion, etc, will take us to the idea of an unconditional respect for all persons, for reasons which are obvious and which Kant pointed out."²⁷² The Kantian dictum that we treat others as ends in themselves and never merely as means issues a serious moral challenge to our psychologically tainted conceptions of charity. Poetic language cannot do this with a similar degree of clarity, except perhaps through well rendered examples that do not readily lend themselves to generalisation.

We tend, unreflectively, to think of duty as compelling and charity as supererogatory. However, if we take it as true that each and every human being has a particular status that is expressed by Kant as being an end in itself, we can quickly come to see how these conceptions of duty and charity are readily muddled by psychological influences. For example, I may hurry because I am late for my appointment with the bank manager, but forget to return to the corner where the beggar sits, to whom have I promised to return with a few dollars after my appointment. It is all too easy for me to register my keeping my appointment with the bank manager as my "duty" and my agreement to return to the beggar with some change as "charity," despite the fact that my agreement with him is sealed with a promise. And despite my promise, and despite the fact

²⁷² Ibid, pages 41-42 – quote from Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H J Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1969), page 89

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that my return to the beggar will make a difference as to whether or not he eats, I may well feel as if I have done something over and above the call of duty should I bother to return to him. In this all-too-common scenario, the moral response that I claim is due to each and every human being gives way to a response based on the demands of social hierarchy, to which I may well be quite blind. The unnatural language in which the Kantian dictum is couched has a relationship with natural language that is analogous to the relationship between an x-ray and the natural response to injury. As the bone shows up in the x-ray as distinct from the surrounding flesh, so, in Kant's hands, the moral status of one's recognition of another becomes distinct from the psychological impulses that surround it. This is something very important that natural language is hard-pressed to capture outside of religious conceptualisations. As I have said earlier, Gaita's "infinitely precious" does not quite manage to do it, and my own reliance on "unconditional value" resorts to language that is not natural. Perhaps the extension of "sacred" beyond its religious home is the nearest we can get to capturing, on secular terms, what is at issue, while adhering to natural language.

But to return to the parodies at the beginning of this section, I think we do need to treat parody with some caution, since serious matters can be parodied with very slight shifts of weight and meaning, and it may be a little too much to expect that Kant's philosophical position could be captured without remainder in a telling line from a play. However, both the point underlined by parody, "...that

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the deliverances of a theory that is intended to reveal...the character of moral seriousness...should be substitutable for more common, untheoretical expressions of it," and the Kantian objection, that philosophical reflection must divest itself of all that is extraneous, put together, draw attention to a problem with regard to the relationship between our direct moral responses and moral theory. In the previous section I argued that our direct moral responses need to be understood in relation to unambiguously moral concepts if they are to deepen and take root; that moral responses diverted toward alternative criteria of value may dull rather than deepen our moral understanding. Hence I share with Kant the concern that we do not "foist into the place of morality some misbegotten mongrel patched up of limbs of very varied ancestry and looking like anything you please."

Furthermore, Kant's aligning morality with reason makes great sense: the apparent morality of Charles Taylor's tubby people seems to be biologically determined by characteristics that result from tubbiness; hence it is not a serious human morality, but more a form of animal husbandry that, within the confines of the thought experiment, would be practised by us, upon ourselves. It is reason, issuing from a thinker with good will, that would arguably raise us above a benign or fractious animal reaction to this or that set of conditions.

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Reason, from the patient's and not just the agent's point of view, also plays a very important part in the idea that we should always treat another as an end in themselves, and never merely as a means. Gaita notes the importance of human reason to the "mortall men" in the Falstaff passage, even though he deems "rational beings" an inadequate replacement for the original term. "His (Falstaff's) pity is not merely for creatures who die," he says, "but for human beings who can reflect on their lives, and who take different attitudes to what they do and suffer because of such reflection."²⁷³ Meaning informs the sense of harm we register at bad treatment from others. We can be more shocked and upset by a betrayal than by a blow, more upset by a minor blow intended to insult than a bruising blow associated with the rough and tumble of a game, and more upset at a dog bite if someone has set a dog onto us than we would be if we were bitten by a stray. We cannot reduce ill-will or ill-treatment from a fellow reasoner to mere unlucky chance, because we assume that their behaviour towards us is, or should be, informed by reason. Our wills are free, by a Kantian account, because they can rise above psychological inclination on the wings of reason, so that the person who deliberately harms me has either done so freely and wilfully, or has failed to see me as worthy of a free and reasoned response.

The difficulty, though, with Kant's great insights; that moral value must be distinguishable from other forms of value, and that our rational animal status

²⁷³ Ibid, page 28

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means that there is more to our morality than psychological tendencies and so on, is that they do not make a full return from abstraction to ordinary language, as Gaita has set out to show. In common with most secular moral theories, apart from virtue theory, in its journey back from the theoretical heights to the cave in which most of us dwell, it tends to stall at institutionalised morality with the attendant policy formation, rather than continue to the point where it enlightens ordinary conversation with renewed insight. If the man next to you on the bus tells you that he is a Kantian, you can be pretty sure that you are sitting next to a philosopher, an ethicist, a policy analyst or something similar. Whereas if he tells you that he has always tried to live an honourable life, or that he sees no point in trying to gain the world but lose his soul, this tells you only that someone has chosen to share a moment of reflection with you, and nothing of that person's occupation or place in the world. Someone might want to counter this claim with the example of the person who says he always tries to do his duty. However, this only suggests that there is a "taking off point" in ordinary language for Kantian thinking, which indeed there must be if we are to recognise a theory as a moral theory, but not necessarily a point of return, where one's ordinary language understanding of duty may be deepened by the theory. This is because the Kantian view of duty is in many ways supported by concepts that do not feature in ordinary language discussion, and are not readily translatable into it. Such considerations may partly inform Anscombe's dismissal of what Kant has to offer in "Modern Moral Philosophy":

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Kant introduces the idea of "legislating for oneself" which is as absurd as if in these days, when majority votes command great respect, one were to call each decision a man made a *vote* resulting in a majority, which as a matter of proportion is overwhelming, for it is always 1-0. The concept of legislation requires superior power in a legislator. His own rigoristic convictions on the subject of lying were so intense that it never occurred to him that a lie could be relevantly described as anything but just a lie (e.g. as "a lie in such-and-such circumstances"). His rule about universal maxims is absolutely useless without stipulations as to what shall count as a relevant description of an action with a view to constructing a maxim about it.²⁷⁴

If we return to the relation between the thinker, the object of thought and the range of concepts under which he thinks well or badly, as it applies to our direct moral responses, Kant gives us very little conceptually to which our direct moral responses can attach. If someone says to me "If you did that you would be bearing false witness against your neighbour," or "What you are planning is neither honest nor just," I am immediately catapulted into territory where the question I am faced with is a moral question. However, if I am asked to form a maxim and determine whether or not I could will it as law, from behind a veil of ignorance if I am to throw in Rawls as well, then my direct moral response leaps past the language that may elucidate it to the formation or consultation of a broad policy on "situations such as this one."

²⁷⁴ "Modern Moral Philosophy," page 2
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Kant's maxim that we always treat another as an end and never merely as a means presents a policy that *ought* to move beyond policy the minute it is applied, since treating someone as an end in themselves implies a full and respectful acknowledgement of that person, so that I will not override him for what I think of as his own good, as the boys in the previous section did to the sea-farer. But unless we are philosophers we do not naturally speak of people as "ends in themselves," and one struggles to replicate the term in ordinary language. The Kantian "x-ray" that allows us to detect the outlines of our moral actions through the psychological shadows surrounding them, in common with other forms of x-ray, does not translate easily into the language of the layman. This problem is exacerbated by Kant's considering that the formula of the end in itself is an equivalent of the categorical imperative to the universal law, according to which rationally formed conclusions must in practice override rather than elucidate personal responsiveness. Despite the departure from natural language involved in its expression, the call to treat everyone as an end and never merely as a means holds the promise of deepening one's moral responsiveness, but its conflation with the categorical imperative points instead to precision in the formation and execution of moral policy. Hence the promise of depth that comes with the first of these formulations is seriously diminished by the second, although Kant takes them to be equivalents. This I think is why Kantian theory tends, outside of philosophy, to stall at policy formation in its return from the theoretical heights to practical life.

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Now I have earlier said that there is clearly a relationship between morality and policy, but that good policy is not the be-all and end-all of morality. Moral theses that do not get past policy formation do not speak to us in such a way as to deepen our moral understanding, but they do provide us with overarching principles and so on, which we apply to the ways in which hospitals, schools, businesses and other complex organisations are run. They also contribute greatly to the coordination upon which we rational social creatures depend. The sort of moral engagement in which I am interested could not by itself provide a basis for coordination in a complex social organisation, except perhaps in a small, tribal society, with long-held traditions and the last word lying with elders who are esteemed for their wisdom. Ours is no such society, and we need morally-informed systems if things are to run decently and well. Furthermore, good policies, while they may offer little in terms of deepening one's moral understanding, may at least in some cases clear away obstacles to its development. Policies opposed to racism, sexism, and so on, for example, remove obstacles to women and minorities being given serious moral consideration. That respecting such policies does not by itself bring about moral depth becomes plain if we entertain the question as to whether or not someone could be regarded as being deeply nonracist. The "deeply" does no work here at all, because if you are not a racist then you are simply able to view people of a race other than your own in a spirit of moral seriousness. Any depth that this entails resides in the moral seriousness with which you engage with the person

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in question, and not in your nonracism. Your nonracism is a precondition of your being able to engage with them in this manner, but cannot by itself be understood in terms of its depth.

However, while moral engagement, as I am construing it, may not by itself prove up to supporting the kinds of principles and systems in accordance with which institutions, etc, should be run, theoretical systems of morality that do not have a strong connection with ordinary life and language offer little with which to deepen or strengthen our moral understanding. This matters, because insofar as we merely defer to institutional moral principles, our moral engagement, through not being adequately reinforced within the range of moral concepts that are part of ordinary language, is liable to erosion. Hence we may succumb to complacent relativism insofar as we might acquiesce in a system that has ceased to be moral, inadvertently mistaking predictability, order or efficiency for morality. If things are going smoothly under such conditions, nothing may jar us into questioning our compliance.

