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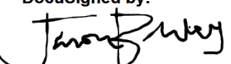
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Fundamental Disagreement and Ethical Self-Consciousness

By

Owen Alldritt

Master of Arts, The New School for Social Research, 2014

Advisor: John Lysaker, Doctor of Philosophy

An abstract of a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate
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Abstract

Fundamental Disagreement and Ethical Self-Consciousness

By Owen Alldritt

In this dissertation I provide a novel articulation of a mode of inter-traditional ethical response based in fundamental ethical disagreement. I do so by critically reflecting on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Stanley Cavell in order to interrelate their respective positions on ethical self-consciousness. I argue that each thinker attempts to describe a limit to ethical self-consciousness by grounding it in the ethical institutions of everyday life. Each of these thinkers encounters difficulties in articulating this limit that can only be resolved by considering the interrelation of these accounts. My argument begins with a description of Moral Relativist positions as responses to the possibility of fundamental disagreement. Finding these positions to be lacking an adequate description of the experience of fundamental disagreement, I then consider Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the interrelationship of ethical self-consciousness, fundamental disagreement, and tradition. I then consider Bernard Williams's response to Alasdair MacIntyre and to modern moral rationalism. I argue that both MacIntyre and Williams fail to understand the limits of the ethical responses they describe, and, therefore, retain parochial descriptions of ethical self-consciousness. I argue that a more fully descriptive account of ethical self-consciousness interrelates the modes of ethical response articulated above by describing them in terms of the particular ethical response proper to fundamental disagreement. I then turn to Stanley Cavell's account of exemplarity in order to flesh out this ethical response and the ethical self-consciousness that it requires. I conclude by considering some implications of the account of ethical self-consciousness I have provided.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Writing about ethical conflict can often seem like a singularly fruitless endeavor. The oldest and most revered philosophy in the canon deals with conflicts in ethics that are still in dispute today. Contributing to such a long-running debate can make one feel as though they are in Lewis Carroll's caucus race; participating in a contest with unclear rules, arbitrary beginnings and endings, and little to no upshot. It is preferable, of course, to think of oneself as standing on the shoulders of giants. The dispute may be long-running, but as the world has changed from that of Ancient Greece so have (some of) the questions that the disputants take to be central to ethics. It is with the conviction that this change marks a form of progress that I have written this dissertation.

It is with this progressive attitude in mind that I have chosen to contextualize my intervention within the intersection of the work of three major figures in the last forty years of English language writing about ethics: Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Stanley Cavell. These figures all share a conviction in common: the mainstream arguments about morality in academic philosophy are missing something important. While they each disagree about what precisely that important missing element is, they all agree that proceeding without it robs the philosophical conversation of its vitality and relevance. Beyond its being dry and irrelevant, each of these authors also agrees that much of mainstream moral philosophy lacks the appropriate form of *self-consciousness* about its own endeavor. By self-consciousness I mean two things: first, our capacity in common for a reflective activity of self-regard. Second, I mean the perspective enabled by this capacity, insofar as this counts as a stable point-of-view that

enables a number of different transformations of our ordinary perspective, such as acquiring new ends of our activity. By ethical self-consciousness, I mean self-consciousness about the Good and/or goods, those ends which we see as desirable insofar as they are rightfully desirable "in-themselves", in virtue of what they are, or insofar as they are instrumental to some other rightfully desirable end of our activity.

My first chapter focuses on Moral Relativism as one popular candidate for self-consciousness about our ethical activity. I provisionally define moral relativism as the view that what is rightfully desirable for some agent is dependent upon core facts of the matter about that agent's identity. It qualifies as a candidate for ethical self-consciousness insofar as it is the thesis (at least implicitly) that ethical self-consciousness is a capacity for self-contextualization. Put this broadly, I hope that the appeal of Moral Relativism is obvious; it appeals to our common idea that who you are matters when we are considering ethics. I explain a number of iterations of moral relativism primarily in order to understand the problems of fundamental disagreement that make it seem like such an attractive candidate for ethical self-consciousness. Fundamental ethical disagreement (or just "fundamental disagreement" as I will refer to it by in this dissertation) is disagreement about core values, the "fundamentals" of ethical life[1].

I then argue that, despite this initial appeal, this understanding of our capacity which seems to enable moral relativism gives short shrift to our ordinary ethical experience. While moral relativism as a thesis undoubtedly captures some aspect of our capacity for ethical self-

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[1] This leaves open, of course, the possibility that fundamental disagreement does not exist, insofar as it rests on This possibility will need to account for the appearance of fundamental disagreement in a manner that will be explored below, particularly in Chapter 3.

consciousness, it seems to leave the intimacy and seriousness of fundamental disagreement to one side. When we are having a fundamental disagreement it may seem as though we are having a dispute about the truth of some ethical claim, and some versions of moral relativism make it seem as though these claims should instead be recontextualized in a manner that reduces them to other ones about our community or circumstances, claims which, at the limit, could suggest that ethical self-consciousness leads to the total undermining of our ethical experience. I highlight especially Richard Rorty's argument that ethical self-consciousness, properly conceptualized, allows us to both recognize the confusion that he thinks animates our attempt to recognize a fundamental disagreement and, most importantly, recognize the at-best marginal significance of ethical self-consciousness for our ordinary ethical disagreements[2].

I explain that I agree with those who think that positions like Rorty's leave something important behind in their account of ethical self-consciousness. Nevertheless, the relativist account of our capacity for self-regard is so strong that it requires me to develop a sophisticated response. I will need to provide an account of ethical self-consciousness that can accommodate the relativist's insights about the limits of our ethical lives while simultaneously refusing to abandon the practical and theoretical significance of fundamental disagreement. It is my view

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[2] I recognize that it may seem contentious to claim that Rorty thinks that ethical self-consciousness is "at best marginal" for our ordinary ethical disagreements. After all, Rorty (at times) appears to think that proper self-regard of our capacities enables a radically liberal form of life predicated on self-consciousness of our fallibility. Nevertheless, Rorty makes it clear that this perspective is not necessitated by our capacity for self-consciousness nor, on his view, will this radical liberal consciousness show up in our ordinary ethical disagreements except as an *absence* of a particular commitment to e.g. epistemological authority. While Rorty argues for the desirability of the self-conscious suite of attitudes, he thinks of his intervention as a refinement of a particular kind of already-existing liberal self-regard rather than a normative "activist" intervention into our debate about values. See especially his discussions of "ironism" in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity.*

that this reconsideration of our self-understanding is so significant that it will require extensive clarification of our identity, agency, and capacities. It is with this clarifying aim that I turn to the three figures whose positions on ethical self-consciousness provide the background for this dissertation.

The first author I deal with, Alasdair MacIntyre, develops a theory of contemporary philosophical self-consciousness about the conflicts of contemporary ethics that takes it to be blind to its origins in traditional social practice and the conflicts therein. I spend much of my chapter on MacIntyre explaining and advocating for his account of the interrelationship between language, practical reason, politics, and history. At the end of that chapter, I argue that the tightly knit complex of arguments that he produces over the course of his development calls for an approach to ethical conflict that reaches beyond them. In his more recent writings, I explain, he seems to recognize that his earlier arguments require more from his magisterial account than he originally thought. Though there are several weak points in his massive tapestry, I choose to focus on the short shrift he gives to the "non-substitutability" of persons, the particular and often idiosyncratic self-consciousness that they bring to bear in the social roles that provide them with their identity.

Explaining what this self-consciousness consists of brings me to my engagement with Bernard Williams. Starting with Williams's famous argument against external reasons, I reconstruct the skeptical view of history and the place of the individual in it that he takes to be the fully developed fruit of modernity. Rather than argue that cultural politics since the Enlightenment enables us to put morality on a rational or scientific footing, Williams maintains that the legacy of the modern revolutions is primarily subtractive. Following on the heels of his

hero, Nietzsche, Williams argues that contemporary attempts to retain traditions of ethical authority must be met with withering skepticism. What remains after this scrutiny, Williams thinks, is (and should be) an approach to evaluative questions that emphasizes Authenticity, Sincerity, and Honesty. This, he thinks, is what is left after our collective embrace of a mature, Thucydidean realism about values.

I explain that both MacIntyre and Williams endeavor to explain the conflicts that often drive us to consider moral relativism and attempt to provide a plausible alternative to it that accommodates the reality of those conflicts. MacIntyre, for his part, emphasizes that universal claims to morality extend only as far as the institutions that undergird them do. This is, he repeatedly tells us, not very far, and much ethical wrong is done in the name of a universalism that overextends beyond the traditions that provide its basis. Williams also accepts the seeming givenness of the contours of cultural (and thus ethical) differences. However, rather than imagine that these differences are given in firm outline, Williams argues that the distance between our life and the life of a person from another background is best thought of as a spectrum. What distinguishes our life from theirs is what we can in good faith take to be livable. This good faith is central to Williams's account of modern self-consciousness.

I agree with MacIntyre that getting clear about practical reason, its enabling institutions, and its relationship to our ethical life in common helps to clarify ethical conflicts and I agree with Williams that we should understand the difference between forms of life on a spectrum informed by a cluster of values oriented to the truth. These are, I explain, two aspects of interrelated processes of serious engagement with ethical conflict. What I mean by "serious" engagement with an ethical conflict is an engagement in which the interlocutors risk

transformation. While both Williams and MacIntyre deal with this possibility of transformation, at times in-depth, I argue that in order to understand the contours of this serious engagement we need to turn to the work of Stanley Cavell.

Cavell introduces a number of images that deal with this sort of transformation across a variety of contexts. In this dissertation, I connect his usage of the images across a number of texts, starting with his introduction of "remarriage" in *Pursuits of Happiness.* For Cavell, the concept of remarriage is the core of the genre of "remarriage comedy" films of the 1930s. These comedies are significant because of the historical context that produces them, namely, the recent victory for women's suffrage in the United States. The films, Cavell argues, are attempts to express resolutions to the new ethical conflict created by the new equality between persons that this victory represents.

Crucially, this new conversation between the sexes is not their first. Rather, what makes the remarriage comedy unique is that it deals with a couple that is already mature and has a pre-established relationship that has come to ruin. Reaching the limits of this relationship has drawn the core couple apart, and they can only come back together because the events of the film enable their *transformation*, both individually and as part of their relationship. In his engagement with the work of John Rawls in his *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell calls the relevant kind of transformation a *compromise*, though this is not, he assures us, the compromise of arriving at a mean by averages. It is a compromise that both *preserves* the character of the parties to it while transforming that character, rather than homogenizing ethical responsibility or reverting to previous norms of the relationship. Cavell attempts to capture both the conservative and developmental aspects of this transformation using the image of "reposturing," changing the

relationship of the elements that comprise oneself while preserving those elements.

Each of the figures I consider here has a massive corpus that extends across a truly startling number of areas of philosophy. Writing on any of their individual bodies of work could and has provided the material for dozens of dissertations across a number of areas of philosophy. In my argument I will be limited to rough sketches of these thinkers that I can put to work for the purposes of investigating fundamental disagreement. That means that here and there I have had to play down or put to one side the development of their thinking over time to ensure that this did not simply read as a series of interconnected philosophical biographies. As each figure here not only represents themselves, but also what I take to be the best of a broader strain of philosophical inquiry, the niceties of their famously delicate and careful arguments have at times had to be condensed to narrower points. It is my hope that even after this process of condensation each has retained enough of the characteristics that make them distinctive such that specialists will see these sketches as loving homages rather than rude caricatures.

I am not alone in thinking that these figures share important intellectual context and an overlapping agenda. In Katrina Forrester's much-lauded *In the Shadow of Justice*, she picks out each of these figures as important parts of the legacy of responses to John Rawls's work. In that book, each writer I include here appears as a dissenting voice attesting to the parochial character of Rawlsian liberalism[3]. I deal with Rawls only tangentially in this dissertation (with the

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[3] Forrester's focus is on the codependent relationship between Rawlsian "midcentury administrative politics" (Forrester 2019, 241) and the alternatives presented by writers like Cavell, MacIntyre, and Williams. She writes: "With liberal egalitarians turning inward, by debating equality in technical terms, their critics looked backwards, to postwar concerns. They remained within the philosophical world built from postwar liberalism, even as that world changed as they wrote" (Forrester 2019, 241-242). While I agree that Williams, MacIntyre, and Cavell each write (in part) in response to the formalistic challenge of Rawlsian constructivism, I will also argue that their critiques of

exception of a slightly expanded treatment written out of necessity, in my chapter on Cavell),

and I deal with his direct students sparingly. Much ink has been spilled on the particular

relationship of each of these thinkers to Rawlsian constructivism, including the substantial

quantity spilled by these thinkers themselves[4]. It is my aim here to make an alternative positive

vision of ethical conflict visible, not, primarily, to critique extant mainstream positions. My

future work on these issues will include critical work on the limits of the Rawlsian position that I

only gesture at in these chapters.

There is an alternative version of this dissertation that deals at length with each of these

thinkers' complicated reception of Kant and his legacy, including the persistence of his thinking

in Rawls's work. Though I wanted, at times, to take this longer route through German

philosophy, I decided that it would take me too far astray. While Rawls as a distant son of this

tradition looms large over this dissertation, his shadow casts slight shade compared to the one

cast by the heir apparent to this legacy: Jürgen Habermas. His position, like mine, begins with

practice-oriented treatment of our ethical and moral concepts. He shares with my position a

conviction that ethical conflict is at the core of modern ethical self-consciousness. He, like me,

also argues that the transformation of modern moral thinking is best thought of as a recognition

of the fundamental unity of two interdependent registers of practical evaluation. And, finally,

Habermas and I share a focus on the institutions that mediate ethical conflict and pay special

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mainstream moral rationalism provide resources to open out onto the traditions of political thinking that Forrester thinks are occluded by the philosophical hegemony of Rawlsianism.

[4]My longest treatment of Rawlsianism in this work comes in my explanation of Cavellian compromise, in which Cavell explicitly puts himself in dialogue with Rawls. While the terms of engagement in this dialogue can at times seems obscure, I argue that Cavell is primarily concerned with something significant missing from the Rawlsian consideration of justice, even as he remains self-avowedly sympathetic.

attention to the relationship between philosophy and this institutional capacity[5].

Nonetheless, I argue that he and I have significant differences. I agree with the tradition of critical theorists, both inside and outside of the Habermasian legacy, which criticizes the Habermasian position for attempting to install quasi-transcendental normative guardrails on ethical thinking. I first turn here to Rahel Jaeggi's recent *Critique of Forms of Life*, a book with innumerable important similarities to this dissertation, which begins with a criticism of Habermas's philosophical quietism when it comes to the norms of ethical life[6]. That book, which also deals with MacIntyre at length (and the other figures of this dissertation more quickly), is an attempt to undermine these philosophical guardrails through a synthetic treatment of MacIntyre, Dewey, and Hegel. It stands alongside work by Rainer Forst, Axel Honneth, and Raymond Geuss in attempting a sympathetic left-Hegelian critique of the limits of normative philosophical inquiry on the Habermasian view[7]. While I do not count the view advanced here as directly part

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[5] See especially Habermas's extended treatment of his social ontology of lifeworld and system in his *The Theory of Communicative Action,* 2 vols. While Habermas's position has evolved over time, his mature position is motivated by the attempt to properly contextualize modern institutional norms within a broader lifeworld context that enables them.

[6] Jaeggi's notion of "experimental pluralism of forms of life" very much resembles the position that I arrive at here. A treatment of my issues with her account would require extended engagement that I cannot attempt here. For the purposes of this work, I would argue that Jaeggi's commitment to the "openness" of ethical life remains too abstract. Contrasting Hegel with Dewey, she mobilizes the latter's work to undermine what she sees as the "internal" character of Hegelian dialectical development. While I address a similar-seeming "closedness" of MacIntyre's traditionalism, I do so primarily not by attesting to the necessity of some possibility space unaccounted for in MacIntyre's epistemology, but rather by appealing to the determinate conditions of expression demanded by fundamental conflict. This pulls me away from the focus on the fraught metaphor of "experiment" in both Dewey and in Jaeggi.

[7] My position has particular proximity to Rainer Forst's in his *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism.* In that book, Forst makes the case that the clarification of conceptual-normative levels can clarify particular problems because it allows one to "ascertain which normative context is addressed in a particular question, and which conception of person and community is understood in a specific way by the opposing positions" (Forst 4). The aspiration to clarify the relative autonomy of the various contexts of moral self-consciousness and related goal of establishing a theory of justice on the basis of respecting that autonomy, however,

of this recovery of Hegelian thinking, I have similar qualms about the perseverance the persistence of the transcendental in Habermas's insistence on the normative significance of the background norms of discourse. I will deal schematically with the relationship of my project to Hegel's and the left-Hegelians in the Conclusion (and some of the footnotes) of this dissertation. For now, it will have to suffice to say that my future work will deal more explicitly with the overlap between the position I outline here and the older reaction to Kantianism that comes out of the thinking of Hegel and Marx.

An idiosyncratic inheritor of this left-Hegelian legacy that could have provided the lifeblood for this work is John Dewey. Dewey's work, focused as it is around thinking about the "bottom-up" life of democratic processes, shares with my view not only a common emphasis on the practical, but also a criticism of idealistic schemes of ethical progress. The American pragmatist tradition, Dewey foremost, was never far from my mind while I was composing this dissertation. I have restricted my remarks on it to some initial consideration of Richard Rorty in the first chapter and some scattered footnotes throughout. While I think both "Classical" and "Neo-" pragmatism have much to contribute to the conversation about ethical conflict and moral relativism, I thought that attempting to bring them into the argument here would have waylaid my progress. Introducing pragmatists would churn up a broader set of historical conflicts that would distract from the tradition of thinkers I am trying to draw out explicitly in this dissertation.

Some of these conflicts would have been created by the powerful images that guide pragmatist interventions into traditional metaphysics and epistemology. While it is inevitable that

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remains indebted to Habermas's discrimination of system and life-world in a manner that I argue is inappropriate to the register of ethical life explored in this dissertation.

one deals (at least tangentially) with metaphysical and epistemological issues when dealing with

deep and persistent ethical problems, I have tried to keep my remarks functional rather than

allow myself extended digression into these sprawling arguments. It is evident on reading this

work that I think that considerations of ethical conflict lead us naturally to inferences about how

we understand the relationship of logic to the world. Were I to venture out into the larger

intersection of value theory and epistemology, I could have productively cited the (relatively)

recently renaissance of fruitful literature on disagreement[8]. Another version of this dissertation

could have dealt with the topic through the German Idealism-inspired "New Idealism" in

Analytic philosophy found in the work of thinkers John McDowell, Irad Kimhi, and Sebastian

Rödl[9]. As it is, these thinkers only appear as marginal figures in my work. I use them to highlight

and to clarify, rather than delving into the broader issues of philosophy of mind, logic, and

epistemology that are their primary concern.

In the interest of incorporating my convictions on this front, however, I will spare a few

moments here for "methodological" considerations. It is not the special concern of this

dissertation to focus on providing the "theoretical backing" for some movement or intentionally

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[8]See in particular Gurpreet Rattan's fascinating paper "Disagreement and the First Person Perspective" which gives a compelling dialectical account of the priority of one's own perspective in peer disagreement on the basis of the intersubjective epistemological limit between persons providing sufficient reason to presume priority of first-personal belief. Closer yet to the subject matter of this dissertation is Zed Adams's "The Fragility of Moral Disagreement" on the dependence of moral disagreement on the shared contingent commitment to the possibility of reconciliation of attitudes.

[9] Irad Kimhi's *Thinking and Being* was particularly important for clarifying my understanding of the logical stakes of this dissertation. Specifically, Kimhi's treatment of the difference between the role of negation in Parmenidean philosophy and the role of negation in Frege's logic were crucial to my discussion of third-, second-, and first-personality. These views come out of the subtext in my discussion of Bernard Williams's arguments against idealism and my reconstruction of MacIntyre's argument for the untranslatability of traditional languages.

attempting conceptual engineering or ameliorative analysis[10]. I hope instead to mimic Rawls in

arguing that the perspective laid out in these pages is one to which we would already assent if we

had the whole picture. The views in this dissertation will make normative demands upon us, but

the hope is that these ethical demands will be utterly *ordinary* in the way that our concept of

anything makes a demand upon us. I provide an argument for the assumption that our ordinary

concepts make normative demands upon us in this work, and it is important to me that this claim

is ultimately *trivial* in a sense, since I take it that *any real* clarifying work that a discursive

activity could do would lead to further demands on us. One of the themes of this dissertation is

that, as a document, it is *not special* in the sense that its attempt to change our ordinary

understanding of the world is like that of any intentionally undertaken performance of

clarification and "interpretation". If the simultaneously transformative and trivial character of

this undertaking seems conflicted, I take heart in the fact that I share this conflict with a long

philosophical tradition of thinkers attempting a transfigurative clarification.

Which brings us to another view that animates this dissertation, namely that concepts are

not *normatively inert* or *ethically ambivalent.* I share with a number of the perspectives

mentioned above the idea that every concept is, by virtue of its fundamentally normative

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[10] The definitive methodological document on this understanding of the proper ends of conceptual analysis is Haslanger's "What Are We Talking about? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds" in which she argues that philosophy can deployed for "unmasking ideology" typically hidden underneath appeals to intuition. While I agree that philosophical argument can be deployed to undermine ideology, I do not think that concepts can be instrumentalized in the manner her division between "what we want to do with a concept" and "what a concept is" might suggest. Nevertheless, I have common ground with Haslanger in thinking that the project of conceptual analysis is not simply a matter of reporting back to us how we use a concept, if by that we mean the narrow notion of usage that takes current and past usage to be interestingly determinative "in-advance" of current usage. This detail will receive greater treatment below.

character, meaningful only insofar as it makes some sort of demand upon us for its further usage (not, I might add, simply linguistically). I will add to that two additional convictions: 1) that the thoroughgoing normativity of concepts *does not* entail either irreconcilable worldviews or that every concept makes equally valid claims upon us and 2) the related idea that our ordinary activity ("linguistic" or "non-linguistic") is *conceptually-laden,* with the further consequence that our understanding of concepts can and should be self-consciously absorbed in order to meet the demands of this perspective. A discussion of the arguments around the status of concepts would require a work dedicated to that end. Nevertheless, I provide some argument to motivate this approach to conceptualization in what follows.

I should also make a note here on the usage of "moral" and "ethical" in this text. I by and large follow the Hegelian convention of referring to the broader normative field that mediates human relationships as "ethical" while referring to the narrower kind of normative mediation thought to be proper to rules mediating relationships between individuals through right (and therefore law) as "morality". Some of the authors I consider use these terms interchangeably. My choice to distinguish them is based on the criticism of the parochialism of modern morality I pursue throughout this work. It is with this distinction in mind that I refer to "ethical disagreement" and "Moral Relativism" in what follows. To clarify, ethical disagreement refers to a conflict of norms in the relationships mediating human relationships and expression more broadly, whereas "Moral Relativism" refers to the view of these ethical disagreements that holds that they are themselves appropriately mediated by an appropriately contextualizing second-order attitude.

While it is not the primary aim of this work to delve into political matters, political

implications are inevitably consequent from the view I espouse here. I cannot treat these

consequences at length, but I hope that in my future work will be able to explore inferences I

take to be downstream from the conclusions I reach in this work[11]. My hope is that this

dissertation contributes to the ongoing renaissance of criticisms and revisions of mainstream

moral perspectives that has developed in the midst of the revival of mainstream English-speaking

value theory after the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Though the

"communitarianisms" of MacIntyre, Sandel and Taylor also make occasional appearances in this

work, my hope is that project this will not be simply assimilated into a restatement of the

communitarian critiques of Rawlsian contractualism. Similarly, while Foot and Nussbaum play

occasional ancillary roles in the story I tell here, I do not want this to be taken as a simple

prologue to a "liberalism of virtues"[12]. Rather, it is my hope that this is recognized as plotting an

alternative route to these critiques that nonetheless remains complementary to them. I want this

work to be seen as of a piece with the ongoing reconsideration of ethical conflict and our

responsibilities therein in the midst of the contemporary unsettlings and resulting reconsideration

of the international order solidified in 1991.

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[11]I have tried to suss some of these inferences in the Conclusion, where I argue for the relevance of my position for international institutions. What still remains to be done, beyond these allusive suggestions, is to give a more concrete account of the relationships between particular institutions and individuals in an historical context that can make their expression of the concepts I deploy in this dissertation more determinate.

[12] Among the many things I regret excluding from this work, the writings of Joseph Raz are among the most prominent. His absence from this dissertation marks out the unactualized potential for this project to have focused on the philosophy of law and the other formal institutions of conflict mediation. My decision to instead deal primarily with individual ethical encounters is a result of my decision to center the development of ethical life rather than its formalization.

1

Ethical Conflict and Moral Relativism

You and I get into a disagreement over whether or not it is appropriate to lie to a friend of ours named Jones. You want to tell Jones a hard truth about a relationship that he is in. I tell you that you should continue to act as though that relationship is fine and good; it would be much worse to shatter Jones' illusions than it would be to continue to tell him white lies. You disagree; you tell me that it is far more important to tell the truth to someone you care about than to continue to propagate a lie for his sake.

You and I are having an ethical disagreement. We disagree on which value, preserving Jones' emotional state or telling Jones the truth, should take priority in our actions. While we may agree that Jones' emotional state and truth-telling are important, we have been thrust into a situation in which we are forced to pick one over another. In such a case, it appears as though only one of us can have our way; there is no way that we can honor one value without compromising the other.

Such a disagreement qualifies as *fundamental disagreement* if the background values are at root incompatible and are not disagreements about practicalities[13]. For example, our situation only qualifies as one of fundamental disagreement if a) we both take an interest in Jones' welfare, b) we both agree that one of our solutions would be better for his welfare, and c) we still disagree on the appropriate course of action. If these conditions do not obtain, then there is not a

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[13] I borrow this term from Richard Brandt's 1967 essay "Ethical Relativism".

fundamental disagreement in value, simply a disagreement about the best way to act upon our shared value. For example, imagine we agreed that the most valuable thing in this scenario is Jones' happiness. I think that he would be happier being blissfully ignorant, while you think we will save him a good deal of later unhappiness by making him somewhat unhappy now. Here, we agree on the *end* but disagree on the *means* to that end. This is not, as described, an ethical disagreement but rather a disagreement about facts of the matter that could be resolved without interesting ethical conflict if we had complete information.

Fundamental ethical disagreement is an integral part of our lives. We argue about whether acts of civil disobedience which destroy property can be justified. We argue about whether an old transgression warrants censure today. We argue whether a public good takes precedence over an individual's rights. How could it be otherwise? If we always already agreed on what actions were best and our actions accorded with those beliefs there would be no need for discussion about ethics. Our arguments about ethics presume an ongoing disagreement about what actions and lives are praiseworthy or blameworthy, and to what extent. The fact that this is so, however, does not preclude the possibility that one or another position could be correct.

Given this characterization of ethics, to what do I appeal in the dispute with which this chapter began? It may be that you are simply wrong; there is an appropriate hierarchy of values and within that hierarchy, maintaining someone's emotional state is more important than telling the truth. There is a *moral fact of the matter*, there is something which *should* be done and that is dictated by the competing values at hand and the context in which the disputants find themselves. Through appealing to my access to this moral fact and your apparent lack thereof, I can make a knowledge claim which might legitimate the view under discussion.

Another way we could resolve this situation is to say that what should be done is a matter of individual conscience. There may or may not be a moral fact of the matter. But what is more important than getting this moral fact of the matter "right" is allowing both of us our individual right to act according to what we think or feel is right. This is the position outlined by John Rawls when he writes:

> The characteristic feature of these arguments for liberty of conscience is that they are based solely on a conception of justice. Toleration is not derived from practical necessities or reasons of state. Moral and religious freedom follows from the principle of equal liberty; and assuming the priority of this principle, the only ground for denying the equal liberties is to avoid an even greater injustice, an even greater loss of liberty. (Rawls 1999 [1971], 188)

In such a case, neither you nor I have a right to prevent one another from acting on our ethical views except in the exceptional conditions described above. To do so would involve inhibiting one another's freedom, which can only be done in the event that doing so would prevent a greater loss of freedom. This solves the disagreement by appealing to a third value, freedom, particularly freedom of conscience, which has priority over both of our claims. Assessing the situation according to this kind of second-order value renders our disagreement moot, but it does risk reintroducing the disagreement on another level (i.e. we begin arguing about whether or not "freedom" should take priority over some fourth, similarly second-order value)[14].

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[14] An appeal to freedom often has several other advantages: 1) it shifts the focus of the argument from values which are not agreed upon to a value that is and 2) freedom understood in this manner has the additional normative content Rawls appeals to above; it encourages us to act according to our conscience *and* it restricts such actions such that we cannot interfere with one another unjustifiably.

We might think the appeal to a mediating or second-order value like freedom of conscience is looking for the wrong kind of solution. Maybe what is "right" in the situation is *different* for each of us depending on who we are. In my community maintaining someone's emotional equilibrium takes precedence over any considerations of truth. In your community truth-telling is more important than the contingencies of any given situation. Given our backgrounds, it is right for me to act in accordance with keeping Jones happy and my doing so is just as right as your acting in accordance with treating Jones as an autonomous rational actor.

This final manner of framing our positions is one species of moral relativism. The value that should take precedence depends on facts about us including the communities from which we hail. This way of understanding the disagreement can scale; it can be the case that what a group of people should do (family, city, state) is dependent on the values of the community in question. It could be the case that what is right for us to do is whatever we are drawn to as a matter of individual conscience, and thus what is good for me is not necessarily good for every other member of my community[15]. Putting aside scalar differences, every moral relativist of this kind agrees that there is no manner of resolving our dispute framed in this manner that involves exchanging ethical reasons[16].

Many people find moral relativism of this sort intuitively appealing. While I do not, I want to begin by considering what is attractive about the idea that what counts as ethical is

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[15] This is fundamentally different than the perspective provided by Rawls. For Rawls, it very well may be the case that one of us is right and the other is wrong. Rawls, however, holds the value of freedom to be more important than *and interestingly different from* the question of which one of us may be right or wrong in cases like the one I have outlined above. This is the significance of his "overlapping consensus".

[16] For an excellent representation of the provenance and course of this sort of argument, see the exchange between Robert Brandom in his "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism" in *Rorty and His Critics* (2000) and Rorty in his reply in that same volume.

decisively dependent upon our circumstances and context. It will turn out that the moral relativist

position will possess a number of epistemological and normative advantages which must be

taken seriously.

1.1 *Advantages of Relativism*

The form of Moral Relativism I outlined above provides us with a simple resolution to

the seeming problem of ethical disagreement. You and I have different hierarchies of value. If

we do not believe we can appeal to some standard independent of our consciences and cultures,

then there is very little progress to be made by way of reason-giving. In illustrating this point,

Richard Brandt helpfully describes two forms of what he calls "metaethical" relativism:

> Is there any such method of ethical reasoning that can be expected in principle to show,
>
> when there is a conflict of values or ethical principles, that one and only one solution is
>
> correct in some important and relevant sense of "correct"? Metaethical relativists deny
>
> that there is any such method, and their denial may take either of two forms: they may
>
> deny that there is any method of ethical reasoning that can be justified with force
>
> comparable to that with which the scientific method (inductive logic) can be justified. Or
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> they may agree that there is such a method but say that its application is quite limited, and
>
> in particular that the fullest use of it could not show, in every case of a conflict of ethical
>
> convictions or of values, that one and only one position is correct in any important sense
>
> of "correct." (Brandt 2001, 27)

The first sort of relativism outlined here denies the possibility of justifying any ethical resolution

by appeal to reasons. Call this position "Skeptical Relativism." The Skeptical Relativist holds

that while we may appear to disagree about moral matters and give reasons for our positions, it is

actually the case that we are doing something quite different. In the Smith case above, the Skeptical Relativist might argue that you and I are simply expressing non-rational preferences which are not amenable to reasoning including, as Brandt mentions above, inductive logic. If one of us changes our minds, it will not be due to the force of the better reason, but to some form of non-rational manipulation.

The second position Brandt describes holds that there is *no guarantee* moral disputes can be resolved with an appeal to moral reasoning. Call this "Weak Relativism." The Weak Relativist sees no reason why there should not be epistemological space for some version of moral reasoning. However, the Weak Relativist will also be skeptical about the idea of moral "defeasors"; while moral reasoning may be able to help us with practical disputes, it will be unable to provide a definitive epistemological ground for resolving fundamental disagreement.

We can start to see the appeal of these relativist positions if we consider the problems with their rivals. Imagine that we want nothing to do with relativist solutions to our problem with Smith and instead insist that there is a rational way to adjudicate our case. A number of philosophers have made different cases for rational principles and/or actions which every reasonable person should adhere to or undertake, regardless of "contingent" facts about such persons, such as who they are or where they come from[17]. We can begin to understand our options for deciding what to do about Smith by considering two representative positions in modern moral philosophy: Kantian deontology and Millian utilitarianism.

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[17] This account is helpfully motivated by appealing to an analogy to other facts about persons. For example, facts about where I am from, which groups I identify and am identified with, and what gender I identify as all dictate certain actions on my part and not others. The idea is that what I should value and what actions I should take in the moral realm is similarly dependent upon facts about my identity.

Both of these positions assert that there is an underlying moral principle to which rational agents should defer in an ethical dispute. For Kantian deontology, this principle is the Categorical Imperative. For Millian utilitarianism, it is the "Greatest Happiness Principle." What are we to make of situations in which these principles come into conflict with one another? It may be that I am a utilitarian who thinks that the most rational solution to our dilemma is the one which will produce the greatest happiness. I argue that we should lie in order to achieve this end. You, in turn, may be a committed Kantian, who holds that we must tell Smith the truth in order to respect his rational autonomy. We both agree that there is a rational solution to our problem, but we disagree about what counts as rational[18].

We have put aside our dispute over which value takes priority and replaced it with the even more difficult task of adjudicating between competing meta-ethical conceptions. Alasdair MacIntyre articulates a common way of viewing such a predicament:

> It is precisely because there is in our society no established way of deciding between these claims that moral argument appears to be necessarily interminable. From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises, but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion. (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*,* 8)

If the basic principles we take to ground morality are at odds, then we will struggle to find any way of resolving disagreements with moral reasons. What appears to be an exchange of common

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[18] For a classic discussion of the possible conflicts engendered by the different conceptions of the relationship between the right and the good in the deontological and utilitarian traditions, see Rawls's discussion of the motivating considerations for "Justice as Fairness" in his *A Theory of Justice* (1999).

considerations can look like a facade beneath which there is another, more fundamental

disagreement about what it means to be rational. How to begin an argument about the character

of practical rationality (beyond some formal considerations like respecting the Principle of

Noncontradiction) is a difficult problem to say the least. In short, shifting the conversation to a

disagreement about what constitutes rationality does not helpfully clarify our dispute. We may

find ourselves in an even more dire deadlock.

Part of the appeal of Moral Relativism of any variety is that it sidesteps having to provide

a positive account that settles this sort of fundamental disagreement. It denies that there is any

way to adjudicate between our claims to rationality beyond agreeing to disagree and thus leaves

us in a transformed version of our original situation. We still hold different positions, but we

realize that we are no longer having an ethical disagreement that can be resolved on analogy to

some other form of dispute. We are now faced with the problem of what it means to be rational,

and, because we take ourselves to have begun with disparate and incompatible premises, there is

good reason to think that there is no rational means of resolving our dispute. This "second-order"

lesson takes both "Skeptical" and "Weak" forms. We might hold that such disputes end in a

stalemate because there is, *in principle,* no means of resolving them with ethical reasons, or we

can hold that such fundamental disagreement is beyond the scope of any epistemologically

defensible moral reasoning. In both cases we can see the appeal of the epistemological

parsimony of moral relativism; it allows us to avoid producing and committing to an ill-founded

and unwarranted account of why we should favor one moral doctrine over its rivals.

A related appealing aspect of this sort of Moral Relativism is that it shares with the

Rawlsian solution the seeming potential to avoid conflicts. If we have no way of resolving our

dispute with moral reasons, there is the distinct possibility that we will only be able to "resolve" it by force. If you and I "agree to disagree", our moral disagreement will not escalate into violence. We might worry that this seeming second-order appeal to peace is thus crypto-normative; it holds that peace between parties to a disagreement should take priority over the rightness or wrongness of those parties. While such a pragmatic appeal may not, we might think, play a significant role in any purely principled argument for moral relativism, it is nonetheless a clear advantage of the position.

I shift now from the negative position described by Brandt in which we hold the Moral Relativist position that there is no "method of ethical reasoning" which can arbitrate between two positions that fundamentally disagree to a positive, "Indexical" version of Moral Relativism. The Indexical Relativist holds the position that I outlined at the end of the previous sub-section. That is, they hold that what constitutes a moral action depends upon (is relative to) the culture, region, or family to which we belong. An Indexical Relativist can also hold that what constitutes right action is a matter of individual conscience[19].

This position may at first seem difficult to differentiate from the previous ones we have considered. The best way to surpass this difficulty is to get clear about to what it is actually committed. One way of understanding what this position holds is to make an analogy to other things that do or do not *fit* us according to facts about our backgrounds. Here it will be helpful to take up and extend a familiar point about right action in Aristotle's *Ethics:*

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[19] There is a trivial and a non-trivial way of understanding for what the Indexical Relativist is arguing. It is trivially true that not everyone should do the same thing in the same situation. Your responsibility should be different than an EMT's in the case of a car wreck. It is not as trivially true that what the EMT should do depends on the culture in which she grew up.

In everything continuous and divisible, it is possible to grasp the more, the less, and the

equal, and these either in reference to the thing itself or in relation to us. The equal is also

a certain middle term between excess and deficiency. I mean by "a middle term of the

thing" that which stands at an equal remove from each of the extremes, which is in fact

one and the same thing for all; though in relation to us, it is that which neither takes too

much nor is deficient. But this is not one thing, nor is it the same for all. For example, if

ten is much but two is few, six is a middle term for those who take it in reference to the

thing itself. For it both exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount, and this is the

middle term according to the arithmetic proportion. But one ought not to grasp in this

way the middle term relative to us, for if eating ten pounds is a lot but two pounds too

little, the trainer will not prescribe six pounds, since perhaps even this is a lot or a little

for him who will take it: for Milo it would be too little; for someone just starting

gymnastic training, it would be too much. (Aristotle 1984, 1106a-b: 26 – 40)

Just as what is right for Milo is different than, and in fact incompatible with, what is right for the

novice, what is right for a member of Culture A could be different than what is right for a

member of Culture B. They could agree that right and wrong actions exist *and* could affirm that

what is right for one person to do is wrong for another. However, this will require an additional

contortion. In Aristotle's case the *end* of the action, good health, is the same for both the novice

and Milo. In the case of relativism, the ends of Culture A and Culture B are different and

incompatible. A good Indexical Relativist is forced to affirm that both Cultures's ends are valid

based on the hierarchy of values affirmed in each. The Indexical Relativist's reasoning looks

something like this:

1) Culture A and Culture B have mutually incompatible ethical commitments.

2) Culture A and Culture B both affirm that there are right and wrong actions.

3) Culture A and Culture B have no reliable means of resolving the "dispute" over which commitment is correct[20].

4) If Culture A and Culture B have two mutually incompatible notions of moral reasoning, no reliable means of resolving the "dispute" over which notion of moral reasoning is correct, and Culture A and Culture B both affirm that there are right and wrong actions, then it will be the case that Culture A and Culture B will both be equally justified *or* equally unjustified in affirming their notion of moral reasoning.

5) Culture A and Culture B are both equally justified in affirming their notion of ethical reasoning.

This argument turns on point (4), which stipulates that if we are presented with premises 1-3 we will reach an evaluative stalemate. We can proceed from this stalemate in two different ways: we can affirm that both cultures are equally (though differently) justified when they claim different ethical statuses for an action *or* we can be skeptical about properly "moral" justification of any sort.

If we affirm the former, then we are effectively saying that both cultures are right to morally justify the action in question in their own terms *and* that neither culture has the grounds

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[20] There are a number of ways to make such a claim seem plausible through inductive argument. Take, for example, the historical fact of a plurality of notions of rationality paired with the fact that the matter remains under dispute. It may be the case that if a matter is disputed for ages without any apparent progress on the part of the disputants, there is good reason to think that there is no means of conclusively resolving the dispute. These themes will be treated at greater length later in this work.

to challenge its opposite's position[21]. This approach leaves moral reasoning intact but effectively

cordons off where moral reasoning can be applied according to cultural boundaries[22]. If we

affirm the latter, then we are expressing skepticism about the possibility of ethical reasoning at

all[23]. There is evidently *something* being expressed when we take up moral attitudes, but it

cannot be thought of as rational. The fact of the intercultural disagreement, on this line of

reasoning, gives us grounds for being skeptical about ethical reasoning *in general.* The

important difference between these two outcomes is that one takes fundamental ethical

disagreement to be real and unresolvable and the other is globally skeptical about ethical

reasoning[24]. If someone affirms Point 5, she will hold that there is *local* (i.e. intracultural)

justification but remain silent on the matter of global justification. She will be an Indexical

Relativist. If someone thinks that Point 5 should instead assert that both parties are equally

unjustified in asserting their ethical point of view, then she will express skepticism about local

and global ethical justification. This will make her either a "Skeptical" or "Weak" Relativist.

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[21] Gilbert Harman ably represents this view in his 1975 paper "Moral Relativism Defended" by construing morality as a kind of implicit agreement established by commonality in intention. Harman calls his view "Aristotelian or Humean" by which he means that it depends upon the desires and intentions of the agent (though not, it should be noted, necessarily on the preferences of an agent in a particular circumstance.)

[22] Consider Gilbert Harman's 2015 example in his "Moral relativism is moral realism", in which he argues that there is a strong analogy between the relativism of linguistics, motion, and morality, such that one can say e.g. something really is in motion within a specific relative context without thereby claiming there is a *single* fact of the matter as to whether it is in motion or that some phrase may mean something in one language but not another without thereby claiming that there is any single fact of the matter as to whether or not it's meaningful. For more on the relationship between language and morality, see my next chapter on Alasdair MacIntyre's treatment of the issue.

[23] This position has a number of variants, perhaps the most familiar of which is classical Emotivism. In the next chapter I will deal extensively with various noncognitive deflations of moral reasoning.

[24] This sort of Moral Relativism that I describe as the first sentence of our disjunction is, at first glance, similar to Brandt's second sort of Metaethical Relativism. Note, however, that while Brandt's Weak Relativism allows for a global means of moral justification, our case scales back moral justification such that 1) it does not commit to any global means of moral justification, 2) it holds that moral justification, while valid, only applies within a given culture, and 3) it neither guarantees nor rules out the possibility of some overlap of moral justifications across cultures.

This argument demonstrates the demands that the moral relativist position can seem to put upon us. The Moral Relativist must redescribe our everyday ethical language so completely that we might start to find it unrecognizable. If we stray from what the Moral Relativist thinks is meaningfully sayable, she must redescribe our utterances in these "anthropological", second-order terms. If I admonish someone for lying who is not a part of my culture (my culture being one that holds prevarication in low regard), then the Moral Relativist must translate my apparent censure into a hypothetical. If I take moral umbrage with someone to whom the norms I am beholden to do not apply, I am treating her as though certain facts about me obtained about her. Put another way, when I say "You should do action X" I am actually saying "If what is true of me were true of you, you should perform action X."   If we find this explanation unsettling, it may be because we think that Premise 2 under-describes what it means to assert the rightness or wrongness of an action. MacIntyre writes:

> [Consider] the type of case in which the answer to the question "Why should I do so-and-so?" (after someone has said "Do so-and-so") is not "Because I wish it", but some such utterance as "Because it would give pleasure to a number of people" or "Because it is your duty". In this type of case the reason given for action either is or is not a good reason for performing the action in question independently of who utters it or even of whether it is uttered at all. Moreover the appeal is to a type of consideration which is independent of the relationship between speaker and hearer. Its use presupposes the existence of *impersonal* criteria – the existence, independently of the preferences or attitudes of speaker and hearer, of standards of justice or generosity or duty. The particular link between the context of utterance and the force of the reason-giving which

always holds in the case of expressions of personal preferences or desire is severed in the

case of moral and evaluative utterances. (MacIntyre 2007 [1981], 9)

MacIntyre's description of the *impersonality* of moral claims appears to return us to the first way

of resolving moral disagreement outlined in the last sub-section. If what he says is true, it means

that the structure of giving a moral reason is one in which we appeal to "*impersonal* criteria" and

thus are in genuine fundamental disagreement about the character of these criteria. This has the

appeal of being more phenomenologically accurate; in saying that we should let Jones be

ignorantly happy, I am asserting that the right course of action is for *both* of us to keep quiet.

Similarly, when you tell me that Jones should know the truth, you are saying that the right thing

for both of us to do is to tell him the hard facts.

This helpfully characterizes why Moral Relativism of the sort I've described seems so

unsatisfactory. In asserting the morality of a given action, we might think that I am additionally

asserting its conditioned universality. It is not enough that *I* should act in such-and-such a

manner; everyone else so positioned ("one") should act the same way and according to the same

principles given the particularities of the situation. This conditioned universality is bound up in

the monotonic character of action[25]. As noted above in my discussion of the Jones case, our ends

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[25] One classic example of how this monotonicity should be thought can be found in the defense of the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative in Kant's *Groundwork.* There he writes:

> Some actions are so constituted that their maxim cannot even be *thought* without contradiction as a universal law of nature, far less could one *will* that it *should* become such. In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found, but it is still impossible to *will* that their maxim be raised to the universality of a law of nature because such a will would contradict itself. (Kant 1996, 4:424)

Put another way, Kant is here arguing that failing to assiduously incorporate the Categorical Imperative into our maxims for action is incoherent that the actions performed in such a manner that it cannot count as a willed at all, and consequently cannot even be thought of as actions. The aim here is to compellingly capture the bindingness of the moral *should* in a way that reflects the absolute character of moral admonishment by tying it to what it means to be an agent. Morality, on this view, is a condition of practical intelligibility.

are mutually exclusive. It cannot be the case that if you succeed in your end that I can also

succeed in mine[26]. Various iterations of Moral Relativism effectively leave this up to a contest of

wills. If we strip away the possibility of resolving disagreements through reasoning, the only

question that often remains is "Who is stronger?"

Such a contest of wills recasts our original disagreement. The question of how to

adjudicate between our competing premises, now understood as the Greatest Happiness Principle

(me) and the Categorical Imperative (you), is "solved" through the victory of one of the

disputants. On this view, however, the dispute disappears: you and I are no longer parties to an

argument, but simply agents with competing interests. In the same way that taking our ethical

dispute seriously required insisting on the substantive content of our claims, it seems to also

require that we take seriously the notion of the disagreement as predicated on an ethical

argument or risk the pain of this alien redescription. It may appear as though we have, yet again,

ended up again in the same place with the same problem. How should we decide between two

mutually incompatible accounts of moral reasoning? We need some way to break from this circle

of interrelated dilemmas and their corresponding circle of alien redescriptions.

One way we can do this is by reconsidering what we think to be the foundation of ethical

life. Such a reconsideration will take us away from the theoretical assertions and counter-

assertions of the scenario described above and into the historical *practice* of ethics. Our Jones

case plays out against a background of assumptions about ethics that are not *a priori*

deliverances but part of the broader fabric of a life in common such that this argument or ones

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[26] For more on this limitation to reasonable disagreement, see Michael Sandel's explanation of it in his discussion
of the Lincoln-Douglas debates in his review of John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*.

like it would appear in the first place. This reality warrants a shift in emphasis to a more holistic view; if I can manage to reconstruct the problem "from the ground up" from the incompatibilities of opposed practices in a more determinant picture of ethical life, I can effectively reframe the problem presented by Moral Relativism. Such an account, properly understood, will take the concerns of the Moral Relativist seriously. In fact, we might think that this is an aspect of what the Moral Relativist is trying to draw our attention to and that there might be a way to recast the apparent epistemological and moral advantages of Moral Relativism such that we can appreciate the insights that lead to it while eschewing the alienating image of ethical self-consciousness that it suggests.