The difference between what is needed to retain and deepen one's practical moral engagement, and what is needed to ensure that we retain decent institutions shows up if we consider what I have just said alongside a couple of claims made by Gaita:

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It is not accidental that we have no moral whizz-kids. That is partly because we cannot acquire moral knowledge in any sense that would make us morally *knowledgeable*...It is more natural to speak of a depth of moral understanding or of wisdom, and *it is not accidental to these that their achievement takes time*.²⁷⁵

A few pages further along he says:

We do not seek moral advice from someone whom we know to be morally jaded. Being scientifically jaded, however, in the sense of one's interest in science having "gone dead" on one, is of itself no bar to a scientist's authority to speak in his field, provided only that his memory is good, and he has not been jaded for too long.²⁷⁶

One might think that the jaded scientist might not be in a much better position, with regard to offering scientific advice, than the morally jaded ethicist with regard to ethical advice. However, what Gaita is pointing to is the difference between the ability to adhere to certain disciplines and the ability to personally engage. The jaded scientist may no longer be able to fully engage with scientific concerns, but will still be familiar with the facts and methods pertinent to his field. So while this person will not be the *best* person from whom to seek scientific advice, he will be still be able to contribute to some extent, due to his familiarity with his field.

²⁷⁵ *Good and Evil*, pages 265-266

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, page 268

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I agree with Gaita that, where we face real moral torments or dilemmas, it is moral depth and wisdom that we seek, and not moral expertise. However, someone who is trained in ethics but also jaded is able to contribute in certain fields to much the same extent as the jaded scientist. As with the scientist, and perhaps also the jaded lawyer, they are unlikely to be as helpful as they would be if they were not jaded, but they will still be familiar with the relevant, principles, likely problems and methods to make a contribution on an institutional or organisational level. What is more, the ability to come up with coherent and acceptable solutions to institutional problems in which various interests and deeply held principles must be translated into plans of action, changes to policy and so on, with realities such as budgetary constraints hovering in the background, is no mean feat. However, the ability to employ a set of methods and principles in such a way as to ensure that, within a given framework, no one is short-changed, does not necessarily translate into moral wisdom. So while I would allow that there are areas of expertise that can be associated with morality on an organisational level, broadly construed, and that there could arguably be such a thing as a whizz-kid within that field, it is of a different order from the wisdom that develops slowly out of deep moral responsiveness.

Large societies with complex institutions do seem to need principles of general policy that can be asserted and applied over a large and varied number of cases. However, there is a limit to what they can do. They cannot, by themselves,

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deepen our moral engagement, or bring us to a lucid understanding of our moral failures. Kantian theory comes closer than most others to being able to speak to us both from an institutional and personal perspective, but does not quite get there, for reasons I have outlined above. Of Kant, Phillips has this to say:

Kant was right in saying that moral considerations do not have to be justified by appeal to an agent's interests, but when he elaborated on what respect for such considerations amounts to, we find it is nothing but respect for the form of the law involved. But, although he sees that something distinctive can be said about the form of moral considerations, he fails to see that this is made possible by ways of behaviour and ways of living in which certain things come to be thought to have special importance. It is the content of moral considerations which makes it possible to say the kind of thing that Kant and others have wanted to say about their form.²⁷⁷

That Kant sees that "something distinctive can be said about the form of our moral considerations" means that he has things of great importance and insight to say to us, which may not be able to be said so clearly in any other way. That he fails to see that this is made possible by "ways of behaviour and ways of living in which certain things come to be thought to have special importance," (essentially, the stuff that he thinks must be removed if morality is to be viewed in its purity), pushes him away from ordinary language discussions, toward the reductive realm of institutional policy. While Kant's call for us to treat others as

²⁷⁷ *Interventions in Ethics*, pages 127 and 128

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ends and never merely as means appeals directly to our responsiveness, his "universalisability" requirement effectively makes the individual rational agent who employs the categorical imperative (consciously, deliberately) into an institution with a single member, rather than a responsive human being.

In the previous section, I argued that our direct moral responses need unambiguously moral concepts in relation to which our moral engagement may be rendered intelligible and so deepened. In this section my claim is that a moral theory that stops short of reconnecting with our direct moral responses in the relevant way may provide us with bases for policy and order, but will not go far toward deepening our practical moral understanding. The only areas in which moral theory and direct moral responses have that sort of connection, that I am aware of, are religious morality, where the associated religious beliefs are accepted, and virtue theory.

Religious moral theorising connects with our direct moral responses through serious religious practice: the results of Pascal's quarrel with the Jesuits, for example, had a bearing on ordinary religious people, in terms of *how* they engaged with certain concepts: the distinction between the spirit of religious law and the letter, for example, retains significance in the most humble living room conversations. What is more, "wrong" in this context, has connotations of repentance, reconciliation and renewal; conceptualisations of moral responses

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that, if they are taken seriously, go deep with people. However, religious language does not speak to everyone, and if religious language does not speak to you, then it will be limited in its ability to deepen your moral responsiveness.

Virtue theory shares this feature of religious morality insofar as the language in which the theorist develops her theory is the same as the language in which people discuss the moral aspects of their lives. Kant, as is well known, regarded ethics based on virtue with suspicion, in part because he thought I may simply *be* virtuous, in which case I will just be following fortuitous psychological tendencies rather than the moral law. However, the virtue terms, while they may mistakenly, in Kant's eyes, be used on occasion to praise fortunate natural tendencies, do mark the distinction between moral and nonmoral values without first stripping away all signs of the forms of life in which they find their meaning, and abandoning the language in which that meaning primarily finds expression.

I have seen on television a gypsy man leading a protest march in a village in which the annual gypsy horse fair had been shifted away from the village itself to a less accessible field. "We must show restraint and dignity," he told the younger members of the group, "We are honourable men, and the people of the village must see that we are honourable men." The gypsy leader will not have thought long and hard about what constitutes being honourable under those particular conditions. Nor is he likely to have determined that what is called for here is

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dignified patience, and after consulting the doctrine of the mean, cautioned against irascibility on one hand and a lack of spirit on the other. However, the commonality of moral concepts between the virtue theorist and the ordinary language speaker means that virtue theory adheres to the concepts in which moral concerns are ordinarily discussed, rather than merely contributing to general principles upon which to base policies. Hence virtue theory retains the capacity to contribute meaningfully to ordinary-language discussion. Expertise in theory does not guarantee wisdom in anyone at all, and one can just as easily be a jaded virtue theorist as a jaded Kantian or Utilitarian, in which case one would be limited to offering one's expertise on some professional level rather than one's wisdom. However, the virtue terms themselves and virtue theory's acknowledgement of wisdom, along with the slow process of its attainment, allow virtue theory to offer a conception of morality which is able to speak meaningfully to someone in search of practical moral depth.

We tend to either comply or argue with policy-based systems rather than deeply engage with them on a personal level, because in general they lack the conceptual resources to speak with immediacy to our direct moral responses. It is, however virtue understood in relationship to such concepts as love, goodness and purity that permits this deepening, since these concepts, often, though not necessarily, associated with religion, allow room for moral considerations that reach beyond what is useful, effective or successful. Such concepts also give us

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room to do conceptual justice to the real-life examples that we encounter, that raise our moral sights above the mundane. As I hoped to show in the previous section, virtue that finds its measure in anything less may be diminished in its transformative scope by the reductive force of that lesser measure.

(4) Conclusion

I have set out here to show the conditions that I think are applicable to the development and retention of a practical moral engagement, as opposed to a functional moral system, arguing that moral depth depends upon an understanding of morality, according to which our direct moral responses are elucidated by unambiguously moral concepts that are not alien to natural language. Such a morality cannot be guaranteed to go deep in all cases, but its existence among us is important insofar as our attitude to the powerless is concerned, and also as a counter to those situations where the practical principles or policies remain in place but the morality leaves them, having been usurped by such values as predictability, orderliness and efficiency. Because the conditions for attaining moral depth are resistant to systemisation, its spread is more likely to arise from example and ordinary language conversation than from any attempt at discerning overarching principles or laws. A real moral example does have real authority. The person who goes out of her way, after her visit to the bank, to return to the corner where she promised money to a beggar a few

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hours before, in a spirit of purity rather than pretentiousness, offers others a view of the world in which such actions are shown to be real possibilities. The acknowledgement of, and reflection upon, such a deed, when one is witness to it, is one form that a direct moral response may take. The response's being sustained and deepened will depend upon the unambiguously moral concepts by which it is rendered intelligible.

In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*,²⁷⁸ Zygmunt Bauman argues that the Holocaust depended, not so much on rabid anti-Semitism, but on the detachment from moral concern of our natural rational aim of self-preservation. Rabid anti-Semitism by itself, he thinks, would lack the efficiency to systematically achieve such large amounts of death and destruction. He says,

The lesson of the Holocaust is the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice, or renders such a good choice very costly, argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty...adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation. *In a system where rationality and ethics point in opposite directions, humanity is the main loser.* Evil can do its dirty work, hoping that most, people most of the time will refrain from doing, rash, reckless things – and resisting evil is rash and reckless. Evil needs neither enthusiastic followers nor an applauding audience – the instinct of self-

²⁷⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, (Polity Press, 1989)

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preservation will do, encouraged by the comforting thought that it is not my turn yet, thank God, by lying low I can still escape.²⁷⁹

However, he also suggests a second lesson to be learned from the Holocaust:

...putting self-preservation above moral duty is in no way predetermined, inevitable and inescapable. One can be pressed to do it, but one cannot be forced to do it, and thus one cannot really shift the responsibility for doing it onto those who exerted the pressure. *It does not matter how many people chose moral duty over the rationality of self-preservation – what matters is that some did.* Evil is not all powerful. It can be resisted. The testimony of the few who did resist shatters the authority of the logic of self-preservation...One wonders how many people must defy that logic for evil to be incapacitated...²⁸⁰

My contention is that a morality that depends upon the deepening of our direct moral responses has more chance of placing us among those who resist evil than moral theories that translate into policy, despite the fact that the latter do make valuable contributions to a well-ordered life. When I myself fall into temptation, ordinary language moral concepts may pull me up short and set me reflecting. When the system to which I defer falls into temptation, I may not notice unless the coordination that it facilitates breaks down.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, page 206

²⁸⁰ Ibid, page 207

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Chapter 6: Reading, Virtue and a Religious-point-of-view

(1) Introduction

In my first chapter, I claimed that there were three main advantages to the notion of reading as an ethical concept: (1) it arises from the way in which we are embedded in the world, carrying with it the immediacy of many of our real-life ethical responses, where the time and space for reflection are minimal; hence it is practical on a fundamental level. (2) Because of this, the agent is placed as a mutual participant in relation to the objects of her moral concern, as opposed to assuming the role of an expert evaluator of actions or a moral exemplar. (3) If we are going to claim that human beings are sacred, or infinitely precious, or are creatures of unconditional value, then it ought to be possible to have the conviction that this claim is true permeate, at least to some extent, our ways of operating in the world.