Before we proceed to this argument, however, I want to pause to consider another position on the question of whether or not Moral Relativism deserves this sort of serious philosophical consideration. After all, it could be the case that I am attempting to chase down a philosophical phantom. Have there ever really been Moral Relativists? If not, how can we take any variant of the position or its insights seriously? Richard Rorty's essay "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism" argues that the Moral Relativist is a philosophical boogeyman. He makes this argument by way of defending American Pragmatism, a philosophical tradition which has at times been accused of being a kind Moral Relativism and of which he was a prominent contemporary figure. In the next sub-section, I will consider Rorty's dismissal of concerns of Moral Relativism in order to set the stage I am proposing and what precisely I am arguing against.

1.2 Who's Afraid of Moral Relativism?

"Relativism" is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is

as good as every other. No one holds this view. Except for the occasional cooperative

freshman, one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an

important topic are equally good. (Rorty 1982, 166)

This is how Richard Rorty begins the "Relativism" sub-section of his essay entitled

"Pragmatism, Relativism Irrationalism". Nobody thinks that every position is equivalent or has

equal value. No one thinks that all opinions are created equal. We do not require an elaboration

or serious consideration of a position that no one holds. Why, then, do we talk about Moral

Relativism at all?

Rorty answers this question in stages. First, he tells us, "Relativisms" exist as a family of

terms in order to serve the purpose of slandering a certain sort of anti-foundationalist

philosopher. To be "anti-foundationalist" means that the thinker in question endorses one or

several of a number of related philosophical positions. For Rorty's purposes (and mine), being

anti-foundationalist means rejecting the representational model of knowledge; if we are to make

progress in moral philosophy, such thinkers hold, it will not be through a more "accurate" or

"essential" model of moral life. Progress will instead be made through our familiar, everyday

sort of ethical argumentation.

We can get a clearer picture of what Rorty has in mind here by returning to the case of

Jones. When we have our ethical debate about what we should do, Rorty believes that those of us

who are not professional philosophers will not, nor should they feel obligated to, resort to

philosophical argumentation in order to justify the course of action they take to be correct.

Instead, you and I will (and we *should*) appeal to the "concrete" upsides and downsides of both

of the debated solutions to our moral problem. We may discuss whether or not Jones has the

constitution to be told a hard truth, whether or not we can look ourselves in the mirror or sleep at

night if we don't confess everything, or whether it is he or we who *really* benefits from telling

him the terrible truth. The key, for a Rortian example, is that the argument is made around the

determinant *particulars* of the situation, rather than referring to some abstract ideal which serves

as a model or standard.

Those who hold that this sort of ordinary argumentation is sufficient to resolve moral

disagreement can conveniently be thought of as Rorty's "anti-foundationalists." These thinkers

appear to be "Relativists" of one sort or another to philosophers who are still committed to what

Rorty calls a "Plato or Kant style" philosophical project. If there is no epistemologically secure

foundation on which we can build our philosophical edifice, it follows, Rorty imagines such

philosophers arguing, that there is no way of adjudicating between mutually exclusive positions

of the sort I have presented above. On this view of Relativism, it is a slander used to strawman

anti-foundationalists by epistemologically conservative philosophers. It is a slander, on Rorty's

account, because anti-foundationalists do *not* argue, as foundationalists would have one believe,

that "anything goes"; as Rorty rightly points out, *nobody* actually believes that.

After explaining this polemical use of the term, Rorty turns to another use which, to his

mind, has greater cache. Certain sorts of philosophers can rightfully be regarded as relativists,

but not for the reasons described above. Rorty has Dewey and James in mind here, and he argues

that both of these thinkers are what he calls "metaphilosophical relativists":

> The association of pragmatism with relativism is a result of a confusion between the
>
> pragmatist's attitude toward philosophical theories with his attitudes towards *real*
>
> theories. James and Dewey are, to be sure, metaphilosophical relativists, in a certain

limited sense. Namely: they think there is no way to choose, and no point in choosing,

between incompatible philosophical theories of the typical Platonic or Kantian type. Such

theories are attempts to ground some element of our practices on something external to

these practices. Pragmatists think that any such philosophical grounding is, apart from

elegance of execution, pretty much as good or as bad as the practice it purports to ground.

They regard the project of grounding as a wheel that plays no part in the mechanism.

(Rorty 1982, 167)

The pragmatist insight, Rorty tells us, is that foundational theoretical legitimation of a practice is

both impossible and unnecessary. This is *not* to say that there is no room for argument about how

we should do things or even disputes about principle. It is just to say that metaethical arguments

concerning the character of ethical rationality will not confer anything special upon the positions

that are debated. Practices do not sit around and wait for theories to catch up.

If you are trained in philosophy and unfamiliar with American pragmatist thought this

sort of insight can be confounding. What is it that we're arguing about if not about first

principles? Rorty further clarifies what sorts of debates remain after we turn away from the

epistemological project of grounding:

"Relativism" only seems to refer to a disturbing view, worthy of being refuted, if it

concerns *real* theories, not just philosophical theories. Nobody really cares if there are

incompatible alternative formulations of the categorical imperative, or incompatible sets

of categories of the pure understanding. We *do* care about alternative, concrete, detailed

cosmologies, or alternative concrete, detailed proposals for political change. When such

an alternative is proposed, we debate it, not in terms of categories or principles but in

terms of the various concrete advantages and disadvantages it has. (Rorty 1982, 168)

There is something patently true here. If what we are doing when we are engaged in philosophical debate is practically inert description, then anxiety about relativism is just as bewildering as this project of description itself. This being said, Rorty attempts to leverage the truth of this claim into something else which is significantly more puzzling. To see why this is so, take the example of the Categorical Imperative. We care if there are alternative formulations of the Categorical Imperative because the various formulations will provide us with different means for clarifying a principle at work everyday moral deliberation[27]. Rorty juxtaposes the Categorical Imperative as an exemplary bit of technical theorizing with "alternative, concrete, detailed cosmologies [and proposals for political change]." One might think that such theoretical work will bear on the specifics of these cosmologies or political changes[28]. Where do the two disconnect?

In our everyday conversation, Rorty thinks, discussions about "advantage" or "disadvantage" require do not depend upon our having recourse to metaphysical states of affairs, but rather depend on concrete descriptions[29]. His argument is that recourse to the traditional

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[27] Kant is clear throughout the *Groundwork* that his aim is to clarify and thereby reveal the inherent truth in everyday moral thinking. See especially the end of "Section I" (4:405).

[28] For an alternative formulation of the relevance of "ethical theory", see Alan Gibbard's patient and clever consideration of Tim Scanlon's work in the former's brief review "Why Theorize How to Live With Each Other?" In his discussion of his own contractarianism in that paper, Gibbard gives a careful defense of the relationship between ordinary ethical evaluation and "plans".

[29] In his Editor's Introduction to *Hume's Ethical Writings* MacIntyre gives a related criticism of an analogous philosophical position in Humean ethics:

> That is to say that moral judgments express a sentiment or feeling is vacuous and unhelpful. Of course they do. But what sentiment or feeling? We can find no useful definition of moral sentiment, except as that sentiment which is bound up with moral judgment. What it is that makes moral judgment and sentiment distinctive, what entitles them to appellation "moral," what their relation is to other kinds of judgment and sentiment---to none of these questions do such theories return to an answer. (MacIntyre 1994a, 15-16)

The similarity between the two approaches is grounded in a version of moral psychologism. More specifically, it is

philosophical appeals to transcendent principles or conditions of intelligibility are, at best, redundant and at worst, hopelessly abstract. This is the core of Rorty's philosophical anti-philosophy; if progress in philosophy means anything, it means recognizing that the purported armature of our everyday language argued for by traditional philosophy does no real, honest work within that language. In this sense, Rorty's position is thoroughly normative. What at first appears to be an anodyne and matter-of-fact discussion of "what argumentation really looks like" is instead setting a normative standard for "what argumentation *should* look like". In his recent piece on Bernard Williams's relativism, Daniel Callcut recalls: "[W]hen I was a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, I spoke to Rorty about the contrast between his ideas and those of Williams. 'Yes,' Rorty said, Williams's view chimed more with common sense but, as Rorty unforgettably concluded, 'I want to change common sense!'" (Callcut 2023). In this sense Rorty is closer to Kant than he might originally appear. In much the same way that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was intended to recover scientific thinking from the inevitable temptations of metaphysics, Rorty's intervention is attempting to recover common sense from its resort to transcendent (or transcendental) principle.

This normative core of Rorty's position becomes clearer in the final sentence of the paragraph I cited above. There, he juxtaposes "categor[y] and principl[e]" with "concrete advantages and disadvantages." Rorty is here not arguing *against* categories and principles in meta-ethics but instead arguing *for* a principle which we might call "The Principle of Ethical Particularity." This has a number of different formulations. In the example at hand, the

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grounded in the idea that we can appeal to the ante-theoretical desires, beliefs, and motivations of agents as brute in some important sense. The particular manner in which they can be taken to be brute is something that will come in Chapter 3.

normative formulation may run "Argue in such a way that supposedly 1) *local* 2) *particular* or 3) *finite* reasons have priority over those who claim to be 1) *universal* 2*) general* or *3) infinite."* In its various instantiations, this principle attempts to be the principle which *universally, generally, and infinitely* does away with every other principle which claims any of those adjectives by arrogating epistemological authority for itself in order to deny any other epistemological authority[30].In short, Rorty is a crypto-normativist; the only rule we should use in moral argument, to his mind, is "There is no rule[31]."

It is a necessary element of such an epistemological approach that it must have an associated notion of the "truth" of a proposition as socially-agreed upon relative coherence. In his extensive criticism of Richard Rorty's view Jürgen Habermas gives a summary of this epistemological point:

Since the truth of beliefs or sentences can in turn be justified only with the help of other beliefs and sentences, we cannot break free from the magic circle of our language. This fact suggests an anti-foundationalist conception of knowledge and holistic conception of

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[30] To see how this principle comes to work in epistemology after "The Linguistic Turn," see Habermas' criticism of Rorty in "Richard Rorty's Pragmatist Turn" from *Rorty and His Critics.* There, Habermas characterizes Rorty's project as a "dramatization of philosophical leave-taking" that rehabilitates the significance of philosophy in order to banish it:

> Rorty understands the deconstruction of the history of metaphysics as a deflationary diagnosis in Wittgenstein's sense. Anti-Platonism draws its eminently practical significance only from the significance of the sickness that it is supposed to cure. The unmasking of Platonism is aimed beyond scholasticism, at a culture that is alienated from itself platonistically. If, finally, the act of leave-taking is not to exhaust itself in negation, Rorty has to open a perspective that will enable a new self-understanding that can take the place of the old, deflated one. (Habermas 2000, 34)

In Rorty's response, he agrees with this characterization of his views while seriously contesting Habermas's attempt to undermine them with a theory of communicative rationality. Crucial to his response is his contention that Habermas attempts to inflate our particular justifications into philosophically significant universalizations in a manner that is extraneous to any particular debate.

[31] For a classic discussion of "moral particularism", see John Rawls' comments on the position in *A Theory of Justice.*

justification. Because we cannot confront our sentences with anything that is not itself already saturated linguistically, no basic propositions can be distinguished that would be privileged in being able to legitimate themselves, thereby serving as the basis for a linear chain of justification. (Habermas 2000, 40)

Rorty's normative view is predicated on what he takes to be the epistemological fact that no linguistically-mediated representation, be it sensory, intuitive, or whatever you like, can take priority over another; to take any such proposition as "basic," "foundational," or "given" will always be arbitrary[32]. This view of truth looks viable because it insists upon the break between the linguistically mediated *theoretical* truth and the *practical* truth. Habermas explains that while the theoretical realm is predicated on the possibility of doubt about and revision of our commitments, the practical realm admits of no such doubts. Our actions require that we take there to be regularities and stabilities that are true of the world such that we can interact with it in a rational manner[33].For Rorty, this means that *practical reasoning stands on its own*. Any theoretical analysis of practical reasoning can only repeat back to us what we already "know" as evinced in our determinate actions.

It seems as though any response to Rorty must argue on behalf of a substantially different view between the theoretical and the practical. While some critics of Rorty, like Habermas,

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[32] For an alternative account of the dependence of the rational character of political dispute on the nonrational lives of human beings consider Stuart Hampshire's account of liberalism as the attempt to maintain active moral conflict through political compromise as laid out in his "Justice is Strife". While I cannot concern myself with all of Hampshire's broad-ranging argument here, I would suggest that Alasdair MacIntyre's argument about the parasitic character of modern moral philosophy on the elements it attempts to adjudicate between is an excellent place to start for a criticism of Hampshire's work.

[33] In the next chapter I will introduce Alasdair MacIntyre's version of this same account of daily regularity and its relationship to revision.

attempt to deal with the problem of metaethical relativism through a linguistically-oriented Kantian constructivism, my argument will take its cues from a different tradition of practical reasoning. We will need to rethink what constitutes the theoretical "wheel" of Rorty's metaphor if it is to have any functional role in the mechanism. In the next chapter I will introduce Alasdair MacIntyre's narrative-based and practically-oriented holistic position. MacIntyre's approach will neither do away with the problem of Moral Relativism, nor will it inveigh against Rorty's criticism of "classical" representational epistemology. Rather, it will reframe the emphasis on the local and the practical in Moral Relativism, particularly in what I called Indexical Relativism above, and the criticism of a universal understanding of rationality in the face of fundamental disagreement. MacIntyre's view of ethical self-consciousness will allow us to move beyond the apparent theoretical hurdles purportedly solved by Moral Relativism as I have described them in this chapter by recasting them as historically posed concrete problems intricately bound up in the theoretical standards of moral traditions.

2

Traditions as Patterns of Rationality

How should we think about a situation in which our differing moral commitments appear to be rationally irresolvable, if not in terms of some version of Moral Relativism? In this chapter I turn to Alasdair MacIntyre's work to help answer this question. His *oeuvre* provides me with unmatched resources for understanding scenes of ethical conflict. His aim is to realistically *delimit* the scope of ethical rationality, *historically position* ethical disagreements, *reveal* the roots of the theoretical in the practical, and, in so doing, *criticize* much of the received wisdom of the modern tradition about universal moral rationality. Arriving at an understanding of the radical character of MacIntyre's position will require a significant shift in perspective from the last chapter. I will achieve this change in viewpoint in a piecemeal manner; I will begin by re-examining what it is to understand the ethical import of an action through MacIntyre's eyes. Understanding the basics of his theory of practical rationality will, in turn, require further explanation of the concepts of "tradition", "institution", and "practice" as necessary elements of that practical rationality.

At the end of the last chapter I said that I would need to develop a different understanding of practical rationality in order to address Rorty's problem for foundationalists. Rorty argued that theoretical considerations of the epistemological foundations of moral rationality play no role in our practical reasoning. He further argued that, in the light of the fully determinate character of our ordinary practical judgments, any attempt to discern *fundamental* principles at work in them was searching for some second, clarifying order of rules or meanings "behind" or essential to

those judgments in a manner that was inappropriate to them. In short, the attempt to do *philosophy of* fundamental ethical disagreement had to give way in the face of this deflation of our ordinary ethical claims. In this chapter I will provide an account of practical rationality that takes theoretical reasoning to be both *derived from* and *involved in* practical reasoning. Using this account, I will show how our animating case from the first chapter 1) does not (yet) count as a fundamental disagreement, 2) does not thereby entail Moral Relativism, and 3) transforms our understanding of the Rortian deflation of the relationship between theoretical and practical reason.

First, we have to get clear about MacIntyre's theoretical understanding of everyday action. On MacIntyre's account, everyday practices do not "speak for themselves" in any simple manner. They require adoption of a *holistic* attitude about action. The worth of an ethical action will have to be understood in relation to a larger tradition which comprises the whole of which it is a part. Taking up the naturalistic, Fregean example of the "Morning Star and the Evening Star" MacIntyre writes:

> Empiricist philosophers have contended that common to the modern and the medieval observer is that which each really sees or saw, prior to all theory and interpretation, namely many small light patches against a dark surface; and it is at the very least clear that what both saw *can* be so described. But if all our experience were to be characterized exclusively in terms of this bare sensory type of description -- a type of description which it is certainly useful for a variety of special purposes to resort to from time to time -- we would be confronted with not only an uninterpreted, but an uninterpretable world, with not merely a world not comprehended by theory but with a world that never could be

comprehended by theory. A world of textures, shapes, smells, sensations, sounds and

nothing more invites no questions and gives no grounds for furnishing any answers.

(MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*, 79- 80)

A world reduced to the "experience" of our sensorium, MacIntyre claims, is something we can

say very little about. Any attempt to make the world intelligible, that is, to understand it for our

practical purposes, will entail detailing what sort of entities populate the world, what sort of

things they do, and why.[34] Indeed, for MacIntyre, to take something to be sense information is

already to take it to be a possible element of an intelligible composite in some sense.

This holistic criticism of the fundamental character of atomic elements of our experience

does not simply rest with the amputated world of the sensorium in empiricism. It extends out to

the "behavioral sciences." The attempt to isolate actions from the contexts and narratives which

lend them sense, MacIntyre writes, is typical of the atomizing tendency of modern thought. To

illustrate the difficulties of attempting to meaningfully isolate behaviors from theories about the

intentional doings of the agents in question, MacIntyre asks us to imagine a person's activity that

could be truly described in a number of ways, all of which pertain: "Digging", "Gardening",

"Taking Exercise", "Preparing for Winter", and "Pleasing his wife" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981],

206). If each of these descriptions is true in-itself, how shall we think about the unity of these

descriptions in the activity in question, insofar as they are all taken to be descriptions of it?

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[34] Kant, on MacIntyre's telling, "rediscovers" the necessity of thinking about the world within a theoretical context after Hume. In so doing, he "undoes" some of the commonsensical pretensions to clarity that were supposed to characterize Enlightenment's victory over the obfuscations of scholastic Aristotelianisms. This explains his account's close proximity (on these matters) to Wilfred Sellars' Kant-inspired critique of the "Myth of the Given" in his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind;* both set out to criticize the idea that there is some meaningful non-conceptual foundational epistemic basis for our cognition.

MacIntyre's answer is that *intention* of the agent will amount to an implicit ranking of these true descriptions, and each iteration of this ranking will in turn describe a different unified phenomenon. The way that we judge the evaluative worth of the action will vary according to how these descriptions are ordered[35]. The next question becomes, in what conditions can an intention appear? Given that we can redescribe the action in a variety of ways, and we cannot simply read the implicit ranking of intention off of it or off of the gardener's mind, how does it appear? Put another way, can we state the conditions in which an action becomes intelligible as the particular action that it is?

The answer to these questions begins by returning to the example. What might we ordinarily do to discern the intentions of our gardener? We may, for example, simply ask him. If we are a private eye or some other particularly nosy observer, we may watch the gardener's broader pattern of action in order to assess whether or not they are in accord with his reported intention. This will cast the gardener's action back into the established background of activities that provides us with a precedent for actions he can intend to do. In this observation, for example, we might imagine that our gardener appears to be "is to put[ting] the garden in order before the winter." In another his "primary intention is to please his wife by taking exercise" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*,* 206). MacIntyre explains that to understand the action in terms of its intention is to understand it as one or the other:

> In the first place the episode has been situated in an annual cycle of domestic activity, and the behavior embodies an intention which presupposes a particular type of

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[35] This is not to say that the agent in question has the descriptions ordered "in his head." MacIntyre's appeal to the habits of everyday life and his emphasis on patterns of action (practice, institution, tradition, etc.) are intended, in part, to externalize what it is to intend something.

household-cum-garden setting with the peculiar narrative history of that setting in which this segment of behavior now becomes an episode. In the second instance the episode has been situated in the narrative history of a marriage, a very different, if related social setting. We cannot, that is to say, characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the setting which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others. (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*,* 206)

With such a background in place, we can understand that this instance of gardening is a variation of a larger pattern of action and intention with its own history. Similarly, we can understand the gardener's intention to "Please his wife" if we understand what the institution of marriage is and what it signifies and commits one to, broadly speaking. We *nest* a given action within sets of histories: the personal history of the gardener, the history of gardening, the history of the family, or (perhaps) the history of a particular plot of land. When we look to establish the priority of descriptions of the gardener's action, our investigation will be assessed according to the constraints and allowances of each of these histories. If the gardener exasperates his wife by spending long evenings with a trowel, a headlamp, and a watering can, any reasonable account we give will have to demote the importance of "pleasing his wife" as part of the gardener's intention.

One might, at this stage, think that we have sufficient knowledge to describe what the gardener is doing. Knowing the histories that inform our understanding of someone's intention is not the measure of language mastery, however. MacIntyre writes: "It is this knowing how to go and go further which is the badge of elementary linguistic competence" (MacIntyre 1988*,* 382).

Here, as elsewhere, MacIntyre uses an Aristotelian "apprenticeship" model in order to understand language use. To be competent in a language, one must know its conventions, but also must know how to use it *poetically:*

> It is in hearing and learning and later in reading spoken and written poetic texts that the young in the type of society with which we are concerned learn the paradigmatic uses of key expressions at the same time and inseparably from their learning the model exemplifications of the virtues, the legitimating genealogies of their community, and its key prescription. Learning its language and being initiated into their community's tradition or traditions is one and the same initiation. When asked in such a society "What is x?" or "What does 'x' mean?" one standard way of answering is to quote a line or two from a poem. So the meanings of key expressions are fixed in part by reference to standard authoritative texts, which also provide the paradigmatic examples used in instructing the same young as to how to extend concepts, to find new uses for established expressions, and to move through and on from that multiplicity of uses, acquaintance with which provides the background for introducing such distinctions as those between the literal and the metaphorical, the joking, the ironic, and the straightforward, and later, when the going becomes theoretical, the analogical, the univocal, and the equivocal.
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> (MacIntyre 1988*,* 383)

Part of what differentiates a masterful language-speaker from a phrasebook-user, a parrot, or a Chinese Room is the ability to distinguish different poetic uses of the language, which in turn depends on understanding the conventions as they stand. "Knowing how to go on" in the language is thus not a matter of distilling implicit rules that *over*-determine future usage, but

rather learning how to extend a concept *appropriately*[36]. It is in learning how to use the concept poetically that I can come to understand what it is to use language as part of my background community of linguistic experts.

This apprenticeship model extends out to the practice of gardening itself. In order to recognize our gardener as a *master gardener*, we must understand the tradition of gardening and its standards. However, we must also understand that the master gardener's aesthetic and practical innovations go beyond those conventions. In order to have such an appreciation, we need to have a "thick" understanding of the practice of gardening. By a thick understanding, I mean an understanding that includes both simple evaluations and evaluations that require knowledge of the history and skill involved in gardening. While a novice may say that a particular arrangement of shrubs and bushes is beautiful, the expert will appreciate the nuance of such arrangements and precisely how such contrasting groundcover is an extension of and play on the practices that constitute the conventional arrangement of these plants[37]. This interrelationship of theoretical and practical understanding will define excellence in gardening.

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[36]Attempting to assimilate our deployment of concepts to a rule-following mechanism will land us right back in Rorty's problem. What work is the rule doing that distilling it out of our actions is an advance on the collection of particular instances of the rule? And how, in observing an atomized action, can we discern the rule at work? Imagining we can distill such a rule, what is the status of that rule in relationship to a variation from it in future action? Our attachment to the image of a rule is getting in the way of our ordinary understanding of intention. Seeing the relevance of these questions means also seeing that intention extends beyond particular actions into a broader network of concerns.

[37] We can, if we like, cast this as "knowing the rule". This will require our understanding of what we mean by "rule" to shift. We cannot be using it on analogy to mathematical rules i.e. of arithmetic in which the input mechanistically determines the output. Nor can we helpfully call it a rule "followed by" a sensor when it detects a particle in a chamber or the law followed by something subject to Newton's principles. These lack the iterative character of the kind of activity we are considering here, not, of course, because they are not repeatable instances. Instead, it is because the activity of gardening as properly undertaken by the gardener *changes* what it is to garden through extension of its concepts.

Even if this account of the relationship between foreground intention and background practice is admitted, we might wonder why we need the additional idea of tradition. My preliminary answer is that a tradition allows us to tie these practices together in an intelligible life. Without tradition's overarching character, a life disintegrates into a series of disconnected moments across which no discernible continuity can be established. Hence, MacIntyre argues that "Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*, 208*). MacIntyre thinks this "basicness" is not accessible through some *a priori* exercise of our self-conscious capacity, but rather available to us as part of the analysis of our everyday sense-making.

The role of tradition in MacIntyre's account of intelligible moral action dovetails with Indexical Relativism as I presented it in the last chapter. More specifically, we can see that MacIntyre and the Indexical Relativist share the notion that an action can only be understood with reference to a larger cultural context, and that without that context the action becomes unintelligible as itself. MacIntyre and the Indexical Relativist also agree that there is no "meta-culture" to which we can appeal in order to make sense of the moral value of an action across cultural contexts. Because there is no *a priori* set of conditions for practical reasoning available through exercise of some special capacity, ethical self-consciousness is best understood as a special kind of attention to our normal understanding of the world. MacIntyre and the Indexical Relativist will *disagree* about the appropriate manner to understand fundamental disagreements between actors that do not share the same background context. The significant difference between them will turn on their respective understandings of what it means to participate in this ethical background. I will explain the exact character of this difference in the next sub-section.

2.1 *What is a Tradition?*

In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry,* MacIntyre asks what constitutes "systematic progress" in moral inquiry. His answer is that any progress made will necessarily take *totality* as its end*:*

> Part of the answer is that the enquiry can only be systematic in its progress when its goal
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> is to contribute to the construction of a *system* of thought and practice – including in the
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> notion of construction such activities as those of more or less radical modification, and
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> even partial demolition with a view to reconstruction – by participating in types of
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> rational activity which have their *telos* in achieving for that system a perfect form in the
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> light of the best standards for judging of that perfection so far to emerge. Particular
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> problems are then, partially, but in key ways, defined in terms of the constraints imposed
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> by their place within the overall structure, and the significance of sourcing this or that
>
> particular problem derives from that place. (MacIntyre 1994a*,* 147)

On this view, we can only understand ourselves to have made moral progress if we can understand that the developments or practical revisions we have made refer to a set of background standards and practices that give such developments and revisions their measure. Moreover, these background standards and practices must be oriented toward perfection, that is, a state in which they need no further development or revision. In short, conceptual and practical innovations are made intelligible by playing at least one *organic* function within a larger, teleologically-oriented whole.

According to MacIntyre, a tradition is this whole which secures the possibility of progress. It provides a map that shows us where we are, where we've been, and where we're

going[38]. For example, if we are to understand ourselves as making moral progress, we should be able to tell a cogent story about how our advancement is related to the body of moral knowledge that we already have. Such advancements should present us with a further determination of what it is to practice moral principles. The Civil Rights movement in the United States presents a helpful example of this sort of advancement; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Christian egalitarian message can be understood as a meaningful historical development of the United States Constitution, Christian universalism, and the American abolitionist movement that interrelates them in a manner that can be understood as deepening the conceptual repertoire of each of them.

While morality often progresses this way, MacIntyre is quick to remind us that this is not always the case. It could be that one of our principles is so deeply flawed that it has to be fundamentally transformed or revised. What is crucial about a case like this is that the justification for such revision comes from *elsewhere* in the tradition. On this view, we cannot imagine a moral judgment being wrong in-and-of-itself any more than we can imagine a moral principle being cogent in-and-of-itself[39].

A tradition, then, is not a *simple* whole, if by that we mean a seamless set of static norms which once-and-for-all delineate the contours of an intelligible life. Understanding how this can be so will require us to understand the role of institutions in the actualization of tradition. Institutions are the diverse material and symbolic homes for the practitioners of a tradition.

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[38] This image, it should be noted, is limited. It does not provide a map of where we are going in a manner which pre-determines or otherwise mechanically dictates our responses. Rather, it provides that which we *are responding to,* which provides the context for our response even as it doesn't determine it "in advance".

[39] While MacIntyre often finds himself at odds with the pragmatist tradition, he holds in common with them that the possibility of "radical skepticism" is not really an intelligible worry. This can be attributed to MacIntyre's and the pragmatists' complicated relationship with the Hegelian legacy. We will return to this proximity to the Hegelian legacy briefly in the next chapter.

When we describe our actions and plans, we do so in terms of these various institutional identities; son, student, American, and union member. The progress of traditions is made in institutions that attend to these various elements of our moral lives; traditions *integrate* institutions and institutions provide traditions with means to permeate the diversity of human lives. MacIntyre characterizes institutions as organized wholes that require *external goods* that are means to their reproduction and apportion responsibility for securing these goods (and the attendant organizational power) according to this organization. Institutions will also require *internal goods* for the sake of which these external goods are deployed. Understanding the role of internal goods in institutions will require us to understand what MacIntyre means by practices.

This is because institutions themselves are not specific *doings*. They refer to patterns of action, belief, and evaluation. I cannot *perform* an institution such as a university, although I can write a paper, attend a class, participate in debate in the student council, and argue with the dean. The *intentional content* of institutions is found in *practices*:

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so

are painting and music. (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*, 187)

A practice, then, is not simply any social behavior or activity. It is intimately bound up with 1)

an end, that is, an *internal* good appropriate to an activity, 2) the possibility of *excellence* in the

undertaking of that activity, defined in terms of its internal good, and 3) the systematic extension

and integration of the internal goods of the activity with other practices that constitute human

life. Internal goods are those goods which are inherent to the excellence of a practice and which

cannot be fully understood by those who are not initiated into the practice. One of MacIntyre's

favorite examples is the goods of chess; what may appear to be just another arrangement of the

board to an amateur is recognized as a high-stakes confrontation to a Grand-master. This is to be

contrasted with external goods, most notably money, which can be understood by everyone to be

good precisely because they are means to other goods, but not properly understood as goods in-

themselves.

We have returned to phenomena like gardening, practices whose intelligibility is bound

to *narratives,* and thus teleologically to ends without which they cannot be understood[40]. On this

account, narratives are defined by an end which brings unity to the various events of the

narrative by casting those events in the retroactive light of that end. They are *systematic,* and thus

organic, as described above; each of their parts is subordinated to the whole. Insofar as I am able

to make the history of my involvement in a practice intelligible, I will tell a story about my

attempts to reach the ends of excellence internal to the practice (necessary for a practice to be

understood as something in which excellence, and therefore mastery is possible.) Insofar as the

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[40] The ontological components of these narratives will vary over the course of MacIntyre's post-*After Virtue* work, but the necessity of narrative to make one's life intelligible will remain continuous throughout.

practice will fit intelligibly into the rest of my life, I will tell a story which takes my involvement with the practice to be an integrated part of a whole life in which I attempt to realize my natural capacities.

MacIntyre's account of the relationship between practices and institutions is thus both *holistic* and *teleological*. It is holistic because one cannot understand institutions without practices and vice versa. Correspondingly, one cannot understand internal goods without external goods and vice versa. This being said, MacIntyre's account remains teleological because internal goods are *goods in-themselves* while external goods are good insofar as they allow us to achieve internal goods[41]. Practices and the internal goods inherent to them thus serve as desiderative and rational endpoint. Aristotle writes in Book I, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that happiness is "self-sufficient" in the sense of needing no further justification; in the social realm MacIntyre describes, practices are self-sufficient in exactly this way. Like happiness, however, they are *not* self-sufficient in the sense of lacking enabling conditions.

Given this image of practices, we may ask what *enables* us to perform a practice well or poorly. The answer is that we must be educated into certain *virtues:*

> *A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to*
>
> *enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which*

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[41] This is patently an extension of an Aristotelian understanding of ends. Consider Aristotle's explicit statements on this same subject:

> A certain dispute over the points stated begins to appear, because the arguments made [by the proponents of the forms] do not concern every good: things pursued and cherished by themselves are spoken of in reference to a single form, but what produces these (or in some way preserves them or prevents their contraries) is spoken of as being good on account of the former sorts of goods and in a different manner. It is clear, then, that the good things would be spoken of in two senses: those that are good in themselves, others that are good on account of these. (Aristotle, 1096b, Bartlett and Collins)

See also his treatment of those factors that can limit one's ability to be happy at 1098b-1099b.

effectively prevents us from achieving such goods. (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]*,* 191; italics

original)

There is no means of ensuring the integrity of practices besides the acquisition of virtues by the

participants in the institutions which preserve those practices. It is only through an understanding

of the tradition of which a given practice is a part and a thorough understanding of the internal

goods of the relevant practice that corruption can be avoided. This means that virtues are

acquired and they are only acquired if a person with the right sort of capacities is brought into a

community that has preserved a tradition that retains those virtues through its institutions and

practices[42]. I can only be a master gardener, as I explained above, if I have acquired an eye for

the particular beauties of horticultural arrangement or the appropriateness of a particular ground

cover, both of which require a notion of excellence that is related to practices, institutions, and

traditions.

MacIntyre's argument is that no rule-set will be able to tell you what action is artful or

eminently practical action to take in any particular situation. It is only through a process of

training, more particularly a form of apprenticeship, that I will come to any understanding of

what action is appropriate in particular cases. As mentioned above, what is "appropriate" is not a

simple matter of rule-following, if by rule-following we mean something mechanically "played

out in advance." Excellence in a practice, what Aristotle would call *arete*, necessarily has a

poetic dimension, as I mentioned above. Acting well requires that we recognize what is

continuous with other cases of practical reasoning and what is *unique* about the situation at hand.

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[42] Understanding why this is so will be crucial to understanding MacIntyre's objections to Bernard Williams in the next chapter. We can anticipate his grievance by asking "What can it mean to be excellent in isolation from a community of practitioners and its history?"

These two elements of the situation cannot properly be understood without one another, and one is not a master at the practice in question until they can practically accommodate that fact[43].This is one of MacIntyre's master ideas; in attempting to distinguish *ethical* practice from practices more broadly as something instinctive or intuitive to human beings, what he calls "modern moral philosophy" has lost its sense of ethics as an *art*.

Thus, MacIntyre argues that practical rationality has its roots in *virtuous* participation in certain historically-situated *practices* in the context of *institutions* that serve as the basis of the practices of these standards. The aspiration of a philosophical account should be to organize these institutions and the practices and the theories associated with them into a holistic system within which a whole moral life can be articulated. We have finally arrived at MacIntyre's understanding of a *tradition:* "A living tradition, then, is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981], 222). Through this definition we get three insights into the holistic character of tradition mentioned above: 1) traditions organize practices, virtues, and institutions in relation to one another as elements of a complete socialized life, 2) traditions organize ideas and theories as part of the same temporally-extended argument, and 3) traditions organize the practical elements in 1 and the theoretical elements in 2 into a whole wherein they function as necessary supports to one another. It should immediately be noted that practices,

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[43] For a discussion of the relationship between rule-following and rule-instituting, particularly in cases that cause Kripkenstein-style skeptical worries, see the Introduction of Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust.* He makes the case that understanding the relationship between the *instituting* and *recognitive* attitudes towards conceptual application is crucial to understanding Hegel's depiction of the concept in the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* While MacIntyre takes pains to distinguish himself from the Hegelian perspective, Hegel's understanding of conceptualization here is thoroughly Aristotelian in a manner that makes Brandom's account amenable to MacIntyre's NeoAristotelian understanding of the concept.

institutions, *and* the traditions that animate them *all* develop over time; it must be possible that they suffer some as-yet-unencountered flaw which requires revision of each.

I can now begin to recast the scenario I began with in the first chapter. One important element of our disagreement about the relationship case is for us to have different understandings of the goods of the tradition of which we are a part[44].But this presents us with a new set of problems. Can our positions even be said to be part of a tradition? Given that they are, how do we know that we are a part of the same tradition? And what sort of thing *is* that tradition, beyond what we have said above? What differentiates MacIntyre's account from those of other NeoAristotelians and Thomists is his particularly modern understanding of the role of history[45]. In the next sub-section I will discuss the relationship between MacIntyre's account and Moral Relativism and their peculiar relationship to a philosophical consideration of history in greater detail.

2.2 *Whose Relativism? Which Abstraction?*

It may seem as though MacIntyre has done little more than dress up Moral Relativism. His account eschews a conventional idea of universal Reason, insists on a community-derived

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[44] MacIntyre's project can here be productively related to Philippa Foot's in her "Moral Relativism" (1978). In that article, Foot outlines a number of features that would necessarily be a part of any morality that could, on her understanding, be coherently thought as such. See also Martha Nussbaum's "Non-Relative Virtues" from her edited volume *The Quality of Life* for a version of this same attempt that is less hostile to the modern moral landscape. While both Foot and Nussbaum attempt to use a NeoAristotelian framework in order to establish a common scaffolding for any talk of morality whatsoever. MacIntyre will ultimately be more conservative in his minimalist account in 1981's *After Virtue,* but will come around to a positive account of necessary moral conditions by the time he writes 1999's *Dependent Rational Animals.*

[45] In John Haldane's "MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?" from the edited volume *After MacIntyre* he emphasizes the historicist departures MacIntyre makes from traditional interpretations of Thomism which take it (rightly) to be making epistemological and metaphysical claims about eternal truths. It is precisely MacIntyre's distance from these traditional interpretations which makes him of particular interest to my project; it is insofar as he has integrated elements from modern philosophy into his broader Aristotelian dialectic that he makes a significant claim against the critical gestures of philosophers like Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

evaluation of the goodness of an action, and argues that there are practices which are not cross-culturally intelligible[46]. In addition to this list of seeming offenses, MacIntyre has provided us with what he takes to be a distinctively non-modern account of practical rationality. The specifics of how this account of practical rationality interacts with Moral Relativism are not yet clear. In this subsection, I hope to clarify MacIntyre's relationship to Moral Relativism by reconstructing his methodology.

MacIntyre's substantial differences from the Moral Relativist change across the course of his career, but they are bound together by a few threads that weave throughout his work. His position is made most explicit in 1991's "Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification." In that text, he presents a counter-argument to Moral Relativism very similar to the one that I presented in the last chapter about the necessarily truth-bound nature of assertions. Appealing to Geach, Aristotle, and Aquinas, MacIntyre argues that theories of truth that support Moral Relativism and truth-agnostic theories of justification fail to take an appropriately holistic approach to the phenomena in question. Dummett is his primary target:

> Certainly, as I have already argued, the concept of truth, 'realistically conceived', or at least conceived so that an anti-realist interpretation is excluded, cannot be reduced to or constructed out of that of justifiability, any more than the concept of a physical object can be reduced to or constructed out of sense-data or the concept of pain reduced to or constructed out of that of bodily expressions of pain. In each such case there have been

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[46] MacIntyre's explicit challenge to Donald Davidson in the "Tradition and Translation" chapter of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is centered around a holistic understanding of language-learning which requires that one be brought wholly into another culture in order to fully understand it. This will play a significant role in the argument of the next chapter.

philosophers prepared to make a reductionist objection, parallel to that advanced by

Dummett. But the reductionist appears to her or himself to face the problem of a

'conceptual leap', only because she or he has matters the wrong way round. Bodily

expressions of pain have to be already understood in terms of pain, if they are to be

understood as expressions of pain and not as something else, and not vice versa, and

sense-data equally have to be already understood in terms of physical objects and not vice

versa. So too justifiability has to be already understood in terms of truth and not vice

versa. There is no conceptual gap waiting to be crossed. (MacIntyre 2006, 213)

What is so interesting about MacIntyre's insistence on beginning holistically in this passage is

that it captures a part of his project in miniature in a manner which means everything for how we

should proceed. MacIntyre appears here to be making the straightforward claim that in making

the assertion, moral or otherwise, that "X is thus-and-so" is to claim (alongside Tarski) that X

truly is thus and so; we could not understand what it is to make an assertion without truth and

vice versa. It follows that he, unlike the moral relativist, will hold that we are able to make

judgments across traditions. I will be able to intelligibly judge, say, that the utilitarian's moral

judgments are fundamentally unjust. How, given the image of judgments in the paragraph quoted

above, could it be otherwise? But how are we able to do this, if what it is to be rational is to be

properly related to a tradition?

MacIntyre's answer spans over three decades and a number of books and articles. We can

begin to understand it by turning back to *After Virtue*. There, MacIntyre compares the two giants

of the revival of Kantian political philosophy in the twentieth century, John Rawls's *A Theory of

Justice* and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia.* MacIntyre does not simply allege that

Rawls and Nozick subscribe to a bad empiricist understanding of positionless abstraction (more on this below). Instead, he says that the construction of just this subject position *is* possible *and* that it is explicitly *ideological*. MacIntyre's argument is that taking up modern accounts of the self and its relation to ethics will enervate our language and lives of much of their intelligibility. Nevertheless, such lives *are* livable and these theories only exist *because* this is so.

Consider MacIntyre's criticism of "behavior" as described in the first section of this chapter. It was not the case that the "behavioral" part of the practice at issue was not an element of that practice; drawing attention to the various "behaviors" involved in gardening, however we would like to slice that practice at the joints, is possible in principle. MacIntyre insisted on holism because it draws our attention to the unified character of the action at hand, and to draw attention to this unity is to draw us out into the larger web of unities that make the world intelligible. What is implicit in this account is that it is *possible* to describe an action as a series of discrete behaviors. As a result, a behavioristic (or other reductionistic) "science" of human action is possible. MacIntyre's argument is that such a science will be profoundly limited in what it can explain, and, as a result, large parts of actually-existing human activity will remain obscure to its adherent. Much like an account of knowing without recourse to a notion of truth, a behaviorist account of human action is fine as far as it goes. It just does not take us very far.

So far MacIntyre has established that any attempt to give an explanation of human action must begin with the action in its fullness. The next natural question is where that leaves "partial" theoretical attempts to understand human action, as in the case of behaviorism described above. What is the status of theories of human action that attempt to begin with atomic elements or otherwise reduce their theoretical vocabulary beyond the tradition-practice-institution-virtue

threshold outlined in the previous section? In Charles Taylor's sympathetic commentary on

MacIntyre's oeuvre he raises exactly this issue:

> In the subtitle of *Three Rival Versions,* and in much of the text, the three rival versions of
>
> moral enquiry are identified as encyclopaedia, genealogy, and tradition. However, there
>
> is also a tendency to run together tradition with Thomism such that the two become
>
> coextensive. Yet surely Thomism is a particular tradition, and commitment to it entails
>
> much more than simply commitment to the idea of tradition? Similarly the other versions
>
> of moral enquiry are sometimes counterposed to tradition while at other times they seem
>
> to be understood as distinct alternative traditions. It is difficult to know quite what to
>
> make of this, but it appears to be an issue which needs further explanation." (Taylor
>
> 1994, 13)

The puzzle here is how one can get sufficient distance from the tradition of which they are a part

to call it a tradition and thereby delimit it, especially when one has to be able to maintain that to

take a practice as justified is also to take it to be responsive to something *true*[47]. We can begin to

understand this if we start with the Kantian case as I presented it above. MacIntyre needs to

explain how it is possible to take up a Kantian perspective *even* if one doesn't hold it to be one's

own *and* that one cannot do this as though one did not occupy a different perspective oneself.

In the chapter "Contested Justices, Contested Rationalities" from MacIntyre's *Whose*

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[47]Why this second part is problematic may at first be obscure. Consider, then, the double life that it seems as though our in-tradition judgments have to play. They have, on one hand, to be about the world. We have to be able to say, "Good fathers are supportive and attentive" and to have that be true, not simply justified. On the other hand, our explanation of how we know it to be true will have to make reference to the resources of the tradition, and thereby seem to qualify our judgments in the manner of "...for people like us." The question is how our judgments can be sufficiently unconditional to relate unproblematically to the truth *and* be available to us only through our traditions.

Justice? Which Rationality? he explains that the person who finds herself within the ambit of a tradition must be able to speak in two voices. The first voice is used to participate in the arguments that currently animate the tradition of which the practitioner is a part and the second voice is used to occupy the position of another tradition, both to test one's own tradition and, possibly, to convert to that tradition if one finds that it is a stronger account of how things are. Much like a second language, this second voice can never be adopted entirely unless an identity-shaking transformation takes place. MacIntyre writes: "We possess such concepts without being able to employ them in the first person, except as dramatic impersonators, speaking in a voice which is not our own" (MacIntyre 1988, 395). The defender of a given tradition thus uses a narrative mode not unlike that of Hegel's in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, or, more appropriately, Aquinas' in the *Summa Theologica;* she speaks in the voice of partial positions, traditions that are not sufficiently aware of their status as traditions or do not even know that they aspire to the status of traditions, in order to perform a sort of immanent critique. This immanent critique proceeds by showing that the problems of the "target" tradition can 1) *cannot* be sufficiently answered using the resources of that tradition and 2) *can* be accommodated by the "mother" tradition, in this case NeoAristotelianism. MacIntyre will write throughout his post-1981 work that occupying the shoes of rival traditions (or pseudo-traditions, as the case may be) is necessary for the practitioners of a given tradition to test the limitations and strengths of their own viewpoint.

Think back to the quote from "Moral Relativism" above. We now have a much clearer picture of what the truth in question will look like. It will be a truth that is whole in the sense that every other intelligible perspective (or what is intelligible within that perspective) will appear to

be a part of it or a moment in its realization[48].What it means to understand such a moral truth as a whole will *not* be to abstract from a given appearance, but rather to *systematically* develop an account in which that whole plays a part and each of its moments fit. This account is, on MacIntyre's account, a tradition. Our evaluation of the world is thus always in reference to a tradition (insofar as it makes the world intelligible at all) and this tradition could not operate if it was not, in principle, subject to possible revision. This answers the Taylor quote above; even if alternative traditions do not recognize the notion of tradition, MacIntyre "sees" them as traditions when he "looks" at them. MacIntyre never steps out of his NeoAristotelian "shoes", but rather endeavors to demonstrate how far he can walk in them.

MacIntyre makes this position explicit in 2016's *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity,* where he explains that people are rendered incoherent to themselves by the introduction of a fundamental split in the way they think of themselves. They spend part of their time as utility maximizing subjects acting according to the logic of capital:

> On the one hand– and here I am relying on what was said earlier about the contemporary social order–they inhabit a social world structured to some large degree by the institutions of state, market, and Morality and find themselves in social relationships shaped directly and indirectly by these. It is mostly taken for granted that what they want is what the dominant social institutions have influenced them to want and the practical thinking of those others with whom they engage is for the most part informed by the

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[48] I sketched the conditions of intelligibility for ethical evaluations in the previous sub-section. An ethical evaluation must be *embodied* in a social practice; it must make substantive reference to an internal good as its end. Candidates for "moral evaluation" made outside of any such practices will have no meaningful sense. Note that this does not *in principle* rule out certain sorts of Enlightenment evaluations, but such evaluations will of necessity be as partial as the framework which undergirds and supports them.

ethics-of-the-state, the ethics-of-the-market, and the norms of Morality. (MacIntyre 2016,

186)

In short, people who spend time in the cultures that MacIntyre takes himself to be concerned

with find that they spend a part of their time in an alienated state that has been part of the

problem of modernity since at least Rousseau. But they will consistently find, he argues, that this

part of their life is at odds with another:

> On the other hand – and here again I refer back to what was said earlier – their initiation
>
> into a range of practices has enabled many of them not only to identify a variety of goods
>
> and excellences that they aspire to make their own, but also to recognize that among these
>
> goods are common goods, goods to be achieved only qua family member or qua member
>
> of this working group or this local community. Trying to give a due place to goods of
>
> these different types, they find themselves asking such questions as 'How is it best for me
>
> to live?' and 'How is it best for this community of which I am a part to live?' so they may
>
> on occasion more or less systematically try to work out answers to these questions, rank
>
> ordering in the course of their everyday activities the individual and common goods for
>
> whose achievement they hope and identifying those qualities of mind and character that
>
> they must possess and those precepts that must govern their actions and transactions if
>
> they are to achieve those goods. In all these respects they are already thinking and acting
>
> in Aristotelian and Thomistic terms, terms systematically at odds with those of the
>
> dominant culture that they inhabit, commonly without recognizing this. (MacIntyre 2016,
>
> 166-7)

The Aristotelian-Thomistic elements of people's lives uneasily coexist with the elements that

accord with the accepted worldview[49]. In *Dependent Rational Animals* MacIntyre argues that the various norms of the "ethics-of-the-state, the ethics-of-the-market, and the norms of Morality" are dependent upon and secondary to the internal goods preserved and promoted by this Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. There, he explicitly links these values to ongoing sorts of dependency to which we are subject.

In that 1999 book MacIntyre shifts emphasis from middle-aged, able-bodied, and male practical reasoners to children, the elderly, women, and those with disabilities. He makes this shift in emphasis for a number of related reasons:

1. To emphasize what these "non-standard" reasoners tell us about the structure of practical rationality as it is "normally" understood.[50]

2. To outline those relationships of care and dependency without which we would not be able to become adults, or survive in our old age.