It is my intention here to both draw and extend upon all that I have written so far with a view to fleshing out these points. I shall begin by revisiting the religious-point-of-view, entering into this subject through the relationship between apophatic theology and religious practice. I shall then turn to personal responses recorded by both Wittgenstein and Weil, and how they conceptualise them, in the hope of showing how in certain ways they reflect the relationship

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between apophatic theology and religious practice. Where in my previous chapter I looked at the relation between our direct moral responses and the concepts we employ to understand and develop them, here I shall look at those responses that can be understood as *religious* responses, and how they may be captured and developed so as to contribute to the orientation within which we "read" the external world.

One might frame the difference between the moral responses which form a moral perspective, and the religious responses which form the religious-point-of-view in this way. The moral perspective typically functions as a perspective within an orientation, where the latter may be understood as a wider, more overarching perspective by which one's life is organised. If my orientation was my commercial business, for example, my moral perspective might allow me to neglect my children to some extent, while nonetheless being reliable and upstanding as a business person.²⁸¹ An orientation brings into focus those things that are taken as pertinent to it, so that within that orientation, I may have the interests of my clients right there at the forefront of my thinking, but find myself nonplussed when asked my children's birthdays, or even perhaps their ages.

²⁸¹ This is not to say that I would count as a "fully virtuous person" by VE standards. The image is intended only to illustrate my use of the term "orientation," and I realise that someone with such a narrow ethical focus would fall short on naturalistic, as well as religious standards.

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Since our orientations tend to filter information according to what seems important from within them, the religious point-of-view has epistemological as well as ethical connotations. The religious-point-of view contributes to our acknowledging, in an ethical light, people whom we may have no relative reason to acknowledge on a practical, as opposed to merely theoretical level, such as those people who tend to be marginalised by human societies. I should add that for most people, an orientation is rich and multi-faceted. I am not arguing that all other concerns should be put to one side to make way for the religious-point-of-view, only that an orientation that includes a developed sense of unconditional value plays an important part in the moral depth that is needed if our moral responsiveness is not to be limited by differences in power and status.

(2) A Religious-point-of-view Revisited

Earl Stanley B. Fronda, in *Wittgenstein's (Misunderstood) Religious Thought*,²⁸² argues that both Wittgenstein himself and Wittgensteinians such as Phillips favour a theological conceptualisation that is best understood in terms of the apophatic tradition, and that accusations against them of non-realism, crypto-atheism or fideism reveal a failure on the part of critics to appreciate apophatic theology for what it is.²⁸³ Where I, in Chapter Two, noted Phillips' reticence on the subject of God's nature, and put this down in part to the limits as to what

²⁸² Fronda E. S., *Wittgenstein's (Misunderstood) Religious Thought*, (Brill, 2010)

²⁸³ *Ibid*, pages 202-205

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one may legitimately say within the constraints of religious philosophy, Fronda draws attention to the fact that similar constraints apply where God is conceived of in apophatic terms. A reason for conceiving of God in apophatic terms lies with the idea that God transcends all being, in which case a limit arises as to what can be said literally about God:

If God is ontologically transcendent, then it follows that God is also *epistemologically* transcendent, i.e. God is not like anything that human beings can think God is. And if God is epistemologically transcendent, then it follows that God is *semantically* transcendent. Thus, to Wittgenstein, one cannot speak *literally* of the transcendent God. It is futile to *try* to speak literally of the transcendent God.²⁸⁴

Frona cites a respectable theological tradition behind this conceptualisation, including of course the thinking of St Thomas Aquinas,²⁸⁵ and looks into various reasons as to why so many philosophers of religion appear to get Wittgenstein and Phillips so wrong. He argues (along similar lines to my own argument in Chapter Two) that a context-free, enlightenment conception of God...was "drawn and maintained" by Western European Christian thinkers with the aim of rebutting the atheistic implications of modern science on its own ground,²⁸⁶ (to be rebutted in turn of course by counterarguments in support of those atheistic

²⁸⁴ Ibid, page 204

²⁸⁵ Fronda cites others as adhering to this tradition, including St Nicholas of Cusa and a strong strain of Eastern Orthodoxy, but for my purposes here Aquinas will suffice.

²⁸⁶ Wittgenstein's (Misunderstood) Religious Thought, page 207

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implications). Such philosophers, described as likely to be "...scientific in cultural orientation, Protestant in theological orientation and rigorously rationalistic in temperamental disposition,"²⁸⁷ Fronda thinks are less than receptive to the apophatic strain in Wittgensteinian thinking due to a mistaken belief that the conception of God underpinning their philosophical work is, or ought to be, applicable to the faith of all people at all times.²⁸⁸ For someone engaged in an ongoing game of philosophical ping pong between theists and atheists, one might say, a conception of God that does not sit well with the rules of that particular game is not to be admitted to the table. God is or God is not, and a God who purportedly transcends the question presents a bewildering philosophical cop-out which is not to be taken seriously. Fronda further notes, however, that certain Dominicans, familiar with the apophatic thinking of Aquinas - Herbert McCabe, Fergus Kerr, Brian Davies and Gareth Moore, to name a few - have proved very sympathetic to Wittgensteinian religious Philosophy, yet can hardly be considered to be outside of mainstream religious thought.²⁸⁹

Now while certain forms of analytic argumentation do seem to play their part in the general philosophical rejection or misunderstanding of apophatic theology, the decline in religious practice may well be the precondition for arguments of that kind gaining traction. However, the relation between apophatic theology

²⁸⁷ Ibid, page 207

²⁸⁸ Ibid, page 208

²⁸⁹ Ibid, page 210, fn 20

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and religious practice (or its lack) may also provide us with a window through which to consider, in practical terms, what it is that constitutes the Wittgensteinian religious point-of-view, whether or not it is accompanied by explicit religious belief.

We know that St Thomas Aquinas's apophatic conception of God is supplemented by a limited theory of analogy. This accounts for our having epistemic access to God's goodness via the analogical relation between the finite goodness we encounter in the world and God's absolute goodness, although "between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilitude."²⁹⁰ According to Patrick Quinn, the analogical argument arose at least in part because Maimonides's extreme apophaticism seemed to Aquinas to come close to erasing the distinction between theism and atheism.²⁹¹ However, one could equally think that Aquinas saw that what we *take to be knowledge of God* stands in need of an account, and that apophaticism by itself is not equal to that task. In the course of putting his case for Wittgensteinian apophaticism, Fronda quotes from the *Summa*:

We name things as we know them. We do not know what kind of thing God is.

Therefore the name 'God' cannot signify what he is.

²⁹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 1, Chapter 1, pages 42-43

²⁹¹ *Aquinas, Platonism and the Knowledge of God*, page 19

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Now God is not known to us in his own nature, but through his works or effects, and so...it is from these that we derive the language we use in speaking of him. Hence 'God' is an operational word in that it is an operation of God that makes us use it...

But from divine effects we do not come to understand what the divine nature is in itself so we do not know of God what he is. We know of him as transcending all creatures, as the cause of their perfections, and lacking anything that is merely creaturely...It is this way that the word 'God' signifies the divine nature: it is used to mean something that is above all that is, and is the source of all things and distinct from them all. (ST 1a, 13, 8)²⁹²

In his previous chapter, Fronda paraphrases Wittgenstein's well-known saying about his attitude toward a soul in claiming:

As one has a realistic attitude/spirit toward the other mind, so one can have a similar attitude toward God. One may say: *My attitude toward the universe is an attitude towards a divine creation. I am not of the opinion that it is a divine creation.*²⁹³

The idea, in this last quote, is of course that one does not form the opinion that other minds exist before responding to other people as having minds, and similarly, one does not necessarily determine that God exists before responding to the universe as a divine creation. Statements like this, along with St Thomas's

²⁹² Wittgenstein's (Misunderstood) Religious Thought, page 182

²⁹³ Ibid, page 159

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claim that God is known to us only through his works and effects, accompanied by an apophatic approach to theology, are far easier to accept within a context of widespread religious practice than in circumstances where it is lacking. That is to say, in a world where the sound of the Angelus bell marks dawn, midday and dusk, where the calendar is referenced in relation to religious festivals, and fasting, feasting and a host of other human activities are invested with religious meaning, to say that God is absolutely transcendent, and that it is impossible to speak literally of God, poses no real threat to faith.²⁹⁴ In fact it may even strengthen faith, by reinforcing the sense of the non-mundane, ineffable quality of all that is holy. That is because where religious practice is widespread God's presence is commonly felt, at least in some instances and on some level, and God's effects seen, while God's significance is affirmed in a great many actions and considerations. This is not to say that God is hence reduced to a significant constructed role in a way of life or linguistic practice (like a king in chess), so therefore non-real. From a theistic position one can answer to such a charge by saying that God's works are more *apparent* to believers under certain conditions, or from within certain perspectives. After all, we can think of many mundane cases where something is apparent in relation to one perspective, but not to another, without recourse to non-realism. An invalid inference may be immediately apparent to a philosopher but not to her friend the hairdresser, for

²⁹⁴ I am speaking here of a society in which such practices are widespread, as opposed to a religious school, for example, in an otherwise secular society. In the latter case, religious practices may have a lesser hold on people.

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instance. What is more, perfectly good explanations as to why the inference is invalid, perhaps even a course in logic, may fail to make sense to the hairdresser, but we would not on these grounds alone dismiss what we know about inferential relations as non-real. Furthermore, where a theistic perspective plays a predominant role in a way of life, it is difficult for atheism rather than theism to find and retain a conceptual foothold. I was once told by an Egyptian cook, himself a tolerant and modestly committed theist, that it was difficult for anyone to be an atheist in Egypt, not because atheists were persecuted, but because their point of view had difficulty gaining traction within the parameters of the broader conversation.²⁹⁵

Under circumstances in which religious practice holds sway, saying, "My attitude toward the universe is an attitude towards a divine creation. I am not of the opinion that it is a divine creation," is as readily graspable (given a moment's thought) as Wittgenstein's original statement regarding souls: "My attitude toward him is an attitude toward a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul."²⁹⁶ With the original, once we have cognised the work done by "attitude" and "opinion" in the two sentences, we simply say "Of course!" When someone approaches one of us to ask the time, we do not form an opinion as to whether he has a soul/mind before answering. We just say, "Three o'clock," if that is the

²⁹⁵ I take it that the cook was speaking of ordinary language conversation, rather than academic conversation, in which case atheism might well be more readily entertained.

²⁹⁶ *Philosophical Investigations*, page 178e

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time, without a second thought. Furthermore, this attitude to a soul precedes rather than follows from speculation about other minds; we do not decide to tell this person the time because we have come to a conclusion, somewhere along the line, that other minds exist. The same will be true of Fronda's paraphrase where religious practice more or less goes without saying, since under these circumstances, divine effects are unquestionably there, and accepted from childhood on, in much the same way as other minds are unquestionably there. When I say "unquestionably there" I am speaking in terms of responsiveness: I might, under these circumstances, question whether there really is anything in talk of the divine, but in most instances this would tend to be on a similar level to my questioning the reality of material objects, while complaining, between premise and conclusion, that my favourite tea cup has been chipped. That is to say, unless I was so convinced of atheism as to put myself out on a limb, as the cook I mentioned earlier thought was the case with Egyptian atheists, many of my ordinary responses would include an acknowledgement of the divine, even though I theoretically questioned it. Difficulties arise with apophaticism however, even if it offers the best and truest conceptualisation of God, where religious practice ceases to have such an unquestionable hold on most people, so that divine effects cease to be so immediately apparent.

Even Phillips' citation of Norman Kemp Smith's claim that both Hume and Kant retained great respect for the Cosmological argument, despite its inadequacies,

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when they turned to look at nature,²⁹⁷ shows a certain weakening in the hold of a religious-point-of-view that is given substance by practice: there is a difference between being struck by the sublime beauty of the mountains, and being unreflectively brought to one's knees under this circumstance, or uttering a short prayer or kissing a blessed object under that circumstance. The former is more distanced, self-conscious and less direct than the latter. However, even where our appreciation of the sublime beauty of the mountains incorporates a certain distance, we are still quite open to having "an attitude to the universe that is an attitude towards a divine creation," while also agreeing that God is fundamentally unknowable to us, since the mountains have the same unquestionable presence as other people do, and their splendour is still able to speak to us of the divine.

Where widespread religious practice is on the wane, however, and the assurance that certain aspects of life and of the world are best understood in terms of divine effect loses currency, an apophatic conception of God can come to seem hopelessly inadequate. Patrick Quinn's claim, attributed to Aquinas, that Maimonides's God erases the distinction between theism and atheism, looks to hold water under these conditions, since the divine effects that previously permitted a limited knowledge of God may now seem almost as absent as the deity himself. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see how those who cling to belief despite the decline in religious practice might seek to beef up their

²⁹⁷ "Belief, Change and Forms of Life," in *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, page 91

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conception of God by investing him with positive, intellectually accessible features. Hence one might construe the standard metaphysical God of analytic philosophy as yet another configuration of "the God of the gaps," with the gaps in question being gaps in the religious practices by which divine effects would otherwise be affirmed.

The abandonment of widespread religious practice, however, does not come out of nowhere, and the God of analytic philosophy has gone very little way toward reinvigorating religious life or otherwise reversing the trend. This brings me back to Kolakowski's insightful comment on Pascal, which I quoted in my last chapter:

Science and technique have been increasingly trusted because of their efficacy and predictive power. But communication with God was mistrusted not because of its mundane inefficiency alone – in this respect it had always been so – but because whatever was not thus efficient was regarded with more and more indifference. In other words it was a profound mutation in human mentality that brought about contempt for everything that was not beneficial in the sense that science and technique were.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ *God Owes us Nothing*, page 190
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Further to this, Kolakowski adds, "*For Christian preachers, this is a lesson still not fully assimilated,*"²⁹⁹ (emphasis mine) a claim which may also apply to some philosophers of religion.

Kolakowski's comments are insightful because they home in on Pascal's understanding that the diminishment of religious life was due to a generalised shift in orientation, following on the mundane effectiveness of important scientific discoveries, rather than the rejection of a putative fact in the light of these discoveries. What is at issue is the loss or diminishment of the religious-point-of-view, and failure to appreciate this leads to the construal of the wager as a mere exercise in prudential reasoning. However, a perusal of some of the surrounding text in *The Pensées* shows that the wager can also be understood as an attempt at jolting a certain kind of urbane person out of one orientation (the scientific outlook outlined above, or an urbanity that is informed by it) and into another (the religious-point-of-view), using an example from within his own kind of orientation, that of gambling and odds. Understood in this way, the exhaustive disjunction³⁰⁰ presented by the wager aims at facilitating a shift in orientation, rather than offering a prudential argument in religion's favour. This shows if we think of a high stakes bet in mundane terms: I bet my house against a castle. The coin comes up heads or tails, and I am now either without a house or the

²⁹⁹ Ibid

³⁰⁰ The disjunction is rendered exhaustive by Pascal's ruling that the refusal to bet counts as a bet against – *The Pensées*, page 150

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owner of a castle. The range of possibilities within which further considerations about my life are entertained is at once radically altered. So it is, in Pascal's eyes, with belief or non-belief in God; it is no mere matter of adding a further, potentially beneficial possibility to my present orientation, but involves instead a radical reorientation. Significantly, the conception of God assumed in the wager seems to be apophatic,³⁰¹ and the suggested remedy for non-belief is religious practice.³⁰²

Now Pascal himself would have no truck with "a religious-point-of-view" that did not extend to religious commitment, for him there is but one true faith, and that faith represents a pearl beyond all price. And even if that were not the case, apophaticism sans practice, as we have seen, looks to be a rather slender offering. If your orientation is one in which religious sensibility has been wholly or even largely displaced by mundane efficiency, then you are unlikely to have an attitude toward the universe that is an attitude toward divine creation. Under such circumstances a God that cannot be spoken of literally is, *prima facie*, hardly distinguishable from no God at all. However, Pascal's apologetics do offer us insight into what constitutes a religious-point-of-view, even if for Pascal himself its completion in religious commitment and practice goes without saying.

³⁰¹ *The Pensées*, page 149 - If there is a God, he is definitely beyond our comprehension, since being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing what he is or whether he is.

³⁰² *Ibid*, page 152 - ...people who know the road you wish to follow...They behaved as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and make you docile...

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We can discern the line between the religious-point-of-view and its completion in practice if we attend to what is brought to the gambling table, and resist leaping straight to the potential rewards of finite ease or infinite bliss. With God's essential unknowability confirmed and the refusal to bet ruled out,

You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid; error and wretchedness. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one than the other.³⁰³

What are at stake are not our reason and our will *per se*, since Pascal does not seem to envisage a believer as lacking either, but our confidence in their supremacy. One might go so far as to say that the reason and the will are in fact *never* supreme, since they always serve something other than themselves.

Assuming that Kolakowski is correct in his assessment of Pascal, then within the alternative orientation, that of mundane technique and efficacy, our reason and our will function well enough, but at the cost of spiritual and moral depth.

However, within that kind of orientation, our reason and our will are instrumental to the fulfilment of our mundane desires and intentions in such a way as to give us the sense of being in control. The religious orientation, in comparison, involves the relinquishment of that ultimate sense of control, and its replacement

³⁰³ Ibid, page 150

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with obedience. So what may be lost at the table in terms of reason and will is the sense of control with which they are associated.

We may view a term like "obedience" as being at odds with personal autonomy, but one can also see it as a rational and willing response to an acknowledged authority rather than mere slavishness. We are all obedient to the laws of non-contradiction, for example, since one cannot honestly reject them in one's practical life and still be sane. So it is with the practical acknowledgement of God, or of absolute goodness; the obedience of the reason and the will follows from the acceptance of their absolute authority. Temptation may cause us to fail to obey of course, and that sort of mistake is called "sin" in religious terms, or "vice" in virtue terms, whereas a failure to obey the laws of logic by, say, affirming the consequent, is generally attributed to poorly trained or careless thinking. However, in both cases, the authority-obedience relation holds against failures: it would be positively idiotic to say, "I fully accept the authority of logic, but I regard it as my autonomous right to affirm the consequent in my arguments," and similarly odd to say, "I acknowledge God's absolute authority but I do not obey it, since I value my personal autonomy."

I say that moral or spiritual depth may be lost if one chooses maintaining one's sense of control over the alternative of obedience to God or the Good, because the very notion of control, aligned to technique and efficacy, reduces the

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pressure to explore matters further, or to look more deeply into things.³⁰⁴ I shall try to illustrate this by use of an analogy. The Australian eucalyptus is equipped with the capacity to develop a long tap root that is able to burrow down into the dry Australian soil to reach artesian water supplies. In New Zealand, where there is more rain and plenty of water in the topsoil, they do not develop this tap root, and readily fall over during storms. Similarly, where we have efficient means of solving our problems at hand, we may fail to develop some of the deeper spiritual and moral qualities, although unlike the gum tree, being blessed with reason, we are hopefully capable of developing spiritual depth in other ways than solely by facing up to demanding mundane problems. However, even though it would be silly to suggest that we avoid applying science and technique to many of our mundane problems, it is worth being mindful of the fact that our problem-solving capacities *can* weaken our moral responsiveness, simply by saving us the effort of meeting certain difficulties. If we were to abort *all* potentially handicapped people, for example, we would not be pressed to find ways of loving and including handicapped children, and "death with dignity" as advocated by proponents of voluntary euthanasia *can* mean death without such losses as would press everyone involved to unearth deeper moral resources for meeting the situation.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ I do not mean to suggest, and nor I think does Pascal, that science and technique should be abandoned in favour of a deeper morality. Rather, that we should be careful not to let them occlude the deeper moral questions, which they may do, due to their mundane reliability.