3. Related to (2), to insist on the unquantifiable and non-normalizing standards of exchange brought to bear in such relationships.

4. To equally insist that quantifiable and normalized standards of exchange are themselves

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[49] MacIntyre thus wants to keep a notion of alienation that is avowedly Marxist, though he puts it towards explicitly non-Marxist ends. This problematic extends through his work, from 1953's *Marxism: An Interpretation* through 2016's *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. He wants to count Marxism as an expansion upon and emendation of the Aristotelian tradition. This influence shows up in his thinking on a variety of subjects, including his ongoing critique of the social sciences (See especially "Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority" and its successor arguments in Chapter 8 of *After Virtue* and Chapter 2 of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*) and his critique of the state (See his critiques of "actually existing" Marxism in *After Virtue* and his response to Pettit in "A Partial Response to my Critics" in *After MacIntyre).* For a helpful summary of MacIntyre's history with political Marxism, see Blackledge and Davidson's "Introduction" to the recent collection *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Readings 1953-1974.*

[50] It should be noted that MacIntyre also spends a good portion of the book on the reasoning capacities of non-human animals. He wants to argue that such animals are capable of a form of practical reasoning in order to demonstrate that practical reasoning is not *essentially* a theoretical affair.

dependent upon the standards mentioned in (3) (per above.)

MacIntyre advances these arguments because he wants to find a set of necessary conditions that need to be in place in order for anything like a human community to come into being in the first place, that is, to qualify as a possible tradition[51].The question now becomes, how can MacIntyre assert the necessity of these conditions *if* he has already stipulated that what counts as a condition is relative to a tradition, even if, as I argued MacIntyre believes above, it is necessary that he is only able to see it from within his tradition. After all, every theoretical position is intelligible just so far as there is something truly livable in it on MacIntyre's account. Why can't resistance to a tradition itself be livable? In 1979's "Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority," MacIntyre himself argues that every norm is necessarily contestable:

> In any type of practice or institution of any complexity, the modes of interpretation that constitute the practice will not always be entirely coherent internally nor consistent with one another: the patients' understanding of the doctor-patient relationship and the doctors' understanding of that relationship, which together give form to their material transactions, are notably not necessarily at one. To borrow a useful metaphor, although one which can also be misleading, their relationship embodies or may embody *an argument* about sickness, health, expertise, drugs and many other topics. Each attempts to

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[51] The case has been made, by MacIntyre himself among others (in particular see Anthony Burns's paper "Revolutionary Aristotelianism?") that over the span of books stretching from 1981 to 1999 he transitions from an epistemologically-driven to a more properly metaphysical approach. That this is in large part true is clear to anyone who is familiar with his oeuvre. That being said, the account provided by 2016's *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* suggests that there is more overlap between these positions than a casual reader might suspect. While I cannot give an extended treatment of the development of MacIntyre's methodology here, methodological considerations will be sprinkled throughout the rest of this chapter (see Robert Stern's "MacIntyre and Historicism" from *After MacIntyre* for more on the relationship between history and knowledge in mid-career MacIntyre.)

win this argument in part by casting the other into a role which fits the dramatic forms

suited to their own side of the argument. As with the doctor-patient relationship, so with

the parent-child, the ruler-ruled, the professor-student and so on. (MacIntyre 1979)

It follows from such an account, and from what I have said above, that any norm or standard held

by a rational tradition, including those laid out in the name of Thomism in *Dependent Rational*

Animals, is contestable. This is what makes "Genealogy" a viable tradition of inquiry in *Three*

Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry; it is, in principle, always possible to suspend a given evaluative

norm or standard, or to "explain it away" by appealing to its contingent origins. How, then can

MacIntyre make the claim that he does about the dependence of the aberrant individual in the

normal case?

The possibility for this sort of skepticism goes all the way up to the structures of tradition

laid out in *After Virtue;* there is no book of the world out of which we can clearly read, once and

for all, the appropriate relationship between tradition, virtue, practice, and institutions. This

being said, MacIntyre argues that it is because they have developed under the pressure of

criticism that the elements of a tradition remain so sturdy. MacIntyre makes clear throughout his

work that this argument, the possibility of skepticism about a given standard or norm of the

tradition, is what makes it able to make progress; it would not be far-fetched to call it the *motor*

for a tradition to make progress. While it is necessary to systematically and skeptically examine

each element of a tradition in order for it to be as coherent and explanatory as possible, this

critical operation has to be argued in tandem with a recognition of the set of goods which provide

the positive content of a tradition.

The discoveries of *Dependent Rational Animals* are thus claims about certain sorts of

internal goods that are not somehow transcendentally secured, that is, claims about their value are in-principle defeasible. While it is safe to say that there is *something* to those goods that make them worth pursuing such that the theory about them was formulated in the first place, it is necessarily always the case that our understanding of them can be contested as *partial*. We may imagine, for example, that while having a "traditional" nuclear family c*an* initiate one into a number of goods that, the structure of the institution of the family could be put into question and the nature of those goods could consequently change. It could even be the case, in principle, that we would find some way to live in a society where the concept of family makes no sense. To live in a society that is wholly skeptical about those goods, however, would have been to suffer a grievous loss of the sort that is described in the opening pages of *After Virtue.* It might even be the case that, if we lose enough practices and their related goods-in-themselves, we could live in something that we could not even recognize as human society. Indeed, at times during *After Virtue* MacIntyre writes as though we already live in such a society.

All this to say that *contestability* does not thereby entail *skepticism,* nor does it entail *relativism.* If anything, the primacy of contestability in MacIntyre's account cuts against any sort of relativism that would hold that accounts cannot be compared to another or that they cannot be rationally evaluated. Throughout his work, MacIntyre goes to other traditions to contest their rival attempts to give an account for the way that the world is and to be contested in turn. Crucial to his account is that he finds them lacking in comparison to his own Aristotelian-Thomist position and, more importantly, that the problems that hound such accounts can be solved by recourse to his position.

I now have the proper ground to recast the problems I grappled with in the last chapter.

Our moral disagreement in the case of Jones *did not* qualify as a rational disagreement, rooted as it was within utilitarian and Kantian outlooks that lacked sufficient practical and historical institutional grounding to permit a rational solution. While our disagreement has lost the possibility of contextless rational resolution, MacIntyre has opened up the door to two other sorts of disagreement: inter-traditional disagreements of the sort described above and intra-traditional disagreements between practitioners in a common tradition or institution. MacIntyre holds that the former can be "resolved" through the oblique absorption and redescription of traditions described above. Historically messy as it is, his story is a bit too theoretically neat. I will begin to explain why this is in the next subsection. There I will take up a particular case of intra-traditional disagreement that is of particular importance.

2.3 Taking It Personally

The account of practical reasoning that I have provided thus far is helpfully glossed by MacIntyre in 1987's "Practical Rationalities as Social Structures":

What place rational argument has within practices varies from practice to practice; of the practices which I have initially listed its place is perhaps largest within the practices of mathematics and theology and smallest within the practice of poetry. But what makes practical rationality possible within each practice, no matter how large or small its place, is the way in which the practice is directed towards the achievement of certain goods, specific to and internal to each particular practice, which provide both activity and enquiry within each practice with their *telos*. It is of course the understanding of this *telos* which provides the practical syllogisms of this kind of rational practice with their ultimate initial premises, premises of the form, "the good and the best within this practice

is such-and-such." (MacIntyre 1987, 123)

Practical rationality centers around teleological activities. The telos of these activities is provided by historical investigation. The practices furnished by this investigation are embodied in the actual practices of living practitioners and the investigation itself is continued in the arguments of the practitioners. A tradition is itself a sort of meta-practice; it has the aim of integrating the practices that make up human life, in part by preserving the community which allows such lives to reproduce themselves.[52] This entails making substantive assertions about the nature of a good practitioner for a given practice, such as a good carpenter, and about the good life for a citizen. The nature of these claims and the practices they are integrated with is such that they can only be evaluated within a community of practitioners. While this last claim has only been made obliquely thus far, it will show itself to be of paramount importance in what follows.

This position opens itself to a number of criticisms. The question that will occupy me here concerns *authority.* The question arises because on the account I have presented we lack *objective* standards of the sort that orient us in the natural sciences. The situation is even worse than this; our understanding of the *telos* of practices (and therefore of tradition) is based on ideals embodied in *existing persons*. Why should we have any reason to grant such persons the authority that MacIntyre wants to attribute to them? Even more importantly, it may appear as though the only way that these ideal sages retain their status is by being *treated as though* they

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[52] One way to get a firmer grip on what MacIntyre means by a tradition here is to take it to be a collection of judgments relating judgments about teleologically-driven practices to a "location" within a larger integrated and unitary structure (a life). Having one's life so integrated will mean that one will be able to make a number of *rational* judgments about one's life outside of individual practices (and the relationships associated with those practices.) This claim has its complement the claim (inherent in MacIntyre's definitions of teleology, practice, and rationality) that without the tradition (and its associated set of judgments) no such rational judgments will be available.

are experts. If the "expert" holds that my understanding of myself is not only partial and limited but loathsome, then what sort of account would hold that I owe them *any* deference?

MacIntyre's immediate answer is that I cannot make sense of myself as an individual without these relations of authority. In all of his work after 1981 he claims that the person as liberal "individual" is not rationally evaluable; I can only really understand myself in light of the norms provided by the histories of institutions like friendship, family, employment, and education. Any disagreements I may have with a given practice and my relationship to it will have to be put in the terms provided to me in that practice. Putting aside the appeal to the abstract individual, we might think that we can challenge the authority of the hierarchy of the practice by reference to resources from other identities. But this is already to fall back into the logic that MacIntyre has provided us; to make reference in between practices is to make use of the medium which strings them together, the tradition, and so to take issue with the fundamental tenets of the way that the tradition organizes practices. What we do in this case is not challenge the existing structure of the practice so much as displace the challenge to another, more fundamental level of theoretical discourse.

Still, there is something deeply disconcerting about MacIntyre's account. It may seem to put us in the same sort of circumstance that Rawls tells us utilitarianism does in *A Theory of Justice.* There, he famously argues that "Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons" (Rawls 1999 [1971]*,* 24). It fails to do so precisely because it accords *who* does *what* action no importance; it simply matters that utility in the situation at hand is maximized, and it does not matter how this maximization occurs. In so doing, utilitarianism *generalizes* individual moral reasoning on the model of a super-subject. In so doing it denigrates

our freedom and fails to recognize what, for Rawls, is the locus of moral agency (i.e. in liberal "freedom of association"). We might, similarly, think that MacIntyre's perfectionist approach fails to appreciate our freedoms in a similar manner. In Rawls's discussion of the "Principle of Perfection" he asserts exactly this; MacIntyre's Aristotelianism, like all teleological theories of justice, reduces us to a function of larger excellence-achieving procedure.

I have argued, alongside MacIntyre, that the sort of freedom accorded to individuals in the institutions of modern morality have limited scope and dependent philosophical grounding. However, neither my arguments nor MacIntyre's sufficiently allay concerns about the differences between persons. These two considerations taken together entail that I will need another, non-Kantian and non-Rawlsian account of the differences between persons if I am to both allay this anxiety and retain MacIntyre's philosophical-anthropological insight into the relationship between practice and theory.

In Bernard Williams' "Persons, character and morality" he attempts to provide us with just such an account. There, he places the emphasis not on the inherent dignity of persons nor of their autonomous agency, but on their differences in *character:*

> Differences of character give substance to the idea that individuals are not inter-substitutable. As I have just argued, a particular man so long as he is propelled forward does not need to assure himself that he is unlike others, in order not to feel substitutable, but in his personal relations to others the idea of difference can certainly make a contribution, in more than one way. To the thought that his friend cannot just be equivalently replaced by another friend, is added both the thought that he cannot just be replaced himself, and also the thought that he and his friend are different from each other.

(Williams 1981b, 15)

I want to argue that *insubstitutability* gives us a more robust basis to understand the importance

of the individual in ethics than abstract rational autonomy. More particularly, insubstitutability

draws our attention to the peculiarities of the individual that are brought to the fore in the

expressive dimension of every ethically intelligible action. This expressive dimension will, in

turn, give us grounds to argue for a broader consideration of our *factical* character, or those

elements about us which cannot be readily be used as universal grounds for justification or

grounded in a tradition, in my account of ethical self-consciousness. What will our capacity for

ethical self-consideration have to be able to do in order to appreciate the role of individuality in

contemporary ethical life?

Introducing MacIntyre's attempts to grapple with Williams' challenge on this matter will

be my first step in answering this question. Unlike in this chapter, where the specter haunting

MacIntyre was Moral Relativism of a particularly cultural stripe, the challenge to his viewing the

next chapter will come in the form of Williams's *individualist* account of the relationship

between desire and reason. This position will hold that ethics is downstream from what Williams

calls our "desire set." Despite my shift in focus to the individual, the next chapter will also give

me an opportunity to ask a number of lingering questions about our capacity for

conceptualization across intercultural *difference* and *deference*: what sort of "imaginative

exercise" can I perform such that I could meaningfully take arguments from other traditions to be

bases for reconsideration of positions that I hold? Given the real differences between traditions

that MacIntyre argues for, how can I even begin to understand what it would mean to live in

another tradition, beyond living in the ways which I already hold in common members of that

tradition or see as mere echoes of my own practices? And given the historical reality of violent

conflicts between persons of different cultural traditions, are there any grounds at all for non-

manipulative *rapprochement* between their adherents? The answer to these questions will bring

us to the first, broadly stated tenets of my own position.

3

Insubstitutability and Moral Minimalism

I ended last chapter with a number of questions about Alasdair MacIntyre's work. We may think that a number of his criticisms of the various attempts at codifying a thoroughly modern morality hold; we may think that without certain sorts of institutions and practices this morality simply cannot get any sort of grip on our everyday lives. Even as I agree with the major tenets of the argument, it is dogged by significant and persistent problems. Why should we think that the preservation and/or reconstitution of our practices is the best way to address contemporary ethical conflicts? Why not instead simply leave the past in the past? There is good reason to think that contemporary ethical life has demonstrated just how little moral reasoning we need and what's left of ethical life, one might think, will suffice.

In this chapter I introduce Bernard Williams's position as a foil to MacIntyre's. Like MacIntyre, Williams is a harsh critic of the modern philosophical attempts to find a universal foundation for morality throughout his career. But unlike MacIntyre, Williams does not focus on establishing the philosophical complement to social conditions for a more integrated and virtuous traditional community, but attempts instead to develop a sophisticated and minimalist account of what has actually replaced the classical image of morality. I introduce Williams's perspective by explaining his famous contrast between internal and external reasons as a challenge to MacIntyre's understanding of the relationship between reason and desire. This will provide us with the groundwork to approach his understanding of the Enlightenment project, which will in turn help us to contextualize what he thinks we still have to learn from ancient moral philosophy.

I then compare MacIntyre's perspective on inter-traditional intelligibility with Williams's. This sets up the introduction of my own view that inter-traditional and intra-traditional self-consciousness refer to activities of self-regard proper to two different forms of ethical response. I then argue that understanding their interrelation will require us to look to the work of Stanley Cavell.

3.1 *Internal Reasons and Moral Emotions*

In Bernard Williams's much-discussed essay, "Internal and External Reasons," he sets out to dismiss as spurious the claim that there is any such thing as an external reason, by which he means a reason that one would mark one as necessarily irrational if one ignored it. Williams goes to great pains to not reduce this idea to either of two simpler positions: Williams is not arguing that 1) there are no grounds for deliberating about the best course of action, given our set of desires (which he labels "S") or that 2) it is not possible that there could be a more advisable course of action (given our desire set) about which we are currently ignorant for any number of reasons (we are not sufficiently acquainted with the situation on the ground, we haven't deliberated appropriately, etc.) He explains:

> There are of course many things that a speaker may say to one who is not disposed to Φ when the speaker thinks that he should be, as that he is inconsiderate, or cruel, or selfish, or imprudent; or that things, and he, would be a lot nicer if he were so motivated. Any of these can be sensible things to say. But one who makes a great deal out of putting the criticism in the form of an external reason statement seems concerned to say that what is particularly wrong with the agent is that he is irrational. It is this theorist who particularly needs to make this charge precise: in particular, because he wants any rational agent, as

such, to acknowledge the requirement to do the thing in question. (Williams 1981a, 101)

Williams is here arguing that there is no one reason which could be mandatory for persons to take into account regardless of other facts about themselves. Put another way, there is no *constitutive* reason that must be taken into account in order for my deliberation about action to be properly rational. The obvious target of a critique like this is the Categorical Imperative. However, this is not just a criticism of transcendental arguments about practical reasoning. This criticism also indicts any principle taken to be necessary for rationality in utilitarian or other teleological argument, such as the Greatest Happiness Principle. Thus, it can also serve as a criticism of a MacIntryean tradition.

What are the practical stakes of dismissing any "external" reason as rationally necessitated? Williams writes:

> In James' story of Owen Wingrave, from which Britten made an opera, Owen's father urges on him the necessity and importance of his joining the army, since all his male ancestors were soldiers, and family pride requires him to do the same. Owen Wingrave has no motivation to join the army at all, and all his desires lead in another direction: he hates everything about military life and what it means. His father might have expressed himself by saying that *there was a reason for Owen to join the army.* Knowing that there was nothing in Owen's *S* which would lead, through deliberative reasoning, to his doing this would not make him withdraw the claim or admit that he made it under a misapprehension. He means it in an external sense. (Williams 1981a, 106)

Claims to external reasons are thus different than claims about improperly motivated persons. A claim about external reasons is a claim about capable agents. More specifically, it is a claim that

anyone that is a capable agent will take external reasons into account. It is a claim about

rationality and, therefore, about the relationship between mind and world. In this particular case,

it is a claim that the *situation itself* furnishes reasons, and thus that a *state of affairs* could

potentially invalidate the agent's claim to rationality. Williams continues:

> Owen might be so persuaded by his father's moving rhetoric that he acquired both the
>
> motivation and the belief. But this excludes an element which the external reasons
>
> theorist essentially wants, that the agent should acquire the motivation *because* he comes
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> to believe the reason statement, and that he should do the latter, moreover, because in
>
> some way, he is considering the matter aright. If the theorist is to hold on to these
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> conditions, he will, I think, have to make the condition under which the agent
>
> appropriately comes to have the motivation something like this, that he should deliberate
>
> correctly; and the external reasons statement itself will have to be taken as roughly
>
> equivalent to, or at least as entailing, the claim that if the agent rationally deliberated,
>
> then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to Φ.
>
> (Williams 1981a, 108-9)

Part of what it is to be rational, on the view that Williams is criticizing here, is to understand the

world correctly and part of understanding the world correctly is perceiving the world in a manner

that accounts for reasons that the world provides. Perceiving the world in such a way does not

simply entail that one understands that a given reason statement could count as a potential reason

for someone, but that this potential reason, seen aright, would motivate *any* properly situated

reasoner and, presumably, be able to change their actions, even and especially if they were

lacking the *desire* to undertake the relevant action, such that they act in a manner mandated by

that reason statement. In short, the world has a normative character that, if properly appreciated, imparts reasons on us regardless of any other facts about our given set of desires *S*.

Against such a view, Williams's aim is to distinguish reasons from descriptions of the world in order to affirm the Humean thesis that the world does not provide any motivating reasons that would be motivating for *any* reasoner[53]. There is one way of understanding this argument such that agrees with my MacIntryean thesis from last chapter: there is no fact of the matter about a given technically capable individual such that they must appreciate this fact in order to be understood to be rational in the limited sense provided by Williams, where this limited sense is itself in keeping with the philosophical anthropology for which I spent much of the last chapter providing an alternative. However, this claim in MacIntyre comes with an additional constraint: the technically capable individual will pay for not recognizing the reasons provided for him by his tradition with the intelligibility of his life in terms of his tradition. Williams, however, thinks that we do not need to pay this high price, though we may find ourselves limited from some of what he takes to be the more extravagant claims of the traditionalist.

This delimitation is most easily discerned in Williams's comments criticizing Kant, his favorite target:

> First, a categorical imperative has often been taken, as by Kant, to be necessarily an
> imperative of morality, but external reason statements do not necessarily relate to

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[53] There is obvious overlap with Gilbert Harman's position as explained in 1975's "Moral Relativism Defended" here. As mentioned above, Harman takes himself to be arguing the Humean point that our moral obligations are not a matter of our rationality, but, instead, of our intentions in common.

morality. Second, it remains an obscure issue what the relation is between 'there is a reason for A to…' and 'A ought to…' Some philosophers have taken them to be equivalent, and under that view the question of external reasons of course comes much closer to the question of a categorical imperative." (Williams 1981a, 106)

Williams's approach cuts against two tendencies in describing persons. The first is to run together "reasons" statements with statements of morality. This criticism has its roots in Williams's philosophical psychology, according to which action on a reason requires a desire to reach some sort of outcome and a belief about the state of affairs such that the outcome can be secured. The key difficulty with making an external reasons statement chime with this psychological outlook, Williams explains, is that it requires that the reasoner could arrive at a motive that is meaningfully disconnected from one's other motives. It cannot be enough that there is one motive that we would all arrive at no matter what our S was, given sufficient deliberation, because that motive would still be downstream from our internal motivations. The theorist of external reasons wants to argue that rationality requires our ability to do things *because* they are rational, not because they are something we desire. In contrast, Williams is arguing that this is both psychologically and metaphysically suspect. Being rational is not equivalent to being moral.

The second, related argument that Williams wants to undermine is the tendency to assign those reasons thought to be universal and transhistorical a particular pride of place. The divide Williams establishes between internal and external reasons is not *just* a Humean assertion of the is/ought divide. Rather, the idea is that ethical reasoning is only relevant to certain kinds of agents, raised in particular ways. Who we are *matters* for ethical reasoning, because ethical

reasoning requires that we be agents with particular sets of desires. It is an argument that we can only understand ethical reasoning by putting it in its proper place in a broader human life.

This critical sensibility persists in his work from 1971 until his later work on ethical reasoning. In that later work, Nietzsche has pride of place in Williams's account of what he thinks of as a "moral minimal". On Williams' reading, Nietzsche provides an account of ethical reasoners that explains moral reasoning in evaluative terms that are not its own. Williams writes:

> Nietzsche's approach is to identify an excess of moral content in psychology appealing first to what an experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter might make of human behavior elsewhere. Such an interpreter might be said to be-- using an obviously and unashamedly evaluative expression -- 'realistic,' and we might say that what this approach leads us toward is a realistic, rather than a naturalistic, moral psychology. What is at issue is not the application of an already defined scientific program, but rather an informed interpretation of some human experiences and activities in relation to others.
>
> (Williams 1993, 239-240)

On this view, Nietzsche provides a perspective that cuts against a "morality first" evaluation of persons. While morality plays some role in our understanding of people's actions, the appeal of Nietzsche for Williams is that he puts morality into a broader motivational context. The effect of this is two-part. First, it accords morality a delimited and non-central role in human life. Second, it explains that this role of morality is part of a larger evaluative picture by which we understand motivations and thus which is necessary in order to make sense of actions. Morality, on this view, is put to non-moral ends. The contrast here, as above, is with the idea of modern morality as an independent register of value and source of motivation, especially if this contrast is meant

to entail that morality takes absolute precedence over other kinds of evaluation.

These two together constitute Williams' attempt to follow Nietzsche in taking up the position of the "experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter." He provides the particularly Nietzschean case of blame as an example. Blame, he argues, only makes sense in the particular contexts in which there is mutual recognition of a shared relationship in common, and thus the implicit or explicit agreement that injuries to this relationship prompt reparative action. Blame, however, can float free of its appropriate context. Considered outside of situations where there is mutual recognition and no further possibility of reparative measures, it becomes a peculiar sort of retrospective wishful thinking. Specifically, it is the thought that the agent who wronged the victim *could have* acted otherwise and thus recognize the victim in the moment of their action. The name for that imagined particular capacity to have done otherwise which rests on this misrecognition of the proper role of blame is "the will."

This case is helpful because it gives us a good sense of the kinds of insight available to Williams's unoptimistic observer that suggests we can take a meaningful, self-consciously critical perspective on some kinds of ordinary moral experience. His account is parsimonious without being reductive, centered around the priority of desire, the limits of recognition, and (as one might expect) relies minimally on moral explanation. Importantly, this is not *cynical* or *eliminative* about moral values, since that would mean dismissing the relevance of moral motivation for the explanation of human action. This is why Williams calls the Nietzschean perspective *realistic;* to be realistic in this sense means embracing the role of moral evaluation in human action not by *eliminating* or *ignoring* the role certain reasons play in our lives, but rather by putting those reasons alongside others.

Thus far I have sketched out Williams's position as one oriented around the pluralization of values and suspicious of attempts by moral explanations to colonize the broader realm of human concern. This realistic attitude towards morality does entail that ethical reasoning is only a matter of individual preference. The recognitive complexities of Williams's account were explored in the 1989 Sather Lectures collected in his book *Shame and Necessity.* That book guides the reader through a number of topics in Ancient Greek cultural self-understanding and moral psychology. Central to that exploration is the contrast between shame and guilt. Williams explains the interrelated roles of these emotions as forms of ethical response to bad action:

> We can feel both guilt and shame towards the same action. In a moment of cowardice, we let someone down; we feel guilty because we have let them down, ashamed because we have contemptibly fallen short of what we might have hoped of ourselves. As always, the action stands between the inner world of disposition, feeling, and decision and an outer world of harm and wrong. *What I have done* points in one direction towards what has happened to others, in another direction to what I am. (Williams 2008, 92)

Shame is based on our modeling the view of an ideal viewer of our public practice. It is concerned with the "conceptions of what one is, and how one is related to others." It thus has to do with character, understood as the integrated unity of our social identity through the patterns of actions in our relationships. Because it deals with character, shame has *transformative potential.* It is a negative evaluation not only of a particular action, but rather "who we are", and thus the developed capacities which enable our particular actions. Because shame is concerned with the broader patterns of life and self that make up one's character and community, it holds out the possibility of reconciliation and transformation of that life and self. In contrast, guilt is an

emotional and ethical response based on the harm done to another in a particular action that transgresses according the commonly understood criteria of pre-existing social roles. Where shame, Williams argues, can enable reform of the self, the appropriate response to guilt is a reparative action to compensate for the harm done. Guilt thus focuses on the particular action and its particular victim, and thus can miss the broader characterological context of the action provided in cases of shame.

The modern morality that is Williams' target is centered around guilt and thus retains a legalistic sense of right and wrong. This limits our moral understanding of the community by making the primary evaluative locus the recognitive community of rights-holders as entities who have commonly-accepted reparative claims. Shame, on the other hand, directs us to a broader view of the community in which these sorts of rights could be meaningfully honored. Williams writes: "The structures of shame contain the possibility of controlling and learning from guilt, because they give a conception of one's ethical identity, in relation to which guilt can make sense. Shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself" (Williams 2008, 93). This is because guilt relies upon relationships that are *enabled by* the character of the people of a community, predicated on their having certain desires and self-understandings. Guilt, in other words, only exists *inside of* a community constituted by the possibility of shame. This contrast will be crucially important to my transformational account of moral conflict I will give later. For now, I have presented Williams's account of our ethical life across three dimensions: the rejection of external reasons, the attempt to explain morality through a broader moral psychology, and the distinction between recognitive and transformational ethical response. In the next section, I will explain how these dimensions meet in Williams's positive account of modern

minimalist morality.

3.2 *Virtues of Truth*

At first glance, this account of Bernard Williams might appear to put him in solid

agreement with MacIntyre. MacIntyre, after all, was critical of the idea of a transcendent or

transcendental moral condition that floated free from any particular tradition or the institutions

that actualize that tradition. They were both consequently critical of the possibility of a morality

which was concerned with a universally and/or rationally discernible series of rules and rights

that delimit the scope of proper human action and which is similarly ascertainable in-principle by

any sufficiently rational and reflective agent. Like MacIntyre, Williams wants to give an account

of morality that understands it as an historical and social phenomenon. Nevertheless, near the

end of *Shame and Necessity* Williams sympathetically criticizes MacIntyre for throwing out the

baby with the Enlightenment bathwater:

> For some critics, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, the belief in the featureless moral self is a
>
> characteristic expression of the Enlightenment and constitutes a major reason why we
>
> should abandon its legacy: in the direction, for MacIntyre, of a renovated Aristotelianism.
>
> But the Enlightenment, as representing a set of social and political ideals in favour of
>
> truthfulness and the criticism of arbitrary and merely traditional power, has no essential
>
> need of such images, and if, more generally, we can make better sense of our ethical
>
> ideas, we can hope to rethink those ideals in ways that will make it clear that this is so. It
>
> has been the argument of this book that we shall make better sense of the ethical ideas
>
> that we need if we look back to some ideas of the Greeks. That process need not condemn
>
> the ideal of the Enlightenment, inasmuch as they are identified with the pursuit of social

and political honesty, rather than with a rationalistic metaphysics of morals. (Williams

2008, 159)

Williams is here arguing for a change in emphasis of Enlightenment values, moving away from

articulating features of a universal rational subject criticized in the last section and towards the

historically-originated values of "truth" and "criticism". Williams wants us to think of the

Enlightenment project as primarily *negative* and *critical*; it differentiates itself from pre-

Enlightenment thinking by centering the experience of the individual *in contrast to* traditional

authority. His criticism of moralism in psychology is crucial to this project; Williams takes it to

be an unjustifiable remnant of a pre-Enlightenment ideology of social authority.

While Williams remains fairly steadfast in his commitment to this vision of the

Enlightenment throughout his career, one of his most thorough treatments of this position is put

forward in his 2002 book *Truth and Truthfulness.* There Williams avows his commitment to a

method that will avoid the centrality of moral explanation and externalist accounts of moral

reasoning, but at the same time give an explanation for the source of some common values that

can negotiate the pitfalls of a reductive naturalism. Williams calls this method, following

Nietzsche, a "genealogy."[54] At its most basic, he explains: "A genealogy is a narrative that tries

to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have

come about, or might be imagined to have come about" (Williams 2002, 20). Such an account

begins by providing an account of the "state of nature", modeled on classic philosophical

analogues, which establishes the basic needs and situation of a group of simplified agents. The

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[54]There is a substantial difference, Williams is at pains to argue, between the Nietzschean genealogy which respects the truth and to which he claims fidelity and the forms of genealogy (associated, one assumes based on Williams's allusions, with the French uptake of Nietzsche) that, misinterpreting this legacy, reject truth.

genealogy itself consists of an account of cultural practices that tracks the complex changes of those practices according to problems they would likely encounter based on the aforementioned hypothetical initial conditions. The result should give an account of a given practice that is not transcendentally vindicatory nor one that eliminates the phenomenon in question entirely in favor of simpler explicantia.

Truth and Truthfulness is thus his attempt to provide such a genealogical account of virtues surrounding truth. In Chapter 5, Williams lays out two conditions for a community to hold that something has an intrinsic value. First, that "it is necessary (or nearly necessary) for basic human purposes and needs that human beings should treat it as an intrinsic good" (Williams 2002, 91). We must be able to make sense of the value in terms of basic human needs and desires as outlined in the state of nature. However, this condition by itself remains too strategic; the utility of a given thing, particularly a given socially-required disposition, is not in-itself sufficient to motivate me to genuinely endorse it. Williams also requires that "Those who treat it as having an intrinsic value must themselves be able to make sense of it as having an intrinsic value" (Williams 2002, 91). That is, the value must make sense when considered in relationship to other values which the agent holds to be intrinsically valuable. The value must have an evaluable coherence with respect to the broader value set of the agent such that it is endorsable "from inside." What we are looking to eliminate, here, is the possibility of a good that is only self-consciously held as one, and not taken *to actually be* a good. Williams is skeptical that, in this second case, we can really understand the value in question meaningfully as a good, and that to do so is not taking it seriously *as* a good.

If these two conditions are met, Williams writes:

[...] then we shall have *constructed* an intrinsic good. Another way of putting it is that in

a genealogy the value can be represented as arising from more primitive needs and

desires, and that when we reflect on that story, we can find the value intelligible without

at the same time losing our hold on it. (Williams 2002, 92)

Williams' amphibious genealogy provides both the analytic composition of a value like Sincerity

as a whole, that is, what basic needs and desires serve as "pieces" for its composition, and the

context in which that value itself sits as a "piece", that is, that set of values of self-understanding

of which Sincerity is a part[55]. Sincerity, Accuracy, and the modern development of Authenticity

out of these more basic virtues are the values that Williams wants to characterize as specific to a

truth-oriented moral minimalism. These are meant to be in explicit contrast with both

MacIntyre's Neo-Aristotelian virtues and the sort of law-driven principled modern moral

philosophy that both he and MacIntyre criticize[56].

What is particularly interesting about Williams's treatment of his modern virtues is that

they are *liminal* in the sense that they cover over a particular gap in social cooperation. Consider

his explanation of the need for Sincerity:

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[55] This argument and its method once again show Williams to be arguing in parallel to MacIntyre. The construction of a genealogy that threads together internal goods into a holistic integrated whole which makes our life in common is his version of an argument for a tradition. He shares MacIntrye's skepticism about the instrumentalization of these core values and, simultaneously, their transcendental validation. However, as we shall see, Williams thinks his alternative asks much less of us than MacIntyre's account, and, as a result, it is much more psychologically and philosophically plausible.

[56] Interestingly, the "constructive genealogical" method as Williams understands it also shares much in common with Rawlsian proceduralism, though it, of course, attempts to arrive at virtues that are anterior to the sort of institutions that Rawls is concern with. As we will have seen in the last chapter and will see in the next chapter, one of the key elements that united all three thinkers is an interest in the elements of informal ethical life that precede any explicit rules-based proceduralism.

Between the cases in which there are shared interests, and those in which dependence on others is recognizably hazardous, we need something else. We need to rely on assertions' being sincere not only where this is guaranteed by obvious self-interest, immediate or medium-term, but in a range of interactions wider than these. We need people to have dispositions of Sincerity, and this implies that people treat Sincerity as having an intrinsic value. (Williams 2002, 95)

Sincerity, in all of its various historical forms, is "a disposition to make sure that one's assertion expresses what one actually believes" born out of the necessity of action coordination (Williams 2002, 96). It "fills the gap" between when we can obviously count on people because doing so is in their self-interest and those situations where the interests are obviously at odds with our own. Importantly, this requires that we depend upon the *individual* being inculcated with Sincerity rather than on the obvious alignment of external interests. It can only be the kind of virtue that is conducive to our life in common if people are taught to hold it to be good in-itself, though the value of this goodness will always be measured in relationship to other goods[57].

Action coordination, Williams argues, will also require a kind of cultivated attention to both internal and external reality that he associates with Accuracy. This cultivation requires the development of a virtuous capacity rather than just a brute natural sensitivity to facts of the matter, Williams thinks, "because it operates in a space that is structured to conceal or dissimulate" (Williams 2002, 124). The "passion for getting it right" Williams argues is

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[57] It is important to the plausibility of Williams's moral minimalism that it not ask individuals to adhere to these virtues all of the time or that they hold them to be goods that outstrip any other goods. This would simply replicate the centering of ethical reasoning that he has explicitly set out to avoid.

intimately related to "an investigative investment, and related ideas of investigative strategies [which] imply that inquiry will encounter obstacles" (Williams 2002, 124). To internalize the good of accuracy is to *actively care* about the truth and thus to continually acknowledge and ameliorate the obstacles that the various interests of the social world continually produce to prevent our understanding it.

Both sincerity and accuracy are intimately related to perhaps the most complex of the virtues that Williams introduces, Authenticity. Authenticity, as a virtue, consists in being committed to the truth about oneself, and thereby overcoming internal obstacles of self-understanding. This obviously requires particularly difficult commitments to both Sincerity and Accuracy, since the object of investigation and explication is more obscure. This is not, however, to say that the virtue of Authenticity is to imply it is solely a matter of hermetic reflection. Like MacIntyre, Williams thinks that any account of our personal identity today must be given in the light of the values and norms of the community of which we are a part. Authenticity, as a virtue, is the capacity to come to a certain stabilization of one's person in light of a social context in which our identity operates:

> Drawn to bind myself to the others' shared values, to make my own beliefs and feelings steadier (to make them, at the limit, for the first time into beliefs), I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess; I become what I have sincerely declared to them, or perhaps I become my interpretation of their interpretation of what I have sincerely declared to them. The sense that I am contributing to this, that it is a project, fills out the idea that acknowledgement is more than mere factual discovery, while at the same time the sense that there is discovery involved is related to the need to resist fantasy

in making sense of my beliefs and allegiances in this way. (Williams 2002, 204)

The stabilization of one's identity is thus a matter of working against external and internal obstacles to understand oneself, which can include understanding how I am seen in the eyes of others and what is expected of me. It involves an agential relationship to myself in light of how I understand my relationships to other people, and therefore a project of my individuality. It is also, however, a project in which the aim is *clarification* of what I am, and therefore cannot be a product of whimsy or imagination. I contribute to it, but it remains beholden to certain limitations because of the social reality which provides its foundation. The conditions of investigation into some matter with the stability of objective inquiry or socially-constituted identity requires the revelatory structure of uncovering or of discovering, but remains conscious of itself as simultaneously a formative project.

This may seem to undermine the individualistic nature of Williams's account. However, this asymmetrical dependence on the mores of a community does not thereby make me beholden in some special manner to that community on Williams's view. He makes this explicit in a discussion of Diderot's philosophy of mind that he is clearly putting in implicit opposition to views which take there to be some inference from our social nature to greater social obligations:

Because Diderot's picture of the mind, and hence of sincerity itself, makes better sense of idiosyncrasy, it can actually help us to make better sense of social and political co-operation. It installs a social dimension into the construction of beliefs, attitudes, even desires. These are the materials of idiosyncrasy, and the lesson is that we need each other in order to be anybody. There is indeed no straight road from that lesson to the demands of social co-operation. As we have seen several times before in this study, and *Rameau's*

Nephew should dramatically remind us, such theoretical considerations, whether about the constitution of the mind, the nature of assertion, or whatever, get us as far as they get us and no further. If the impact of the social world has made some man into an idiosyncratically uncooperative and self-centred figure, there are no reasonings drawn from this process that can rationally require him to be something else[58]. (Williams 2002, 200)

From the fact, Williams argues, that I am in need of social stabilization in order to establish a personal identity, it does not follow that I have a *reason* to become socially compliant. This should not surprise us; after all, for Williams, we can only understand what someone has a reason to do through an understanding of their (sometimes iconoclastic) desires.

This is a model for how Williams will deal with MacIntyre-style criticisms of his thoroughly modern ethical outlook. Williams avoids these attacks by 1) dramatically reducing the scope of "positive" Enlightenment ambitions as seen above, and 2) ceding the sociality of identity to MacIntryean critics. But, as we have seen, the strain of confirming both of these positions simultaneously alongside his commitment to a position centered around truthfulness requires him to tread the conceptual divide very carefully. While he accepts that our identity is something to which we are beholden in authenticity, he also has to retain that it is a product of

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[58] It is no coincidence that Williams and MacIntyre both write about *Rameau's Nephew.* The play considers the challenge of recovering some vision of ethical life after the Enlightenment challenge to traditional moral conceptions. For the MacIntyre of *After Virtue*, *Rameau's Nephew* is a literary internal critique of Enlightenment morality that expresses Diderot's inability to find a natural basis for that morality in human nature. For the Williams of *Truth and Truthfulness,* who considers at length Hegel's treatment of Rameau, the latter represents sincerity of the deed, being honest about what one is even when that strains the integrity of one's identity. This contrast over the philosophical stakes of the dialogue is an index of some of the most contentious issues between the two thinkers.

creative endeavors that depend upon interpretation. This requires him, like MacIntyre, to deal explicitly with our self-conscious capacities for narrative and interpretation.

His definitive statement of position on these matters comes to the fore in his discussion of what his genealogical method means for our understanding of our relationship to our common history the final chapter of *Truth and Truthfulness*. There, he again positions genealogy as a form of explanation in-between naive triumphalist narratives and rejection of narrative outright. After the development of historical time and Enlightenment disenchantment, Williams argues that any grand teleological narratives have been given a significant burden of proof[59].However, this is not to say that any collection of events should simply be ordered according to the structure of a "chronicle" of unconnected factually reported events. Rather, what a particular history will call for will not simply fall into either of these categories but instead fall alongside other cases of truth-telling into an exercise of the virtues connected with the practice of history. This discussion requires an extended treatment of the limitations of relativism as a response to fundamental disagreements about specifically historical narratives:

> Relativism indeed moves in when there appears to be a conflict, but what it aims to do is to remove the conflict, to show that it is only apparent. In the present case, it will be said, a *relativist,* strictly speaking, should insist that one style of interpretation makes sense to one group of people and another to another, so there is no conflict between them, and this is the end of the matter. But with historical interpretation, clearly, this is not how the matter ends. It may be so when we examine interpretations made by people in the past,

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[59] Which particular historical-teleological narratives Williams has in mind remains somewhat obscure, though at times he insinuates his targets are what he takes to be Hegelian or Marxist positions.

because the matter they were about is indeed ended. It may be so in the present when nothing turns on it. But as I said in the previous section, people who advance contested interpretations are often trying, not just to rally their own group, but to convince the unconvinced. They will not be satisfied with a settlement that, in strictly relativist style, offers each party its own history. (Williams 2002, 260)

I said in the last two chapters that cases of fundamental disagreement are commonly motivated by the incompatibility of the ends considered. This is part of what makes historical argument so insightful on Williams's view: it requires creative and synthetic work to differentiate it from a simple chronicle, but it should also fit the common facts of the matter than any chronicle would include. It needs, in short, to be Authentic, and part of what it is to be authentic is to be able to convince another of its authenticity. Failure to meet either of these criteria of authenticity will make it not just bad history, but not history at all.

On Williams's view, as on MacIntyre's, the virtues of any human community are virtues because they are not just natural sensitivities or automatic responses, but learned excellences of a particular social role. The difference between Williams's moral minimalism and MacIntyre's full-featured Neo-Aristotelianism is that the former takes our social roles to be similarly minimalist. Sincerity, Authenticity, and Accuracy are not, like Courage or Temperance, married to the performance of certain actions. This is precisely why they are intended to be virtues appropriate to any community of coordinated action. This is not the same, however, as claiming that they are transcendental conditions. As products of particular contingent histories of human action, they do not claim for themselves any special status. They are not necessary constitutive role in making one an agent, since they are just requirements any community like ours must have

if its participants want to retain some capacity for coordinating action. It is precisely the capacity for acting in conflict with these virtues, exploiting or manipulating them, Williams tells us, that is the necessary context of their development. Recalling his discussion of external reasons, we should not think that our rationality lives or dies with these virtues.

The broader significance of this treatment of rationality will reappear later in this dissertation. For now, it is enough that we have established Williams's minimal values, explained the methodological commitments that allowed him to arrive at them, contrasted them with the MacIntyrean account, and explained that the virtues as thus described give us good reason to preserve the notion of truth as the (internally good) product of overcoming of internal and external obstacles to coordination and cooperation. This common core to communal values, established late in Williams's career, will provide us with the light by which we may better understand his explicit treatment of fundamental disagreement and moral relativism. In the next section, we will see that Williams's understanding of intercultural ethical understanding rests on the plausibility of actually livable lives that places cultures in relationship to one another on a spectrum. This will require an account of what sort of ethical self-conscious can capably understand our relationship to other forms of life as on spectrum, and what that can mean for the "objective" or "subjective" character of our evaluation of those forms of life.

3.3 Relativism and Distance

Relativism, Williams argues, only becomes a question for theoretical inquiry when it is connected to the possibility of practically living another form of life. As a philosophical doctrine it amounts, we learned in the last section, to saying that no one needs any convincing. He said this is because the sort of account of ethical life that we give about which we are tempted to give

relativistic arguments is designed to articulate a form of life, defend it against its detractors, and "convince the unconvinced." This is because the kind of fundamental disagreement that Moral Relativism takes as paradigmatic is a social conflict with mutually exclusive outcomes. Williams wants to frame these sorts of conflicts in terms of "needs":

> [T]he dimensions of disagreement involved are not simply a matter of knowledge or explanation or to be resolved by further historical inquiry. They are matters of the needs of various parties, and of their relations to people who have other needs. We can be brought to see the needs of other people, and this will alter our own. Moreover, we can be brought to do this, in part, by being told their historical story, which is why it may be worth one group's telling their story to others. But all of this is a matter of the politics, in the broadest sense, of their relations. At the end of the line, the question may be whether one lot of people is going to live with another or not, and that will involve the question whether one lot can make sense of the fact that something different makes sense to the other. (Williams 2002, 260)

Williams's "needs" are those theoretical elements of our communal practical life that together support our "making sense" of everyday life. Williams's account shares with MacIntyre's an emphasis on the practical dimension of fundamental disagreement: how is it that we can come to understand our own position in relationship to another's, and understand that we are, consequently, the sort of thing that can understand our own perspective in relationship to someone who disagrees. This section will explore, beyond the virtues of truthfulness, what conceptual elements we will need in order to make sense of this vision of ethical self-consciousness.

Williams thinks about the aggregates of needs of people of a given social group in terms of a system of beliefs (referred to with an "*S*" in the quotations to follow), "as an ideal limit for the understanding of the group's beliefs" (Williams 1981c, 133)[60]. His 1974 "The truth in relativism" described conflicts between *S*s in terms of whether or not they were "real options" for the individual participants in the conflict or for interested onlookers:

What is it for an *S* to be a real option? In accordance with the starting-point that *S*s belong to groups (which is not to deny that they are held by individuals, but to assert that they are held by individuals in ways which require description and explanation by reference to the group), the idea of a real option is meant to be a social notion. *S2* is a real option for a group if either it is their *S* or it is possible for them to go over to *S*2; where going over to *S*2 involves first, that it is possible for them to live within, or hold, *S*2 and retain their hold on reality, and second, to the extent that rational comparison between *S*2 and their present outlook is possible, they could acknowledge their transition to *S*2 in light of such a comparison. Both these conditions use concepts which imply that whether a given *S* is a real option to a given group at a given time is, to some extent at least, a matter of degree:

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[60] In Jack Meiland's comments on Williams's account of relativism, he points out that Williams appears to be arguing for a position that is not truly relativist in an interesting sense, since it leans on a cross-cultural evaluation of what counts as "livable". The argument is that this makes the exact same mistake that the accounts that Williams is arguing against make in attempting to evade cross-cultural evaluation through a cross-cultural evaluation. But Meiland's mistake is revealed in his discussion of the limitations of the evaluation of livability. He argues that there is obviously something wrong with an account of cross-cultural evaluation that leaves out the ability to argue, for example, that the Nazi "way of life" is wrong. But what is key here is that this is *not* a cross-cultural form of evaluation. Saying that the Nazis are wrong often leaves us well inside of the norms and expectations of our own culture in our intratraditional arguments. Williams is arguing that the real cases in which moral relativism are most relevant is when we are attempting to practically mediate between cultures by assessing whether or not we are going to change our lives. The possibility of this transition or transformation is where moral relativism is relevant, not, as Meiland would have us believe, when we judge other cultures from well inside of our own.

this consequence is not unwelcome. (Williams 1981c, 139)

Already in this 1981 account we can see Williams's virtues of truth at work. Adopting an S, evaluating it in terms of its livability, is not solely a matter of completely voluntary personal election. Belief change, rather, requires that we can make sense of who we are and what the world is like on the other side of it, and that we can make sense of our transition from one set of beliefs to another insofar as there is sense to be made of it. Internal and external obstacles need to be overcome if one is to become what one currently isn't. In this, Williams agrees with MacIntyre's account[61].