³⁰⁵ I realise that this raises huge questions as to where the boundary may lie between making use of technology etc, to ease suffering, and finding in ourselves the depth to meet suffering. I

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Now for Pascal, spiritual depth lies in one place only, which is practical commitment to Christianity, but for someone for whom such a commitment is not a live option, there remains a question of *moral* depth, a question which I shall put to one side for now, and attend to it in the next section. Pascal himself is rather quick to leap to the temporal or eternal rewards that result from the bet, though he does suggest, almost in passing, the beneficial changes to one's life that come with belief; "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere, true friend...It is true you will not enjoy noxious pleasures, glory and good living, but will you not have others?"³⁰⁶

However, it is perhaps in part the emphasis Pascal places upon pleasurable rewards³⁰⁷ that inspired Simone Weil to affirm, as an alternative to the wager, the value of obedience to God whether God exists or not, and that "If one follows this rule of life, then no revelation at the moment of death can cause any regrets; because if chance or the devil govern all worlds we would still have no regrets for having lived this way."³⁰⁸ Her reasoning is as follows, "If God should

do not have the space here to develop this line of thought, but I do acknowledge that it raises a serious question. My aim here is limited to showing that we *can* close off certain moral responses through our ability to deal with problems efficiently, without suggesting that we abandon technical efficiency altogether. What is more, if we are not alive to the alternative presented by a religious-point-of-view, the question as to where the boundary lies may not even arise for us.

³⁰⁶ *The Pensées*, page 153

³⁰⁷ This leap to rewards does, to my mind, subtly suggest a degree of surrender to the orientation that he is opposing (supposing Kolakowski is right) since, like a technically effective solution to a problem, it effectively closes the question he has opened. Perhaps he thinks that immersion in religious practice will fill the gap.

³⁰⁸ Weil Simone, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees, (Oxford University Press, 1970), page 157

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be an illusion from the point of view of existence, He is the sole reality from the point of view of the Good. I know this for certain, because it is a definition. 'God is the Good' is as certain as 'I am.'³⁰⁹ Her idea seems to be that mundane goods are all relative, and yet we are able to conceive of a goodness that is absolute. Even if nothing, anywhere, meets this standard, our loyalty to it cannot be in vain, simply because it is, by concept alone if by nothing else, unassailably good. In relation to this line of thought she elsewhere says, "What is essential is to know that one is hungry; and that this is not a belief, it is absolutely certain knowledge that can only be obscured by lies,"³¹⁰ and "I am quite sure there is a God in that I know that my love is not illusory."³¹¹ By this account, there are among our direct responses, some whose *telos* can only be understood as a goodness that is absolute. If there were no such responses, there would be no point of connection between human receptivity and religious claims; nothing even from which religious cultures, as we presently know them, might develop. I desire a glass of water *because* I am thirsty; the strength of my desire for the water being relative to my thirst. A desire for an absolute good is a desire that *there is* a goodness which is not good solely due to its relative or instrumental value.³¹² And whether or not there is anything in reality that corresponds to the word "God" it is worthwhile to take that desire for goodness seriously, since in

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, page 159

³¹¹ Weil, Simone, *Gravity and Grace*, page 103, quoted in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, page 225

³¹² This line of thought is underpinned also by the idea that forms of human longing tend to have objects: loneliness longs for company, hunger for food, etc. So whether or not there is a God, or anything that corresponds to the word God, a longing for goodness cannot be without a point.

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doing so, one's own life will be altered in accordance with the goodness conceived, thus allowing this non-instrumental goodness a place within concrete reality, whether or not it is underwritten by a real God.

Comparable statements can be found in Wittgenstein's "A Lecture on Ethics." In attempting to capture what he is talking about when he speaks of absolute or ethical value, he puts forward an analogy as to how someone might respond if he were to speak about pleasure. In this case, he says, you would "try and recall some typical situation in which you always felt pleasure."³¹³ In a similar vein, he lists three examples from his own experience, so as to lend concreteness to what he is trying to get at on the subject of ethics. One is the experience of wondering at the existence of the world, which is of a different order than mundane wonder, marked by the fact that it is not accompanied by astonishment that things are not otherwise. That is to say, we do not marvel at the existence of the world in the same way as we would marvel at seeing a rhinoceros strolling along the motorway, against a background in which such events are very much unexpected, but rather we marvel at the world simply because it *is*. Another is the feeling that one is absolutely safe, whatever happens, which "has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God," and which again has a different sense than feeling safe because one is in one's room so cannot be run over by a bus. He also lists the feeling of guilt, which is "described by the phrase

³¹³ "A Lecture on Ethics," page 8
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that God disapproves of our conduct."³¹⁴ Guilt, listed in this context, and understood in terms of God's disapproval, stands separately from issues of recompense, and might be understood in similar terms to Gaita's account of remorse, as a personal revelation of what it is to visit evil upon another.

In these instances both Weil and Wittgenstein are pointing to certain responses that have formed part of their own life experience. One could say that they are focusing on the kinds of human responses that allow religious claims to gain a grip on us in the first place. Responses of this kind present a point of connection between real lives and religious concepts, which in many cases find both expression and development within religious practices. One might compare them to the responses that Whittaker thinks are central to religious belief, which I have written about in Chapter Three, Section (2). Religious practices in turn serve to sustain the sort of perspective in which God's effects are acknowledged; whereby God's essential unknowability is able to speak to believers of the ineffable nature of the holy, rather than of nothing at all.

Bearing these insights of Weil's and Wittgenstein's in mind, let us return briefly to Pascal's urging his convert to give substance to a positive bet by engaging in religious practice. If Pascal were not to recommend religious practice, it would be difficult for him to gain traction with his interlocutor in recommending an

³¹⁴ Ibid, pages 8-10

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apophatic conception of God. And if he were to then beef up his conception of God with positive features, the God in question would risk having no relevant point of connection with his interlocutor's understanding. By extracting God from religious practice and investing him with positive, intellectually accessible features, you may give yourself something to say without giving your interlocutor anything to hear that might give him pause. However, for many modern people, and perhaps also for some people in Pascal's day, religious practice is not a live option. In which case practice may not evoke a religious response, but may instead be seen as an impenetrable way of speaking and acting with which it is impossible to engage.

This matters, because whether or not one is a theist, there are important features of moral life that tend to find their deepest expression within the conceptual range that is associated with theism. What is more, if the rejection of theism stems largely, as Kolakowski suggests, from "a profound mutation in human mentality that brings about contempt for everything that is not beneficial in the sense that science and technique are," then the danger is that in attempting to capture and transplant value from one perspective to another, we may in fact distort the content. I have already discussed, over two chapters, the way in which the word "right" can lose its moral ground where its ultimate measure lies in mundane efficacy, efficiency and predictive power. I have also

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noted how Virtue Ethical concepts, while more resistant to distortion than "right" is, may nonetheless have their content stunted by such measures.

Essentially, the general abandonment of religious practice may in fact rob us of important ways of *knowing* and *seeing*. What is more, this lack can loop back into what remains of religious practice, since religious people are as influenced by the values that arise within the broader conversation as anyone else. What is significant about both Weil's and Wittgenstein's suggestions are that they take us to some of the mainsprings of these ways of knowing and seeing. In terms of lived reality, the religious-point-of-view is effectively the acknowledgement of these responses, and their connection with the concepts by which they are rendered intelligible with as little diminishment or distortion as is possible.

For the person who practices a theistic religion, responses to reality such as those listed by Wittgenstein, are understood in terms of divine effects. And where divine effects are acknowledged, an apophatic conception of God is not a form of disguised atheism, but an acknowledgement that "...from divine effects we do not come to understand what the divine nature is in itself..."³¹⁵ For the nontheist who acknowledges the same responses, they might be understood as inexpressible except in relation to absolute concepts, which are "essentially mysterious" in that they are experienced as deeply significant, although they lack

³¹⁵ Wittgenstein's (*Misunderstood*) *Religious Thought*, page 182

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a relative point. As I have said in Chapter Three, the main difference between the theist and the nontheist lies with the degree of epistemological caution where the conceptualisation of these human responses is concerned. The man in the Bible whose sight was cured by Christ shows this sort of caution when he says, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know; one thing I know is that I was blind, now I see."³¹⁶ Admittedly he concedes, after a few verses of discussion, that the man in question (Christ) must have come from God. However, his initial response is a direct acknowledgement of what really did happen to him, followed by a willingness to reach for concepts by which he could understand it. In a religious context, these of course are religious concepts, as they were in his case. In a non-religious context, they may be the concepts that came closest, within the conceptual range available to the non-religious, to honestly conveying the truth of what has happened. While the man's cure was a physical one, being the restoration of sight, this had moral connotations in his world, since his blindness was seen as a punishment for sin, whether his own or his ancestors. So, whatever we may now think of this construal of illness, for the man himself his restored sight carried with it the idea of being forgiven, which also stood in need of understanding, if it was to have an intelligible place in the meaning of his life.

³¹⁶ *The Holy Bible*, John 9: 25

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In practical terms, the acknowledgement of responses in the range suggested by both Weil and Wittgenstein, and illustrated in the Biblical story of the man whose sight was restored, along with the willingness to do these responses conceptual justice, are, as I understand it, the features that constitute the religious point-of-view, which may be accompanied by varying degrees of religious commitment. Notably, Weil herself was a theist, though not a member of an organised religion, while Wittgenstein's religious commitment seems to stop at acknowledgement and respect. We recall from Chapter Three the Wittgensteinian quotes, "I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious-point-of-view;" and "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that is the sum of my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural."³¹⁷ At the end of "A Lecture on Ethics" he says,

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.³¹⁸

I take it that Wittgenstein's claim, "What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense," refers to scientific or factual knowledge, since at the very least

³¹⁷ *Culture and Value*, page 3

³¹⁸ "A Lecture on Ethics," page 12
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one knows that one has responded at this or that time in such-and-such a way. In fact it is the strength of both his and Weils' positions on religious matters that they both begin with such certainties: I may have misconstrued or failed to adequately articulate or understand my response, but that I *had* a response of a certain kind is undeniable. It is in this sense that the religious response, like the virtues, arises from the way in which we are embedded in the world, which is point (1) of the three points I reiterated from Chapter One in the introduction to this chapter. The capture and development of these kinds of responses through our attempts to adequately conceptualise them, I shall argue in the next two sections, facilitates the shift in orientation that permits us to interact with others as moral equals, whatever their status, which is my claim in point (2), and allows us epistemological access to the sacredness of others, so as to render that term meaningful in a practical, as opposed to a purely theoretical sense (3).

(3) The True and the Good

In this section I return to the two things we may lose at Pascal's gambling table; the true and the good, to look at them in light of the claims made by Weil and Wittgenstein, mentioned earlier. From Weil, there is the idea that even if the good does not exist, the love we may have for it is recognisably real, so that living in accordance with this principle can give no cause for regret, even if "chance or the devil govern all worlds." From Wittgenstein, there are three

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examples taken from experience; that of wonder at the world's existence, of the feeling that one is safe, whatever may threaten, and the feeling of guilt at certain of one's actions, all pointing to a tendency in the human mind to desire to say something "about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good;" a tendency for which he expresses the deepest respect.