What is unique to Williams's 1981 account, however, is that instead of focusing on the holistic interrelation of institutions and their practices into traditions, Williams emphasizes the necessarily *graded* character of the integration of forms of life in fundamental disagreement. He then frames the extremes of this grading in terms of the pole of "conversion" and the pole of "feature change":

> In the limiting case of incommensurable exclusivity, this condition will have virtually no
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> effect. There will be little room in such a case for anything except conversion. But even
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> conversion had better be something which can be lived sanely, and this is the force of the
>
> first condition. To speak of people who have accepted *S*2 'retaining their hold on reality'
>
> is to imply such things as that it is possible for *S*2 to become their *S*, and for them to live
>
> within *S*2, without their engaging in extensive self-deception, falling into paranoia, and

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[61]For more of MacIntyre's account of conversion, see especially the final chapter of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, "*Contested Justices, Contested Rationalities" in which he discusses at length the process of coming to self-conscious understanding of our relationship to a tradition.

such things. The extent to which that is so depends in turn, to some degree, on what

features of their existing social situation are held constant under the assumption of their

going over to $S2$. Thus $S2$ may not be realistically possible for a group granted features of

their present social situation, but it might be if those features were changed. The question

of whether or not $S2$ is, after all, a real option for them then involves the question of

whether those features could be changed. (Williams 1981c, 139-40)

"Livability" should here be understood in terms of the graded practices and self-conception of

the participants in a system of beliefs. A life within an alternative system of beliefs will be

"livable" just in case it can be made sense of by those who are considering it as a whole which

they are taking to be an alternative. Williams wants to understand "making sense" in an ordinary

way; here it means something like "is broadly intelligible" and not simply either "is not

contradictory" or "is fully explicable in the terms of a tradition" (Williams 2002, 234-5). This

makes the possibility of real incommensurability a question of not presenting any intelligibly

livable alternative. If two forms of life are really incommensurable, on this view, there are no

alterations that could come about socially such that I could make sense of my life as part of

another S. The paradigmatic form of incommensurability will be that of lives known to have

been lived but now understood to be an impossibility:

In this sense many Ss which have been held are not real options now. The life of a Greek

Bronze Age chief, or a mediaeval Samurai, and the outlooks that go with those, are not

real options for us: there is no way of living them. This is not to say that reflection on

those value-systems may not provide inspiration for thoughts about elements missing

from modern life, but there is no way of taking on those Ss. Even Utopian projects among

a small band of enthusiasts could not reproduce that life. Still more, the project of re-

enacting it on a societal scale in the context of actual modern industrial life would

involve one of those social or political mistakes, in fact a vast illusion. The prospect of

removing the conditions of modern industrial life altogether is something else again--

another, though different, impossibility. (Williams 1981c, 140)

Some options are only available to us through physical artifacts and unclear and inchoate

imaginings about them. Like Williams's Ancient Greeks in *Shame and Necessity* these cultures

are, at that point, less "systems of belief" accessible to us as real alternative to our current form

of life and more on the side of "narrative resources." Critically important for this view is that the

obstacle to overcome here is not solely *theoretical*; the feature of a given society that reduces it

to narrative resources is its practical availability to us and, as mentioned above, its capacity to be

incorporated with those practical and theoretical commitments we already evince in our life as

we currently live it.

The natural question at this point is what sort of capacity for self-reflection do we have

that could enable us to not only understand these other positions as live alternatives to our own,

but to understand ourselves in relationship to these live positions *schematically,* that is, in terms

of a more general structure of "livability". Williams' explicit self-positioning on this matter helps

us to better understand how he can make the sort of claims he does throughout "The truth in

relativism". More specifically, it outlines a form of historical consciousness that is possible and

that Williams actually claims for himself:

In this connexion it is important that there are asymmetrically related options. Some

version of modern technological life and its outlooks has become a real option for

members of some traditional societies, but their life is not, despite the passionate

nostalgia of many, a real option for us. The theories one has about the nature and extent

of such asymmetries (which Hegelians would ground in asymmetries of both history and

consciousness) affect one's views about the objective possibilities of radical social and

political action. (Williams 1981c, 140)

Williams fleshes out his own views of what such asymmetries amount to in the broader treatment

of contemporary self-consciousness in *Truth and Truthfulness.* The two landmarks in the

development of this capacity that he highlights there are 1) the advent of historical time in

Thucydides and 2) the Enlightenment, which, for the sake of its treatment in *Truth and*

Truthfulness, marks the development of the mature forms of the virtues of truth described above.

The case for the first, Thucydidean asymmetry is presented in the chapter "What Was Wrong

With Minos?" in which Williams compares and contrasts the Thucydidean and Herodutean

accounts of Minos in order to argue that Thucydides' writing introduces the genre properly

known as history. Thucydides' history does not simply list out the facts of a minimalist narrative

like a chronicle, but also operates through the rhetorical and rational issue of a form of an

explanation that is not mythological. Williams explains this innovation as the introduction of a

kind of explanatory homogeneity:

If a happening in past time is explained, for instance, by a person's having a certain

intention, then we should be able to understand such an intention operating in our own

time; or, if not, then we need an explanation of that – for instance, that our situation is

culturally different from theirs. We ourselves are much more impressed by the

importance of cultural variation than most people were before the nineteenth century, and

in other ways, too, different causal forces and kinds of events come into play, but the

question of how specifically similar the explanations may be between different times and

cultures is secondary to the idea that at some level the world is explanatorily

homogeneous. (Williams 2002, 167-8)

This explanatory homogeneity "addresses" something that was left unaddressed by Herodotus

and Thucydides' other forebears and, in so doing, provides another degree of *power* to his

explanation. Intellectual advances, Williams tells us, are "inventions" which "enabl[e] people to

do things they could not conceive of doing before it happened" (Williams 2002, 171). The

possibility of our being the sort of thing which can both produce and use the inventions of

explanatory homogeneity and the contemporary virtues will require another layer to Williams's

account of self-consciousness. Our understanding of this layer will come from his fraught

encounter with a position typically associated with the historical development of novel capacities

of mind: idealism.

3.4 *Idealism and Relativism*

In 1972's "Wittgenstein and Idealism" Williams provides us with an account of self-

consciousness as he sees it at work in the later Wittgenstein. This is a self-consciousness not of a

removed, third-personal view, but rather the second-personal perspective of a "we" in common,

uncontextualized by a third-personal perspective:

While the 'we' of Wittgenstein's remarks often looks like the 'we' of our group as

contrasted with other human groups, that is badly misleading. Such a 'we' is not his

prime concern, and even if one grants such views as the 'justified assertion' doctrine, the

determination of meaning by social practice and so on, all of that leaves it open, how

much humanity *shares* in the way of rational practice. Nor is it just a question of a final

relativisation of 'we' to humanity. We cannot exclude the possibility of other language-

using creatures whose picture of the world might be accessible to us. It must, once more,

be an empirical question what degree of conceptual isolation is represented by what

groups in the universe---groups *with* which we would be in the universe. If they are

groups with which we are in the universe, and we can understand that face (namely, that

they are groups with a language, etc.), then they also *belong* to 'we'. Thus, while much is

said by Wittgenstein about the meanings *we* understand being related to *our* practice, and

so forth, that *we* turns out only superficially and sometimes to be one *we* as against others

in the world, and thus the sort of *we* which has one practice as against others which are

possible in the world. Leaving behind the confused and confusing language of relativism,

one finds oneself with a *we* which is not one group rather than another in the world at all,

but rather the plural descendant of that idealist *I* who also was not one item rather than

another in the world. (Williams 1981d, 160)

The use of this second-personal "we" in Wittgenstein's work is an intentional decision that

mimics and goes beyond the limit of a transcendental argument. What it means for the "we" to

be a "plural descendant of that idealist *I* who also was not one item rather than another in the

world" is that such a "we" occupies the position of *anything* that understands itself to be a part of

a community in a world. What is crucial to this depiction, Williams notes, is that this

identification is understood in terms of partialities and degrees. It is precisely this piecemeal

structure that sets it apart from either the parochialism of a narrow relativism or the rigid

regimentation of transcendental accounts. Intercultural differences should not be thought of in

terms of categorical identification with some total set of norms appropriate to a unified tradition, but in terms of our collective gradual sense-making our various forms of life.

We should be careful, though, not to assimilate Williams' position to Wittgenstein's. The Wittgensteinian position, thus understood, presents us with another layer of abstraction from the consequences of its commitments. After quoting Wittgenstein asserting that our number system, however else it should be thought, should not be understood as "in the nature of things", Williams explains:

> The diffidence about how to put it comes once more from a problem familiar in the *Tractatus:* how to put a supposed philosophical truth which, if it is uttered, must be taken to mean an empirical falsehood, or worse. For, of course, if our talk about the numbers has been determined by our decisions, then one result of our decisions is that it must be nonsense to say that anything about a number has been determined by our decisions. The dependence of mathematics on our decisions, in the only sense in which it obtains – for clearly there cannot be meant an empirical dependence on historical decision – is something which shows itself in what we are not prepared to regard as sense and is not to be stated in remarks about decisions; and similarly in other cases. The new theory of meaning, like the old, points in the direction of a transcendental idealism, and shares also the problem of our being driven to state it in forms which are required to be understood, if at all, in the wrong way (Williams 1981d, 163)

Williams is arguing that it is incoherent to think about some of our understanding of the world as determined by our decisions because it puts us in the unintelligible situation of making claims about the world that are *just* claims about a community. This should be familiar territory. If we

imagine, as Williams does, that transcendental accounts and Wittgenstein's account share a skeptical attitude towards our ability to claim that the world really is as we take it to be independent of our experience of it. The paradigmatic contradiction that Williams is attempting to articulate here, as above, is that claims that we take to be about the world cannot be understood on their own terms if they are taken to be claims about our interaction with it[62].

Instead we have to think of our claims about the world as just that; claims about the way things are. John McDowell describes what I think is at issue in Williams in Tarskian terms:

> But to say there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world is just to dress up a truism in high-flown language. All the point comes to is that one can think, for instance, *that spring has begun*, and that the very same thing, *that spring has begun,* can be the case. That is truistic, and it cannot embody something metaphysically contentious, like slighting the independence of reality. When we put the point in the high-flown terms, by saying the world is made up of the sort of thing one can think, a phobia of idealism can make people suspect we are renouncing the independence of reality --- as if we were presenting the world as a shadow of our thinking, or even as some mental stuff. But we might just as well take the fact that the sort of thing one can think is the same as the sort of thing that can be the case the other way round, as an invitation to understand the notion of the sort of thing one can think in terms of a supposedly prior understanding of the sort of thing that can be the case. And in fact there is no reason to look for a priority in either direction. (McDowell 1996, 28)

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[62]In this critique Williams is echoing a familiar Hegelian critique of Kantian Transcendental Idealism. See, for example, his argument about the problems with the instrumental picture of Reason in the introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.*

Attempting to mediate our experience of the world through a second-order explanation, the famous Wittgensteinian "This is how we do things" will lead us awry from what we mean to say, which is that things really are thus-and-so. When it comes to mathematical claims or claims about the natural world, this simply will not do.

The extension of McDowell's thought in the passage above to ethics, however, is precisely what is contested in Williams's response to McDowell in the 1995 edited volume *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams.* And this is precisely what we should expect, given Williams's argument against external reasons as I have described it above. McDowell's argument, in sketch, is that reasons for action are importantly homogeneous with reasons for anything else. We do not need to travel through Williams's Humean moral psychology to arrive at reasons for action, but can instead take any state of affairs to be a sufficient reason for action, provided that it is seen aright and if seeing it aright means seeing it as requiring action on our part. McDowell writes:

> It is worth emphasizing that there need be nothing philosophically mysterious about the notion of considering matters aright in this kind of context: no implication of a weird metaphysic, for instance, in which values or obligations are set over against our subjectivity, as independent of it as the shapes and sizes of things. If we think of ethical upbringing in a roughly Aristotelian way, as a practice of habituation into suitable modes of behaviour, inextricably bound up with the inculcation of suitably related modes of thought, there is no mystery about how the process can be the acquisition, simultaneously, of a way of seeing things and of a collection of motivational directions or practical concerns, focused and activated in particular cases by the way of seeing.

(McDowell 1995, 73)

Key to Williams's reply is a point about differences between persons he makes about

McDowell's deployment of the Aristotelian *phronimos:*

> Aristotle's *phronimos* (to stay with that model) was, for instance, supposed to display
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> temperance, a moderate equilibrium of the passions which did not even require the
>
> emergency semi-virtue of self control. But, if I know that I fall short of temperance and
>
> am unreliable with respect to even some kind of self-control, I shall have good reason not
>
> to do some things that a temperate person could properly and safely do. The homiletic
>
> tradition, not only within Christianity, is full of sensible warnings against moral weight-
>
> lifting. (Williams 1995, 190)

This response to McDowell does not rely upon the particular model of the *phronimos.* Rather,

Williams is drawing attention to the differences between persons that *matter* for what they

should do. Even given the McDowell's Aristotelian and externalist view that some state of

affairs requires a particular response in virtue of it being that particular state of affairs, this does

not mean that everyone *can or should* arrive at the same actions from that fact of the matter. The

only way to overcome this gap, Williams thinks, is to wade back into "the deep swamp of

questions about free and the development of character" (Williams 1995, 193). Given that

Williams does not even subscribe to this limited view of the requirements of ethical life, the

asymmetrical developments of our ethical capacities detailed in *Truth and Truthfulness* cannot

require us to see the world as providing us with ethical reasons to act in one way or another.

Arriving, then, at an understanding of our capacities in common does not, for Williams,

entail that we have good reason to affirm that invocation of the idealist "we" and the apparently

consequent acceptance of external reasons is the appropriate response to fundamental

disagreement. The resulting distortion of our ordinary experience of the world requires too much

from a theory that cannot sufficiently motivate it. Williams explains the difference between

ethical matters as demands on our Authenticity and scientific matters as demands on our other

capacities:

> One necessary (but not sufficient) condition of there being the kind of truth I have tried to
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> explain in relativism as applied to ethics, is that ethical relativism is false, and there is
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> nothing for ethical Ss to be true of – though there are things for them to be true to, which
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> is why many options are unreal. But scientific realism could be true, and if it is,
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> relativism for scientific theories must be false. (Williams 1981d, 143)

What it means for ethical Ss "to be true to" something cannot mean that our talk about ethics is

delusional. Rather, it has to mean that our talk about ethics is true or not to a form of life that is

viable for us; it has to be commensurate with that value of sincerity that he describes in *Truth*

and Truthfulness as characterized by "The resistance to fantasy, the consciousness that I cannot

merely make things as I would wish them to be, a feature of all genuine inquiry, lends a sense of

the objective to these acknowledgments, in the personal as much as in the political case"

(Williams 2002, 204). What is critically important for Williams is that there is a meaningful

distinction between those things that we can say without this mediation and the things that must

be said in terms of a "we" of our values in common. Like MacIntyre's concept of a tradition, the

virtues of truth draw out, with one hand, the values held in common by those who really have a

common set of values and, with the other, articulate the limit to those values in relationship to a

broader world.

Despite his conviction that there are some ways of seeing the world that are barred to us, regardless of how much we may wish to inhabit them, Williams is not convinced that what he calls the "new theory of meaning" provides us with sufficient reasons to undermine the commonsensical division between evaluation in the sense of relationship between desire evaluation in the sense of belief. What remains to be seen is how these asymmetries of historical development can simultaneously place a demand on our phenomenal experience of ethical life without, thereby, providing us with external reasons for particular ethical actions. It may help to restate the seeming dilemma explicitly here:

> 1) The view that the virtues of truth make a demand on us relies on their representing asymmetrical capacities for action, namely those capacities for action which undermine traditional epistemological and ethical hierarchies and thereby limit the claim that ethical life makes on us.

> 2) However, the nature of these demands must not be ethical in the *idealist* sense articulated in this section. It may not make a *categorical* demand on us in virtue of our rationality. It must make a *hypothetical* demand on us in virtue of a set of common desires and *needs*. This is necessary to leave our commonsense Humean normative/descriptive divide intact, even if it requires further qualification.

> 3) It may seem then, that we are presented with a tension in the requirements of modern self-consciousness. There is no explicit *contradiction* here, but a possible contradiction looms, particularly in light of Williams's claim that a certain kind of ethical self-

consciousness *destroys* the ethical content of our view[63].

Williams's answer to the seeming dilemma, stated briefly, is that these asymmetries can make non-moral, contextualizing demands on moral life. In the next section, I will attempt to make the Williamsian case for this delicate division through a contrast with MacIntyre's account.

3.5 Two Limits or One

I hope it is evident at this point that MacIntyre and Williams disagree on a number of important issues. While they agree that there is something fundamentally wrong with the kind of ethical self-consciousness proposed by moral rationalism, they simultaneously disagree as to its character. For MacIntyre, the problem is that modern moral rationalism attempts to reveal a more fundamental layer to moral life that applies to anyone by virtue of their being an agent. In so doing, it occludes the social roles and practices of the institutions of everyday ethical life. For Williams, modern moral rationalism's attempt to establish conditions for any cooperative agent are dead on. The problem is that it mistakes its self-consciousness of the limits of moral evaluation for a negative space which needs to be filled with some other principle or doctrine. Both hold, alongside the moral relativists, that there is a limit to our everyday ethical experience that modern accounts of ethical self-consciousness attempt to overcome. Their accounts seem mutually exclusive and, indeed, are held to be so by the disputants. Nevertheless, I will argue that the weaknesses of each of their views demonstrate that this seeming contradiction is a product of their steely focus on one dimension of ethical life.

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[63] See Williams's well-known argument that some kinds of purported moral thinking, particularly the kind he associates with moral rationalism, involves "one thought too many" and an overly cognitive view of our everyday evaluations. See especially the famous case in "Persons, character, and morality" as collected in his *Moral Luck.*

This will require that we return to MacIntyre's argument in order to clarify the particular form of ethical self-consciousness he takes to be at work in traditions. For MacIntyre, traditions are defined by being both historical and realist. This should initially strike us as contradictory: for a moral theory to be historical means for it to be available for revision in the light of various facts of the matter, and for a moral theory to be realist is for it to make claims about moral facts of the matter that are invariant. We can begin to understand how MacIntyre holds both of these descriptions together by considering his criticism of what he takes to be the Hegelian attempt to give a moral theory that is both historical and realist. In *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* MacIntyre writes:

> Implicit in rationality of [traditional] inquiry there is indeed a conception of a final truth, that is to say, a relationship of the mind to its objects which would be wholly adequate in respect of capacities of that mind. But any conception of that state as one in which the mind could by its own powers know itself as thus adequately informed is ruled out; the Absolute Knowledge of the Hegelian system is from this tradition-constituted standpoint a chimaera. No one at any stage can ever rules out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgments being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways." (MacIntyre 1988, 360-361)

Putting aside the accuracy of MacIntyre's understanding of Hegel's concept of Absolute Knowing, we can consider his primary claim about the (non-)self-evidentiary character of mental states. He is arguing that there is no assessment of a state of affairs that is not subject to the possibility of revision. MacIntyre then goes on to give a now-familiar account for why this is in terms of the periodic crises of traditions that alternatively lead to 1) the revision of the tenets of

the tradition using resources from elsewhere within its epistemological arsenal, 2) the failure of the tradition in the face of a rival which can account for the rationality of both its practices and its epistemological failure, or 3) the utter collapse of the tradition. There is, of course, no "neutral" standpoint from which one can evaluate the traditions independently of integrating oneself in one or another form of life, only the respective internal processes of 1) discovering new depths of the tradition, 2) finding oneself converted, or 3) finding oneself increasingly incoherent.

The concept of a tradition on this account is a first and foremost a *response* to the *de facto* pluralism of ethical life. Persons do have fundamental disagreements in a patterned and collective manner that brings them into conflict. MacIntyre's immanently developed NeoAristotelian notion of a "tradition" is, in effect, a recognition of this persistent problem, which we can characterize as a problem insofar as it gives us reason to doubt our own practices. MacIntyre insists, however, on perpetuating this problem by arguing that differences of tradition are in-principle ineradicable due to the contingencies of particular cultures and the places to which they are attached. MacIntyre explains:

> Traditions fail the Cartesian test of beginning from unassailable evident truths; not only do they begin from contingent positivity, but each begins from a point different from that of the others. Traditions also fail the Hegelian test of showing that their goal is some final rational state which they share with all other movements of thought. Traditions are always and ineradicably to some degree local, informed by particularities of language and social and natural environment, inhabited by Greeks or by citizens of Roman Africa or medieval Persia or by eighteenth-century Scots, who stubbornly refuse to be or become

vehicles of the self-realization of *Geist."* (MacIntyre 1988, 361)

MacIntyre is arguing there is some *ineliminable* difference such that our practices cannot be brought into a form of life that is post-traditional. Crucially, these traditions are internally self-sufficient. They are organized such that they do not require some external supplement and do not "entail" some further set of concepts, such as a common concept of personhood.

MacIntyre's claim remains abstract and obscure stated this way. We can begin to understand his argument more clearly if we recall his motivation to retain the real conflict between traditions that he thinks is covered over in more modern accounts. More comes out in his response to Richard Bernstein's review of *After Virtue.* Titled "Bernstein's Distorting Mirrors", this article argues that Bernstein's attempts to synthetically combine elements of competing views obscures the actual social histories in which traditions come to clash and one triumphs over the other. A Hegelian account of modern development does not do justice to the unjustified violence that modern moral consciousness does to traditional forms of life. Bernstein's account, MacIntyre says will require a real reference to a particular social history in order to dispel what MacIntyre thinks is basically an ideological projection of the global market as representing a good-natured symmetrical agreement rather than the interests of a ruling class. Whether or not MacIntyre is right about Bernstein's naivete (I have my reservations) we can take this challenge seriously. For MacIntyre, the fallibilism of a tradition comes from a historical self-consciousness about its previous failures and reformations. Indeed, the notion of "reformation" involves the self-consciousness of a process of necessarily internal revision. The understanding of truth that MacIntyre insists upon is the truth of a mind's adequacy to its object, not a transcendental or abstract truth true everywhere and at all times.

It is on the basis of this real, continuous conflict he identifies that MacIntyre argues for the irreducibility of traditions and the corresponding untranslatability of languages. He is predictably concerned with *localizing* language to a specific time and place where it can be properly understood as caught up in particular practices and institutions. This position will allow him to claim that languages are inextricably caught up in the tradition in which they play a role and to further claim that if you are not an active participant in those traditions then you are importantly unable to fully speak the language. He explains this fundamental untranslatability in these terms:

> The characteristic mark of someone who has in either of these two ways acquired two first languages is to be able to recognize where and in what respects utterances in the one are untranslatable into the other. Such untranslatability may be of more than one kind. It may be the result, as we notice earlier, of one of the two language possessing resources of concept and idiom which the other lacks, or perhaps of each of the two processing in different areas resources unavailable in the other. So it was not only the case that Greek lacked certain resources possessed by Hebrew before the Septuagint's translators partially transformed Greek but also that Hebrew till later still lacked philosophical resources which Greek itself had to acquire through a radical set of linguistic innovations, themselves deeply alien to archaic Greek. You cannot express some of Plato's key thoughts in the Hebrew of Jeremiah or even of the Wisdom literature, but you also cannot express them in Homeric Greek. (MacIntyre 1988, 375)

On this view, words develop in order to serve certain functions in a particular cultural context and it is only through the holistic development of the form of life of which those words are a part

that they can come to mean new things. Trying to understand the use of words outside of their particular contexts of deployment can lead one to a faulty image of language in which words somehow have some sort of flat "reference" relation to things. MacIntyre explains: "'reference is no more than a name for the unity in the diversity of use, and if the diversity of use were abstracted, what would remain would not be some pure referential relationship. Instead nothing at all would remain" (MacIntyre 1988, 377). The philosophical puzzle of reference is predicated, he thinks, on a misunderstanding of language that assumes there is a relation between words and concepts outside of their part in the practices of the particular tradition to which they are native.

The philosophical confusion around pure reference, however, does not come from nowhere. It emerges from an international liberal "community" which has very little in common and thus has an abstracted relation to the practices which undergird it. MacIntyre argues that the practices, and therefore the social relations, that still hold this "community" of internationalists together is so threadbare that participation in it can either be (as we saw above) simply a mask that one must wear for financial transactions and that renders the continuity and unity of one's life unintelligible or it can replace all of one's meaningful practices and relationships with a void.