Where in the previous chapter I argued that we need unambiguously moral terms, such as the virtue terms, if we are to understand and develop our direct moral responses, so as to form a genuinely moral perspective, here I shall argue that something similar, though not identical, applies to a religious-point-of-view. It is similar in that it involves the capture and proper conceptualisation of a certain kind of direct response, and also in that it involves a value distinction. With virtue, the distinction is between moral and nonmoral value, while in this case the relevant distinction is between relative and absolute value. One might think that these amount to the same thing, but I have chosen to treat them as separate things, because one's morality may or may not be orientated in relation to a religious-point-of-view, or to absolute value in the sense that is associated with a religious-point-of-view. It is dissimilar, however, in that a religious-point-of-view informs an orientation from which the world is seen and understood, whereas the virtue terms primarily attach to character and action rather than orientation. Moreover, talk of a religious-point-of-view is dissimilar to talk of virtue in that much of the terminology pertinent to the former is ambiguous,

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whereas with the latter the terminology is unambiguous. My claim is that the religious point-of-view, through the shift in consciousness or orientation it involves, extends the possibilities of virtue beyond what is applicable to the good team player, or the good contributor to social coordination.

According to Wittgenstein, "...a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions. All these expression *seem*, prima facie, to be just *similes*."³¹⁹ The virtue terms are not exactly similes, although they do not describe the world purely in terms of brute fact. However, as I have noted before, some of our fact-bearing terms are inherently evaluative; words like "lie" and "murder," for example, describe facts but carry with them a built-in evaluation. The virtue terms seem to function in this way as well; as with "lie" or "murder" they are descriptive words that are inherently evaluative. Furthermore, they can be linked to fact through the needs of the human animal, as has been discussed in an earlier chapter. In this sense the virtue terms are unambiguously moral terms, as I have earlier argued: we are very much open to challenge on moral rather than any other grounds if we describe as just an act that a morally sound person would consider unjust.

The religious-point-of-view in comparison is rather harder to pin down, since many of the terms that are pertinent to it *are* ambiguous. If we return to the

³¹⁹ "A Lecture on Ethics," page 9
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word "right," much discussed earlier, we see that Wittgenstein approaches this same word from the opposite side of the absolute/relative divide than Anscombe, which is one of his reasons for saying that ethical expressions seem to be similes. Where Anscombe speaks of "right" as having lost its grounding with the rejection of the authority of divine law, Wittgenstein begins with the way "right" works insofar as facts and propositions are concerned, where only relative value, relative good, right, etc., come into play. There is no sense in talking about a "right road" without reference to an arbitrarily pre-determined end, for example. However, one might in comparison consider what it would mean to talk about "the absolutely right road," which Wittgenstein thinks would be "...a road which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going."³²⁰ So it is with the difference between "right" as in the right way to saddle a horse, and "right" where it is grounded by divine law, or "good" as in a good hat to wear to the derby or a good pianist, and the absolute Good that is often singled out with a capital "G," of which Weil speaks. One can see in the examples put forward by both Weil and Wittgenstein that the direct responses that lead us to contemplate the absolute Good are of a different order than those that pertain to the mundane chains of cause and effect that make up the fabric of everyday life. However, whether terms like "right" and "good" are derivative from religious language in their mundane sense, or metaphorical where they are used in the religious or moral sense, the religious point-of-view is harder to pin

³²⁰ "A Lecture on Ethics," page 7
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down linguistically than virtue because the self-same terms are often used in these two very different senses. Anscombe has shown us what can happen to our ethical thinking when we get these two senses of the same words confused.

If we look at the examples I have given of direct responses that culminate, when adequately conceptualised and taken seriously, in a religious-point-of-view, their difference in kind shows up in that they are not by themselves followed by a *because* or a *so that* in the mundane sense, and they can seem to us degraded if we attempt to conceptualise them in that way. The sense of feeling safe, whatever happens, for example, is an unconditional sense of feeling safe, while in mundane terms I feel safe *because* of something; safe from the measles because I have already had them, safe from bankruptcy because my business continues to go well, and so on. And the desire for goodness is simply a desire that there is goodness; not *so that* there will be good cakes, love affairs, cars and orchestras. It is just the same sort of difference as arises between "right" where it means something like "in accordance with God's will," regardless of the mundane result, and "right" where it means "will bring about or contribute to an intended mundane result."

We grapple with the relation between absolute and mundane ends on both ethical and religious grounds. We say the good will be rewarded in the afterlife, but to be good *so that* one will get the heavenly reward is to be less than truly

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good. Similarly, we say that while the virtuous are more likely to have flourishing lives than the vicious, real virtuousness is for virtue's sake, and not adopted *so that* one will flourish. It is difficult for us to conceptualise things that strike us as important without a "because" or a "so that" attached, since causation plays such an automatic part in our day-to-day operations, even if we also understand that "because" and "so that" do tend to degrade some things, like virtue for instance, not to mention love. "I love you *because* you are a good cook and an early riser, *so that* I can enjoy home-cooked breakfasts in bed," said seriously, would not pass muster as an expression of love. Hence we come up with these strange little verbal dance steps; yes there are rewards for goodness, but we must not allow rewards to become the point of our being good, since goodness that is contingent upon reward is degraded goodness at best and sham at worst. Yes, I am glad that you are not a complete disgrace, but I love you regardless.

However, there really is something like a duality, or at least a dimensional depth, where the sense of absolute value casts its light over mundane events, even though the absolute and the mundane can be difficult to think about simultaneously.³²¹ I have written earlier of St Martin giving his cloak to a beggar. This would not be a meaningful story if it did not have naturalistic elements to it; if humans did not feel cold and/or cloaks did not provide warmth. However, if we think of St Martin as not simply making a grand or gratuitous

³²¹ I have discussed the difficulties involved in trying to reconcile Plato's and Aristotle's ways of conceptualising virtue in Chapter Four.

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gesture, but as feeling the beggar's need with the same urgency as one naturally feels the need to get to an airport on time, to get to the car before the meter runs out, etc, one sees in his action something over and above the ordinary mundane interactions between rational social animals. While the cloak is given *because* the beggar is cold, *so that* he will be warm, there is going with it a pure recognition of the shared humanity between the saint and the beggar that would be degraded by the term "supererogatory." Such a term would suggest that someone of the saint's status did not *have to* show that kind of recognition to a mere beggar, thus introducing a patronising element. The recognition that the saint shows to the beggar shares with wonder at the world's existence, the feeling of being absolutely safe and so on, the absence of a "because" or a "so that," even though they are present in the action of giving him the cloak. In this way it exemplifies Phillips' distinction between attending to another in response to the fact "that they are," as opposed to "how they are" in terms of whether they are "desirable or undesirable, deserving or undeserving,"³²² in which case a "because" would be applied to the person and not just the action. It is the sort of recognition that gets to the core of what Kant means in his insistence that we treat another as an end, and never merely as a means. It also illustrates why religious people will say that all people are children of God. Furthermore, the deference to absolute value which informs the saint's recognition of the beggar raises the action of giving the cloak above slavish self-abnegation, as well as

³²² "From World to God," in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, pages 55 and 56

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patronising high handedness. Slavish self-abnegation arises from selflessness in direct relation to *relative* value, as happens when a brow-beaten wife, say, becomes self-effacingly complicit in her husband's bullying.

One might frame the difference thus: a developed sense of absolute value, arising from the sorts of responses listed earlier, puts one's own natural perspective *into* perspective, not in relation to a bigger and more powerful, but still relative perspective, but to a goodness that is beyond perspective, whether or not there is any absolute in reality. After all, whatever is the case, St Martin of Tours and others like him have really existed, and have really shed light on other people's conceptions of what living a moral life can ask of us. If a moral perspective of the kind that stops short at mundane decency (so a relative perspective) were to hold sway in the above scenario, the saint, who would not in this case have been one, might have given his cloak to the beggar in a mildly condescending spirit, informed by the nonmoral value difference between himself and the beggar; the one a Roman soldier with a place in the world, the other a poor wretch at the mercy of chance. And in such cases as that of the woman who is self-abnegating in relation to a domineering husband, her perspective is not "put into perspective" by the acknowledgement of an absolute value, but is overwhelmed by her husband's relative but overpowering perspective. Hence her own perspective is damaged or destroyed rather than seen for what it is. The saint, who is not a saint in this case either, would have given away his cloak in a

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spirit of slavishness if he had been in the beggar's thrall, and felt psychologically compelled to surrender to the beggar whatever it was that the beggar demanded. An Aristotelian might explain these differences in terms of a mean, with genuine compassion being the one that hits the target, but I am not sure that such an account by itself would capture the purity and attentiveness of the saint's response to the actual man, which lies at the heart of his action.

This brings me back to the "true and the good" which are brought to Pascal's gaming table. The first thing to note is that Pascal cannot be talking about "the true" in terms of brute facts, since neither belief nor disbelief in God, or by Weil's account, in absolute goodness, is going to alter one's knowledge of empirical facts. The second is that the terms "true and good" have the ambiguity that runs through religious and non-religious evaluative terminology. If I opt for the benefits of technique and efficacy in rejection of God or the absolute Good, then the "true" becomes that which proves reliable in the abovementioned capacity, and the "good" becomes the benefits that this reliability brings. However, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of our reason and our will, if we are not careful, efficiency of this kind *can* compromise our development of moral depth by allowing us to deal matter-of-factly with many of our problems rather than dig deeper for the resources to meet them. And if we consider this point alongside the above thought experiment in which both mundane decency and slavish self-abnegation may fall short of what is needed for pure, non-condescending

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compassion, we see that there are ways of knowing associated with a religious-point-of-view to which it is possible to be blind, especially where we limit our moral responsiveness to that which seems, *prima facie*, to be pertinent to the needs of the rational social animal.

Simone Weil has said, "Except for those whose soul is inhabited by Christ, everybody despises the afflicted to some extent, although practically no one is conscious of it."³²³ Gaita, in response to this and other similar claims says that we do not believe that the afflicted should be despised or even condescended to, even if we often cannot help doing it, and asks, "...why is there such a terrible discrepancy between what we believe and how we act? If we believe that those in apparently ineradicable affliction are of infinite worth...why do we act as if we do not believe it?"³²⁴ What Gaita seems to have in mind here is something like the mildly condescending version of the cloak story, rather than the behaviour of the teenaged larrikin who might openly ridicule or even throw stones at a homeless person. We "act as if we did not believe" it, not by resorting to the latter kind of behaviour, but by failing to let go of our own sense of superiority, even in our compassion, or as Phillips would put it, failing to give such purity of attention as would bring about the renunciation of our comparative power.³²⁵ An immediate objection will arise in some minds at this point, "But why renounce

³²³ *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, page 173, as quoted in *Good and Evil*, pages 193-194

³²⁴ *Good and Evil*, page 194

³²⁵ See above, page 280, fn 322

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my power in relation to the afflicted when I can use it to be of help to them?" My answer is, my use of my power is on the level of St Martin's giving of the cloak, whereas my receptiveness to the person depends upon its renunciation. The beggar is an end in himself, with no "because" or "so that" attaching to his worth. This is where the renunciation of power comes in. However, the saint does have and use the power to give the cloak "because" the beggar is cold, "so that" he will be warm. This is where relative power comes in. The result of the two together is dimensional depth; the manner in which the relative act is performed is evidence of the deeper unconditional recognition of the man.

Iris Murdoch would reply to Gaita's question by pointing to our natural selfishness, which provides part of an answer but not the whole answer. "Our minds are continually active," she says, "fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world."³²⁶ There is certainly truth in this selfishness thesis. I can neither think another's thoughts nor feel another's pain, and what is more, I encounter the world from an enclosed perspective, or from behind its veil, and believe what I encounter. A friend recently sent me a cartoon of a rhinoceros standing on his hind legs and painting a landscape. The shadow of his horn formed the centrepiece of the landscape, and for a rhinoceros with hind-leg-standing and landscape-painting capacities this shadow-split picture would really represent the landscape, being

³²⁶ *The Sovereignty of the Good*, page 84

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the only view of it he knew. My natural self-centredness, one might say, presents me with my own variation on a similarly incorrect picture, in which the world is partially concealed from me. One can play a game with older children around the idea "If you had a further sense, what would it be?" It is impossible to come up with something that is not a variation on the senses we already have, since we have no idea as to what the object of this extra sense could possibly be. X-ray vision, for example, would be an extension on already existing vision, not a further sense. If one were to invent a completely new sense, one would also have to invent an object for it, using an imagination informed by the senses we already have. If there is any reality beyond the scope of our five senses and reasoning capacity, we can have no idea what it might be. Someone might suggest intimations of God at this point, but even these are drawn into the equipment that we have in order to be spoken of: Christ's transfiguration was *seen*, and God's voice *heard*. What is confounded by those experiences that give rise to a religious-point-of-view is the habit of causal expectation, not the senses. As with the landscape painting rhinoceros, my knowledge of the world is determined by my access to it, and my access to it is determined by a discrete and limited self.

My natural self-centredness however is modified by the fact that I am a social animal, trained during a long childhood to take my place as such. It is here I think that we find a fuller answer than Murdoch's, because the life of a social

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animal is largely based upon broadly accepted power and status relations. For the human, and hence rational, social animal, we get something more like a compound of moral responsiveness and power/status relations, so interwoven that it can be difficult to separate them.³²⁷ Weil can be rather hard on social relations, and frequently invokes Plato's term "the social animal" or the "collective animal" to describe them.³²⁸ Her problem seems to lie with the way in which we readily confuse the mundane and sometimes bogus authority of power with genuine moral authority, within a social context. In fact her admiration for the words that Thucydides puts into the mouths of the Athenians in their confrontation with the inhabitants of Melos stems from the fact that they do not make this mistake: "Regarding the Gods we have the belief, regarding men the certainty that by a necessity of nature each one always commands wherever he has the power to do so."³²⁹ The Athenians do not go so far as to claim that their superior power gives them a moral right over the Melians, but merely the brute capacity to overwhelm them. Even Weil, however, does not reject outright the value of mundane institutions and related moral practices, counting them as necessary though not sufficient for genuine justice.³³⁰ She also allows that in our undertakings, we do not stop to ensure that everyone who has contributed to

³²⁷ Some other social animals probably also have certain equivalents of what I am calling moral, where they tend to another animal that is hurt for instance, or tend to the offspring of those who have died. Such actions, however, do not rule out the power relations that tend to govern the ordering of things with social animals. A wild dog may call attention to his wounded friend, but will still be automatically answerable to a top dog.

³²⁸ "Human Personality," pages 18-19 – This represents but one of many such examples.

³²⁹ Thucydides, V 105, as quoted in "Are We Struggling for Justice," page 1

³³⁰ "Are We Struggling for Justice," page 8

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their success has been acting with full consent, since "If it were otherwise, things would not get done, and if things did not get done, we would perish."³³¹ This concession, however, is not spared the judgement that most of our actions are "tainted with sacrilege."

The power relations that accompany our moral practices are largely invisible to us, wherever we stand within them, so long as social coordination continues to work and things run smoothly. What is more, they do play a part in a genuine morality; one might think of parent/child relationships, teacher/student relationships and so on, where the obligations of each party are altered according to differences in power and status. Furthermore, status is often associated with real authority within important fields. It is all too easy for us, however, to carry these sorts of largely unconscious evaluations, which are familiar and immediate, over into our attitude to people *qua* human beings.

To explain this further I return to an earlier thought experiment, put forward in a previous chapter to illustrate the importance of Kant's dictum that we always treat others as an end and never merely as a means. I imagined hurrying to an appointment with my bank manager, and promising a beggar on the corner that I would return to him with change after my appointment. The idea was that I felt compelled by my appointment with the bank manager, but voluntarily charitable

³³¹ Ibid, page 2

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in my returning to the beggar, despite my promise to him. The "must" that drives this thinking is not a moral must but an instrumental one. If I really saw the beggar in terms of his unconditional value, I would be drawn back to him by a moral must rather than a charitable whim. The fact that the above responses may feel perfectly moral to me shows up the "taint" of which Weil speaks, and the "terrible discrepancy between what we believe and how we act" to which Gaita draws attention. In response to these sorts of situations, Weil has suggested that we make no distinction between justice and charity, since where they are separated we readily reduce justice to social constraint and charity to whim,³³² a result of confusing almost invisible power relations with unalloyed moral responses. It is within this admixture of moral sensibility and smooth social co-ordination that we can lose sight of the sacredness, or unconditional value, of those human beings who lack standing within our social milieu. One might say that while our status as social animals modifies our selfishness through our training and interactions with others, it still readily presents us with a measure that is relative, awash with "because" and "so that," that is larger than our own personal perspective but not absolute. In comparison, the recognition of an absolute goodness allows me to see my own perspective for what it is, so that the mundane differences between myself and another are less likely to colour my moral response to them. The reduced influence of mundane differences in turn facilitates the shift in orientation that permits me to interact with others as moral

³³² Ibid, page 5

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equals, whatever their status, and allows me epistemological access to the reality of others. These capacities are what I may lose at Pascal's gaming table should I choose the relative true and good over their absolute versions.

The question for the next section is how these considerations may be brought to bear on my reading of the world.

(4) Virtue and Reading from a Religious-point-of-view.

Earlier I distinguished between Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and a religious-point-of-view in this way: with Virtue Ethics, the distinction is between moral and nonmoral value, while with the religious-point-of-view, the relevant distinction is between relative and absolute value. An attentive reader will also have noticed that I placed virtue for virtue's sake among those things that we think transcend the "because" and "so that" chains of causation that distinguish relative from absolute value. What is tricky about this is that we do see genuine virtue as transcending the mundane chains of causation, while at the same time one of the strengths of modern Virtue Ethics is its link to nature, which is the home of all things relative. However, as I have tried to show in the last two sections, a religious-point-of-view also has a link to nature through certain kinds of human responses that both move us and strike us as significant, while apparently having no clear natural purpose. We reach for absolute terms to speak of them, since

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mundane terms are not able to meet the challenge they present to language. Now it is possible that Philippa Foot's "sea change"³³³ is able to go some way toward accommodating those responses that can only be understood in terms of absolute value within the conceptual range of natural virtue. This, however, raises a question that I shall not address here; what I am interested in here are the ways in which we can allow the sense of absolute value to play a significant part in our reading of the world, and hence our attitudes to other people, including the most naturally disfavoured people. I have made a distinction between natural virtue and the religious-point-of-view, because the former, without further elaboration, does not automatically imply the latter. However, as I have noted elsewhere, in previous chapters and also in relation to the famous story of St Martin of Tours, a moral response to another involves something of both levels of value if it is to have depth and dimension: my recognition of my fellow human being is in relation to an absolute value, in terms of which his value is unconditional, while my action toward him is in response to his need, which is in many, but not all instances, relative. In sitting quietly with the despairing and the dying, and even in certain cases of showing love, there may be no relative thing that I could do that would meet those situations; the proper sort of recognition may be all that is required and all that can be offered. That said, the naturalistic dimension of virtue may also provide a counter to

³³³ *Natural Goodness*, page 52 - It is part of the sea change that came at the point of transition from plants and animals on one side to human beings on the other that we can look critically at our own conduct and the rules of behaviour we were taught.

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one's potentially fetishising the absolute, or retreating into a distorted version of it out of fearfulness in the face of mundane life. I have known a five-year-old to insist on giving \$20; the largest amount of money she had ever owned, to a man begging outside a supermarket. Her justification was simple; "I have a bed to sleep in and food to eat. He doesn't." Her mother wisely said, "I decided I should let her do it, but to watch and make sure that she doesn't start making too much of a fetish out of unselfishness." I say that the mother spoke wisely because while recognition of the unconditional value of others is important, this does not erase all other fields of importance. Furthermore, one does not want to take an obsession with absolutes to the point of peering earnestly into the faces of people who just want to get on with their lives; the busy librarian for instance, when one is returning one's books. Moral depth requires something of both unconditional and relative conceptions of value. A. E. Taylor spoke of a tension between the two, and there is a sense in which one side of the equation provides a check on the potential excesses or deficiencies that may arise from the other.

The difficulty however, lies in getting the sense of unconditional value into the meanings that we read. When we do not live in a world that regularly reinforces it, we tend to underrate its importance (like my promise to the beggar), and we are much of the time claimed by readings of instrumental value, which are nonetheless important to how things go for us. Not to mention the fact that we are hostage to ambiguous terminology in even talking about unconditional value.

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"Good, right, law, wonder, love" and numerous other terms are equivocal, and can attach to both relative and absolute conceptions.

I shall tackle this problem, of getting a sense of unconditional value into the meanings that we read, from two different angles. The first and perhaps the most important point pertains to how we link the responses listed by Weil and Wittgenstein to the idea that all human beings are of unconditional value, sacred or infinitely precious. "What," one may ask, "has wonder at the existence of the world, for example, or a longing for goodness, to do with the unconditional value of human beings?" Assuming I can offer a satisfactory answer to this question, the second point pertains to the continuity that I claim exists between the range of responses that underpin theistic belief and the same range of responses conceptualised in ways that do not depend upon theistic belief. The question here is double headed; how are the fruits of these responses able to retain a hold on us where they lack the support of something like religious practice, and how, where religious practice is present, do we avoid retreating into religiously informed metaphysical comfort zones, so that the concepts we have at our disposal end up having little connection with our real lives?

With the first of these problems; that of linking the kinds of response that have no "because" or "so that" attached with the idea that each and every human being is of unconditional value, two of Gaita's examples are pertinent. One is

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remorse, which sadly leaves us wise after the event rather than in advance, but which can nonetheless powerfully bring home to us the reality, and so the unconditional value of those we have harmed. Another is our seeing a person in the light of someone else's love, whether love of the kind shown by the nun, whereby the unconditional value of severely damaged patients was made apparent, or of the kind shown by a mother, father, devoted friend or spouse, whose love for the person in question is unconditional if not unconditioned. It may be an aspect of our "social animal" status that our seeing someone else as loved, while it does not make us love them, does tend to make us take them seriously. What is exceptional about the nun example is her revelation of unconditional value in people who would seem to manifest little in the way of relative or social value in our eyes. A mother's love for her child reveals the child as relationally connected, but this will only come as a surprise in exceptional circumstances, such as the child's being the author of such despicable acts as to challenge the idea that they could be loved. In comparison, the love shown to the inmates by the nun reveals people as relationally connected in a way that challenges our cosy worlds of relative value, since it would be difficult for the inmates to be relationally connected in a relative way. And as I have said above, (pages 214-215), one can also wake up to the unconditional value of another by encountering their life on their terms rather than one's own, as happened in the thought experiment in which I was given shelter by someone whom I had previously thought of as my inferior to the point of planning to oust him from his

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home. I there also suggested that the point can be brought home by an insightful friend who is willing to challenge my self-deceptions to the extent of piercing my wilful blindness.

I place insights such as these within the context of responses such as wondering at the existence of the world, feeling perfectly safe, etc, because in common with those responses, a fellow human being is, under such circumstances, seen as valuable independently of any instrumental value they may possess. That is why, within the religious context, they are understood as children of God, and why Gaita, observing people in this way, has reached for a term like "infinitely precious" to describe them; a term which for him has its meaning in relation to absolute conceptions. Notably, there is a comparable difference between someone being understood as a "child of God" or "infinitely precious" and someone being understood as "God" or as "of absolute value." The value of the human being within this frame of reference is unconditional, and things which are unconditional can be adequately understood only in terms of absolute conceptions, whether we speak here in terms of God or of absolute conceptions of value. What gives human beings their unconditional value is their *standing* in relationship to absolute value, whether or not this is understood in religious terms, which we apprehend under conditions of the kind listed above.

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For such insights to permeate our reading of the world, they need to be captured, conceptualised and nurtured, which leads into the second problem that I have listed. Just as my earlier appointment with a bank manager registered to me as a "must" while my promise to a beggar registered to me as more-or-less conditional, my responses to immediate concerns which seem compelling can squeeze out my responses to unconditional value. Weil says, "The brightness of the stars, the sound of the sea-waves, the silence of the hour before dawn – how often do they not offer themselves in vain to man's attention?"³³⁴ This applies to the powerless as well. Because we are so caught up in relative value, intimations of unconditional value are easily lost to us or robbed of their potency, whether or not we are religious. Moments such as those of which Wittgenstein has spoken, which shift our focus away from relative value at the times of their occurrence, can readily be forgotten, or reduced to pleasant reveries to discuss over dinner, so long as we stick with wonder at the world's existence and the sense of feeling safe whatever happens, and put the more demanding guilt or remorse to one side. Where some variation on the conditions that Kolakowski spoke of in terms of contempt or indifference to everything that is not of mundane benefit prevails, the responses that speak to us of unconditional value can be hard to capture, hard to hold onto should we capture them, and hardest of all to allow a serious place in the ways in which our lives are oriented. Religion too, under such circumstances, is readily transformed into salt that has lost its

³³⁴ *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, page 198

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saltiness. As I have argued earlier in this chapter, when divine effects do not register as such, an apophatic conception of God is not far removed from no God at all. And as I argued in Chapter Two, the metaphysician's God lacks the real life connection by which to provide an adequate replacement for an unknown God whose effects are open to limited apprehension while remaining essentially mysterious. In fact a nontheistic religious-point-of-view that has life in it may go further toward keeping the sense of the sacred, and the unconditional value of every human being, within our form of life than a theism that passes muster theologically and theoretically, but is not alive for us in the relevant sense.

One of Christopher Hamilton's criticisms of Gaita's work is that it lacks "an understanding of modern scepticism." He says

By this I mean it has no real understanding of the way in which the modern consciousness, when it looks out into the world, often sees, not a world that is ordered and intelligible, but a heap of broken rubble, of old certainties decayed or destroyed, of broken lights and faded dreams, where morality is fractured, spirituality hijacked by shallowness and emotion desiccated and feeding on itself. The odd moments of recognition in Gaita's work exist, as it were, in order to show that we do not need to worry about the decay of old certainties, for their demise leaves things pretty much as they were.³³⁵

³³⁵ "Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness," page 194

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I am not sure what sort of morality Hamilton thinks might have a beneficent influence on this rather bleak picture, which one could take to be a picture in which the pursuit of efficacy and predictive power has triumphed, proving less efficacious than hoped due to the price extracted from the human spirit.

Presumably, Hamilton thinks that there is therefore no point of contact between such a world and ideas such as those espoused by Gaita. I do not accept this, and even if I thought it were true I would not want to resign myself to it, preferring instead to continue to beat my head against the walls of language. To begin with, such a world becomes a positively dangerous one where its morality depends upon orderly systems whose moral content can incrementally disappear, while its notions of virtue are limited to those that are consistent with smooth coordination; or results that seem beneficial under the described circumstances.

However, as I have said more than once over the course of this thesis, we build our concepts and then our concepts build us. This thought has a relationship with Weil's idea of contagion, mentioned in Chapter One, (page 44), as well as Giata's talk of leaving open conceptual space for such concepts as love, purity and goodness, understood in absolute terms. To say that we build our concepts and then our concepts build us is to say that we understand or read the world in relation to what we acknowledge within it, and what we acknowledge is shown in the concepts that we take seriously and the language by which we express them. To allow space for conceptions of absolute value is to allow such conceptions,

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... tied as they are to a certain kind of direct human response, to influence the way in which we read the world and our fellow human beings. It is the strong tie these conceptualisations have to direct human responses that give them their reality, and thus allow, to whatever degree people are receptive at any given time and place, something of the contagion of justice that Weil thinks possible. One might consider in this light Charles Dickens in the nineteenth century, giving renewed vigour to the Christian precepts concerning love of neighbour to people who were also living in a world where old certainties were breaking down. No, Dickens did not bring about a sweeping change in Victorian London, but he did offer a view of things that was able to speak meaningfully to at least some of its people, and thus allow at least some degree of positive contagion. To give a value conceptual space is to allow it into the conversation. Its possibilities for contagion are dependent upon the receptivity of the other participants in that conversation, or the form of life in which that conversation is taking place. Receptivity is not going to be universal, whoever the audience is. However, what we are interested in here is a live morality, rather than a policy that will bring about order or beneficent results, whose limitations I have previously discussed. To suppose that people living in the world described by Hamilton are so immune to the relevant responses that only a negligible few might catch the conceptual ball of absolute value when it is tossed their way, is to be unduly pessimistic, and I say that as a pessimist myself. Even in Nazi Germany, as Bauman has pointed out, the few whose moral responsiveness pressed them to resist evil "shattered

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the authority of the logic of self-preservation." Hence I see no reason why conceptions of absolute value, understood in connection with direct responses that occur in real life, cannot at least infiltrate modern scepticism.

(5) Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to show the common ground between religious practice and an apophatic conception of God, and those responses that lead us to consider things in terms of absolute goodness and their conceptualisation. I have then gone on to show how such concerns play out when they are brought to bear on our moral lives, with particular attention in the last section as to how they may be brought to bear on the immediacy of our reading of the external world. Overall I have sought to flesh out claims that I made in my first chapter in favour of the concept of reading being applied to our moral lives: (1) it arises from the way in which we are embedded in the world, carrying with it the immediacy of many of our real-life ethical responses, where the time and space for reflection are minimal; hence it is practical on a fundamental level. (2) Because of this, the agent is placed as a mutual participant in relation to the objects of her moral concern, as opposed to assuming the role of an expert evaluator of actions or a moral exemplar. (3) If we are going to claim that human beings are sacred, or infinitely precious, or are possessors of intrinsic

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worth, then it ought to be possible to have this notion permeate our ways of operating in the world.

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The Ethical Implications of Simone Weil's Notion of Reading: Conclusion

I have largely said what I want to say, so my conclusion will be brief. I entered into this subject, our inclusion of the broken and the outcast among us, through the notion of reading because it seems to me that our ideas of the unconditional value of each and every human being are next to worthless if they cannot penetrate our ways of operating in the world, and our reading of the world is key to the character of our operations within it. I am not seeking to offer an alternative morality at the level of theory, though I have pointed to the limitations of some theories in their ability to transform our moral lives. Rather I am interested in ways in which the unconditional value of others may penetrate the practical and theoretical structures in which we operate, privileging Virtue Ethics in this regard, in both Aristotelian and Platonist versions, because of its strong links with natural language and so everyday morality. There are two features of my account that are of great importance to it. One is the distinction I emphasise between unconditional and relative value, since this has allowed me to track the difference between those responses we have that can be understood in mundane terms, and those responses that require absolute conceptions of value if we are to do them justice. The other important feature is the link between real human responses and their conceptualisation. This is because if we are to take the unconditional value of others seriously, it must be a live issue for us, and live issues evoke real and direct responses in us. And for our direct

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responses to penetrate our understanding and transform the ways in which we read the world, they need to be done justice in their conceptualisation.

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