Given that MacIntyre admits that there is a form of life that mediates various communities, why should we not think that we can give an account like Williams's of some necessary virtues of any community at all, including the community of internationalists? MacIntyre addresses this throughout his work but the most puzzling and interesting comment on this question comes in this paragraph in which he claims that international liberalism itself constitutes a pseudo-tradition:

From the fact that liberalism does not provide a neutral tradition-independent ground

from which a verdict may be passed upon the rival claims of conflicting traditions in

respect of practical rationality and of justice, but turns out itself to be just one more such

tradition with its own highly contestable conceptions of practical rationality and of

justice, it does not of course follow that there is no such neutral ground. And it is clear

that there can be no sound *a priori* argument to demonstrate that such is impossible. What

is equally clear, however, is that liberalism is by far the strongest claimant to provide

such a ground which has so far appeared in human history or which is likely to appear in

the foreseeable future. That liberalism fails in this respect, therefore, provides the

strongest reason that we can actually have for asserting that there is no such neutral

ground, that there is no place for appeals to a practical-rationality-as-such or a justice-as-

such to which all rational persons would by their very rationality be compelled to give

their allegiance. There is instead only the practical-rationality-of-this-or-that-tradition and

the justice-of-this-or-that-tradition. (MacIntyre 1988, 346)

Here MacIntyre reflects on precisely the failure that I am addressing without ruling out a

universal solution in principle. Nonetheless, the ongoing recalcitrance of local communities to

give up their identity and submit themselves to the obvious superiority of liberal internationalism

gives us reason to think that there is something unaccounted for in its "minimal" practices and

institutions and their accompanying account of agency. The fact that international liberalism is so

successful and yet still fails to convert so many suggests, MacIntyre thinks, that the ineradicable

fact of the *physical distance* required by the local instantiation of the institutions necessary for

traditions. The persistence of this real and conceptual distance even in the midst of the success of

a globalized market and international law is sufficient to think that no mediating tradition will do

any better in the foreseeable future.

The question of how to manage a concept of tradition as a spatial and conceptual limit and, simultaneously, attesting to the unqualified character of ordinary phenomenal experience of ethical life is something that MacIntyre wrestles with throughout his post-1981 work. In each of his explanations of how to understand the two-headed character of traditions, he argues that the key is the primacy of the practical. Justificatory theorization of the sort that characterizes the budding self-consciousness of traditions comes from out of an already-organized and consciously articulated body of practices and accompanying texts (MacIntyre 1988, 354). In the *After Virtue* era his preliminary solution was to say that practical thinking requires 1) that we recognize that moral life requires institutions, 2) that we recognize that the requirement of actually-existing institutions does not in any way impinge on the moral truths arrived thereby, 3) that the limits of these institutions were, in an important way the limit of the (necessarily fallible) truths thus revealed, and 4) that this leaves room, in principle, for other traditions (that meet certain minimal requirements) that extend just as far as the tradition does. Key to point 4, as explained in the discussion of the regionality of language above, is the necessary locality of these traditions. These arguments resting on the metaphor and reality of space had to co-exist with the argument that the language of modern moral rationalism could reflect a real set of institutions and a form of life, asymmetrically dependent though it may be on the local institutions of tradition. By the time of *Dependent Rational Animals*, however, MacIntyre's satisfaction with the plausibility of this self-consciousness had faded and a result he returned to straightforward

social ontology[64]. The tension of holding together the feasibility of modern moral rationalism and traditional forms of life in one ethical self-consciousness that did not simply revert to a modern account of that self-consciousness proved to require too much of a burden.

Regardless of whether or not we take the view of the early or the later MacIntyre, however, the same Williamsian thought about the limit of idealism still applies. The following could be said about any MacIntyrean view after 1981:

> An idealist interpretation will not be served by anything that merely puts any given 'we' in the world and then looks sideways at us. Under the idealist interpretation, it is not a question of our recognizing that we are one lot in the world among others, and (in principle at least) coming to understand and explain how *our* language conditions *our* view of the world, while that of others conditions theirs differently. Rather, what the world is for us is shown by the fact that we can make sense of some things and not of others: or rather – to lose the last remnants of an empirical and third-personal view – in the fact that some things and not others make sense. Any empirical discovery we could make about our view of the world, as that it was conditioned by our use of count-words or whatever, would itself be a fact which we were able to understand in terms of, and only in terms of, our view of the world; and anything which radically we could not understand because it lay outside the boundary of our language would not be something we could come to explain our non-understanding of-it could not become clear to us what

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[64] On these tensions and MacIntyre's eventual solution see Jason Blakely's "MacIntyre Contra MacIntyre: Interpretive Philosophy and Aristotle". In that article, Blakely explains in detail the development of the MacIntyrean position and criticizes MacIntyre's later naturalism for turning away from the difficulty of the hermeneutic problematic that he establishes in the *After Virtue* trilogy.

was wrong with it, or with us. (Williams 1981c, 152)

In this passage we can see MacIntyre's commitment to the positioned character of thinking, holism, and the "we"-addressing character of ethical discourse. Insofar as we think that it is missing something about the immediate aspect of our experience, that our response to states of affairs cannot be redescribed in a tradition or in terms of the idealist we without any loss, we will take MacIntyre to be vulnerable to Williams's critique. The fact that MacIntyre himself resorts to a view of ethical life that incorporates our biological response to the world in an attempt to recapture some of this immediacy should indicate that this tension remains a problem for him and should for us.

If MacIntyre's view is *positive* in the sense that it requires the practical positing of institutions and practices, then Williams's view is *subtractive.* Williams argues that our way of understanding the truth is in *negative* terms, that is, being put into negative relief of a history of errors including "taking hallucinogenic drugs, being brainwashed, or agreeing by vote to a hypothesis drawn blindfold from a hat" (Williams 2002, 129). We can only know what truth is in respect to its meaningful difference from those methods that we know historically lead to error, but that that does not, in turn, require that we reduce both those error-prone methods and our current method to a common epistemological kind (something that will be mirrored later in the book in his treatment of political philosophy[65]). Williams, in short, has a parallax view of the same phenomenon that allows MacIntyre to dismiss liberal internationalism as a failure. The fact that traditions have "given way" to the virtues of truth common to our life in common suggests

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[65]In the passage above cited from *Truth and Truthfulness,* Williams cites Appendix C of his *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*, where he makes the familiar epistemological case for the asymmetry between dreaming and waking states, specifically that one can account for dreaming states when one is awake but that the opposite does not apply.

that there remains something unmediated in the relationship between those forms of life. For Williams, that gap is covered by the virtues that every form of life has discovered it has in common.

MacIntyre feels the need to explicitly response to this point in Williams in one of his mentions of the latter thinker in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity.* There, he deals with the Williamsian commitment to sincerity as described above. The question that remains after we are provided with Williams's negative account, MacIntyre thinks, is how we are to make decisions about what really does or does not count as a real obstacle to our internal self-understanding? "[W]hen all is said and done" MacIntyre writes, "crucial aspects of what Williams was saying to us about deliberation and about our reliance on our deepest feelings remains obscure" (MacIntyre 2016, 156). This is because questions of self-deception remain *even after* we have washed away the sediment of the expectations of other people as is required by sincerity. MacIntyre frames this in terms of what considerations count for us when we are considering whether or not our form of life is self-deceptive. A concrete consideration of the sources of our self-knowledge, MacIntyre thinks, demands that we consider our relationships to other people even if we arrive at the sincere understanding that we do not care about our present relationships. We are required to return to a point of view that extends beyond ourselves:

> Whether an agent's deliberations and choices are or are not defective in various ways depends in key part on the nature of that agent's social relationships and that an agent's deliberations and choices may be most her or his own when that agent's first person standpoint is open to and informed by the third person observations, arguments, and judgments of others. So our imagined agent, confronted by her choice between alternative

careers, needs to consider what her social relationships are and have been, something that would not have been suggested to her by Williams's misleading claim that 'Practical thought is radically first personal.' (MacIntyre 2016, 162)

Both Williams and MacIntyre agree that coming to understand our feelings over the course of our development requires our understanding, in one way or another, the feelings "of anyone so situated". In the paragraph above MacIntyre is pointing out that this condition never really disappears from the conditions of our self-understanding. The situations that lead us to consider ourselves sincerely, are, in part, situations in which our self-understanding is put into question by other people, and, furthermore, situations in which we take that questioning seriously. This, MacIntyre would have us believe, undermines the idea that the self-understanding proper to authenticity can only come about through a version of self-interrogation that radically privileges the self over others.

MacIntyre and Williams are both right and they are both wrong. Williams is correct that the dilemmas that require that we exercise the virtue of sincerity requires us to do something that nobody else can do for us and that this requires an investigation that is rightly described as importantly first-personal. MacIntyre is undoubtedly right that the resources required in order to undertake this investigation can only be provided to us through our relationships. What he misunderstands, however, is that these resources are not available to us as a third-personal view from the standpoint of tradition. Rather, they will require taking the problems presented by fundamental disagreement seriously in a way that does not reduce to the deferral to third-personal authority available through tradition, the retreat to "radical" first personality, or the accounts of conversion given by MacIntyre or Williams that evade fundamental disagreement by

circumventing it. Fundamental disagreement, I will argue, connects together the first-personal and the third-personal by simultaneously demonstrating their limits and uniting them in a manner that requires a unique deployment of our practical capacities.

MacIntyre mounts an explicit defense against Williams's critique of Neo-Aristotelian positions like his own. He outlines these threefold critiques at the end of the third section of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity.* The most pertinent argument for my purposes is that Aristotelians cannot make the case for an end that we should prioritize over our other ends. Given the variety of distinctive human features, there is no reason to prioritize one of them over another in our account of human ethical life. MacIntyre's answer to this criticism is to resort to the Thomist point that we complete and perfect our lives by allowing them to remain incomplete. "A good life is one in which an agent, although continuing to rank order particular and finite goods, treats none of these goods as necessary for the completion of her or his life, so leaving her or himself available to a final good beyond all such goods, as good desirable beyond all such goods" (MacIntyre 2016, 231). This is an explicitly theological thought in the work of Aquinas. It will take on a different character in the account that follows.

3.6 The Intersection of Traditions in Fundamental Disagreement

I have argued alongside Williams and MacIntyre that Moral Relativism is a purported solution to a problem posed by fundamental moral disagreement. My position clarifies what is missing from the Moral Relativist account by retaining elements from the evaluative perspectives I have laid out above across two axes: the traditional axis, in which the individual gives an account of themselves with regard to the norms of the institutions, practices, and virtues appropriate to their community standards, and the inter-traditional axis, in which individuals who

have lives that *creatively integrate* practices from *multiple* traditions must assess whether they can retain their practices "without their engaging in extensive self-deception, falling into paranoia, and such things" (Williams 1981c, 139). Accounts given from this perspective are best assessed using the language of *internal reasons* exactly because recourse the *external reasons* available to the accountant through a single reason-providing tradition have failed. Whether or not we are provided with internal or external reasons is not primarily a matter of epistemology, still less a matter of metaphysics, but rather symptomatic of the problem on which we are deliberating. This does not, importantly, void either the idea of external reasons or of internal reasons, nor does it require the total segregation of traditional values from the virtues of truth common to all cooperative communities. It does require that we take seriously the truism that different ethical problems require from us different responses that draw upon different practical capacities. It elaborates on this truism by outlining the contours of two of these major practical capacities. It further asks of us that we take seriously that some problems, problems of fundamental disagreement, require all of these practical capacities in a manner that does not reduce them to one another, but rather requires a further capacity for expression.

On this understanding of the failure of external reasons, our explanations in terms of our traditional reasoning risks falling into actions that are inconsistent with the self-understood unity of the person, things required of us that "don't make sense" to us. On the other hand, in acting on our "internal" reasons in response to the failure of traditional, external ones, we risk undertaking "actions" that do not make sense to others or, at the limit, cannot be intelligibly understood as actions at all. These latter sorts of actions remain subject to a modified form of the three values of modern assessment that Williams introduced above; Sincerity, whether or not the reasoner is

in good faith in giving their account of themselves, Accuracy, whether or not the reasoner can be reliably assessed, by themselves or others, as providing intelligible accounts, and Authenticity, whether that account is, in Williams' words, "rich enough to permeate and affect many of the most important aspects of life" and thus meaningfully coheres with the reasoner's "way of life". These values secure the possibility that our ethical response in the wake of the failure of our traditional social roles and the practices pertinent to them are livable in Williams's sense.

There are two important preliminary notes about this integrative account: first, it is bereft of the language of "will", "autonomy" and other fraught individualist moral rationalism that are put into question by both MacIntyre and Williams. Second, it is not static. It sets up the dynamic within which moral emotions like *shame* can perform an inter-traditional function in a *reforming* manner. Shame, as I have described it in Williams' account above, is an emotional response to an ethical failure that causes me to reassess my character and the community of which I am a part. While guilt only non-pathologically functions along the traditional axis described above, namely, when we have specific social duties to other persons that we neglect and thus must make recompense for, shame is *reformative* because it impels the transformation of the individual and the community of which they are a part. Inter-traditional shame pushes one to develop the resources of their accounting, through the working out of internal reasons, into an expression again available to common consideration[66]. I will discuss this at significantly greater length in the next chapter. It is precisely this possibility of transformation which can advance the

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[66] It should also be noted that my account is not "solely linguistic" affair if what we want to do is put language on one side of a divide and practice on another. Per MacIntyre, forms of accounting are practices that have, when intelligible, both theoretical and practical elements. Whether or not I know the words to the song cannot mean much if I do not also know the melody and the dance.

resources of language in the manner MacIntyre describes in his account of inter-traditional development above, but where he assimilates this process to the internal development of traditions, I am arguing that the resources required to make this kind of progress extend beyond the form of ethical self-consciousness available to us through the language of the conflict of traditions. Another approach to thinking about ourselves and our actions will be required.

I am not simply arguing that both MacIntyre and Williams's accounts can be preserved in whole cloth in my position. The radical first-personality of value that my reconstruction of Williams's argument suggests, and the secured third-personal authority of the MacIntyrean account will both need to be attenuated. This will happen not, however, by replacing them both with some averaged-out third account that introduces a new set of fundamental concepts that render them both irrelevant. Rather, it will proceed by taking both first- and third-personality seriously as perspectives providing responses to different sets of moral problems, and recontextualizing both of these perspective by arguing on behalf of a third perspective that mediates them by establishing their interconnection. This third view is the one I asked us to take seriously at the very beginning of this dissertation: the view that fundamental disagreement has a real place in our ethical life and is not a product of confusion or a waypoint on the path of conversion. First- and third-personality in ethics are forms of ethical self-consciousness available to us because of fundamental disagreement and the capacities that it calls upon us to develop[67].

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[67] It may seem at first pass as though I have simply recreated Rorty's Ironist standpoint as mentioned in a footnote above. However, Ironism is meant to be an ethical form of life proper to itself, avoiding fundamental disagreement by recognizing it at an *ironic* distance from oneself. Ironism thus avoids fundamental disagreement as a real problem of ethical life by attempting to *preserve it* at a distance, thereby bypassing the particular response appropriate to it on my view.

3.7 Intersection Point

You feel "inauthentic,", you "don't belong," or you've seen how they do things across the river and become bitter about how things are done over here. These are entry points to being a misfit in the tradition that we have called home; they draw attention to the way that we grate against our family, our culture, our polity, or the particularities of our own position. When MacIntyre says, in his critique of Williams, that we must have some way of 1) confirming who we are through other persons and 2) understanding ourselves in terms of the resources of our tradition, he is insisting that we need some metric of understanding ourselves in our dissatisfaction if that dissatisfaction is not going to become nonsense. There are extreme cases where a fundamentally different alternative needs to be sought; MacIntyre freely admits that it could be that the tradition is failing so radically to meet the everyday needs of those who inhabit it that there needs to be a transformation of the fundamental values of a tradition. The question is where those resources for the transformation in the wake of this failure are going to come from if we do not see them as just matters of developing some new way of living in our own tradition or leave them stranded in ambiguous abstraction with broad talk about authenticity. My position centers the importance of those scenarios when the resources for this transformation come from our experience with radically different ways of doing things that provoke discontent with who we are now.

The contemporary "crises of the self" we have been considering thus far refer to situations in which the interconnection of communities has brought into stark relief the failures and inadequacies of a great number of what we have thought of as internally coherent traditions. In light of this impetus to change, Williams's three values of Sincerity, Accuracy, and

Authenticity can then be seen rightly as the first, negative, minimalist moment of the need to transform move beyond the traditions of which we are a part. MacIntyre is wrong to dismiss modern anxiety about the sources of our moral thinking as simply the product of an actually impoverished contemporary moral life or an ideological cover for a parasitic class of universalists. He is, however, right that the solution is not to freeze cultural development into a bad-faith pluralism, assume that these aspects of life are outside the scope of any reasoning, nor to try to accommodate everyone in an impoverished moral minimalism. But the discontents of modernity are not simply the consequence of a fall from tradition or the promising sprouts of a conversion to another existing form of life; they are an indication of the need for concrete ethical work.

MacIntyre gives a generous and clarifying treatment of the aberrant individual in *Dependent Rational Animals* and attempts to show how the resources of his NeoAristotelianism can deal meaningfully with them.[68] The cases he considers are of course important, but so often refer to a non-existent case in which we not only find ourselves completely at odds with the resources of our tradition, but in which we also have no access to a lived alternative. In the next section, I will consider cases in which we are pulled by a living alternative as I have described it above. The contemporary thinker who has thought most about authenticity, tradition, and the striving to relate to and transform the ordinary is Stanley Cavell, to whom I now turn. In the next chapter I will show how the approach I have introduced above meshes with Stanley Cavell's sophisticated discussions of trying (and, at times, failing) to account for ourselves as we

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[68] See especially chapters 8, 9, and 10 of *Dependent Rational Animals.*

encounter other traditions.

4

Ethical Exemplarity

In "The Wittgensteinian Event" Cavell writes:

> We do not enter our adulthood as Socrates, but perhaps as one stunned at the failure of
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> our assertions to convince Socrates. So that we do not know to what extent our ordinary,
>
> or say unexamined, lives are spent in exile from our expressions. (Other philosophers,
>
> Emerson among them, have spoken of our living as aliens, or rather as in alienation from
>
> our thoughts; Kierkegaard says we live as if we are "out," meaning not at home;
>
> Wittgenstein will add: not at work.) (Cavell 2005, 15)

The moral relativist, MacIntyre, Williams, and (for the moment) myself all are attempting to

contextualize this very situation of "being stunned", that is, finding oneself unable to articulate a

convincing response to an ethical conflict. In providing an account of the interconnection of the

first- and third-personal kinds of ethical response at the end of the last chapter, I hoped to clarify

the perspectives of the disputants (again, myself included) with a sort of parallax view:

1) MacIntyre understands that contemporary ethical conflicts increase the urgency of

   justifying ethical traditions, but his characterization of the evaluative stance he attributes

   to modern morality is fundamentally confused. More specifically, his attempt to render a

   "practical perspective" on which it is impossible to mediate meaningfully between

   different traditions resulted in his articulating a tradition-neutral perspective from *within*

   a tradition, namely his Neo-Thomism, and thus left him with the difficulties of

   rearticulating his perspective as a universal one.

2) Williams' emphasis on the modern role of the individual demonstrates an appreciation for the limitations of traditional ethical accounts, his account of the role of the individual ensures that does not "throw out the 'modern' baby with the bathwater", his accounts of the contemporary virtues of truthfulness, and his understanding of the limitations of modern moral accounts is compelling, but his sympathetic arguments on behalf of modern epistemology block him from understanding the persistence of our relationships and social milieu in our scrutiny of our authenticity.

3) I argued that to correct for the gaps in both views is to argue that the modern values that Williams outlines in *Truth and Truthfulness* are not in fact minimalist moral values but are instead values appropriate to the conflicts in "traditional" ethical life, which, while not "debunked" or "demystified" have found themselves in need of a complement enabling their transformation.

But we have reason to think that this sort of explanation of the weaknesses of both of the views on offer would not yet be convincing to these thinkers. This is because they *share an animating set of premises* with several of the species of moral relativism that I introduced in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Seen this way, we can reorganize the positions at hand around this argument in common:

1) The failure of modern "moral" norms to universally convince gives us good reason, we might think, to reject them.

2) The rejection of modern "moral" norms requires that our evaluative practices gain their authority from some other approach to evaluation, and the most obvious candidate is *something* captured by the practices of "traditional" ethical life, i.e. our previously

existing ethical self-understanding.

3) But seeing the limit of the "cultures" and "places" associated with traditional ethical life suggests a limit to the application of traditional ethical values[69].

4) So the appropriate response, given that we have rejected modern "moral" norms at (1) is to recontextualize "moral" values within a broader set of human concerns.

5) But this recontextualization still needs a justification for its evaluative stance if we do not want to reject ethical evaluation altogether in favor of a broader evaluative skepticism.

6) So we are forced to give an account of universal evaluative justification that is at pains to distinguish itself from the modern "morality" we rejected at (2). To retain this distinction, our account should have the following features:

   a) *Not* transcendental (gaining its warrant from a definitive theoretical structure of intelligibility)

   b) *Not* exhaustive (capturing every or fundamental possible features of human life)

   c) *Not* triumphalist (claiming teleological priority over other forms of evaluation except insofar as that is necessary to make this case for its purported universality)

   d) *Not* realist (claiming to describe features neutral of any evaluator)

   e) *Not* moralistic (centering moral forms of explanation)

This sets the agenda for the sort of account of modern evaluation that we get in both *After Virtue* and in *Truth and Truthfulness* in two different ways. Both of the positions described in these

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[69] One might think that the "suggestion" here is an inappropriate one that aspires to a kind of *expressly political* reconciliation that is a component of "modernity" but as its opposition. See for example J.M. Bernstein's discussion of Hannah Arendt's opposition to the attempt to move beyond this purported limit through political means in his "Without Sovereignty or Miracles: Reply to Birmingham".

books are responses to a 'modern' disappointment in moral rationalism in its utilitarian and Kantian forms, the same sort of disappointment in accounts of moral rationalism that animated the questions posed at the beginning of this dissertation[70].

It is best to understand these as two forms of disappointment with modern morality and the institutional arrangement which it is both justified by and justifies. In MacIntyre's case this leads him to reject the codified institutions of modern morality, paradigmatically the pluralistic liberal state, as an institutional misunderstanding of the status of the person as having meaningful moral agency outside of a tradition. The same disappointment brings Williams to embrace modern moral norms *insofar as* they have survived the skeptical shedding of the *traditional,* paradigmatically theological, institutional misunderstanding of the status of the person. The aim of my argument as I have introduced it is to inveigh on behalf of a third way that takes seriously the thought about the *transitional and mediate character* of modern moral self-consciousness without thereby embracing the moral skepticism (or "suspicion") of a Williams-style view.

If we are going to move beyond the dilemma I have presented here, we will need an account of ethical self-consciousness which retains MacIntyre's and Williams's criticisms of their targets in modern moral philosophy without finding itself in either of the cul-de-sacs I have already articulated above. Explaining such a position on the terms set by MacIntyre and Williams will require locating it in a particular institutional venue to which it is native. It is with an eye to locating this institution that I turn to the work of Stanley Cavell.

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[70] For an alternative to this account and to my account, consider the version of "modernity" advanced by Charles Taylor in his "Two Theories of Modernity" which shares both Williams's qualified endorsement of Enlightenment disillusionment (though he suspects Williams of being *too optimistic* about what can and cannot be shed from traditional ethics) and MacIntyre's criticism of a modern "progressivist" account of the Enlightenment project.

4.1 *The Institution of Modern Criticism*

Stanley Cavell's essay "Music Discomposed" is an attempt to characterize the modern critical enterprise in music. In that essay, he describes the problem of sense-making in an environment with no clear tradition of aesthetic criteria:

> The only exposure of false art lies in recognizing something about the object itself, but something whose recognition requires exactly the same capacity as recognizing the genuine article. It is a capacity not insured by understanding the language in which it is composed, and yet we may not understand what is said; nor insured by the healthy functioning of the senses, though we may be told we do not see or that we fail to hear something; nor insured by the aptness of our logical powers, though what we may have missed was the object's consistency or the way one thing followed from another. We may have missed its tone, or neglected an allusion or a cross current, or failed to see its point altogether; or the object may not have established its tone, or buried the allusion too far, or be confused in its point. You often do not know which is on trial, the object or the viewer: modern art did not invent this dilemma, it merely insists upon it. (Cavell 2002 [1969], 176)

Cavell here is describing a "two-way" capacity, a form of expertise that allows one to distinguish the true from the false and thereby identify both[71]. He is careful to explain that this capacity is not secured by having common abilities: possessing ordinary sensory and communicative abilities does not make one a critic. He shares with MacIntyre an interest in emphasizing that

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[71] For an explanation of the Ancient Greek thinking on the logic of the "two-way" capacity, see Irad Kimhi's *Thinking and Being,* particularly the treatment of the grammar of negation in the Introduction to that work.

criticism is indeed a practice in need of development and rehearsal. But he distinguishes himself from the MacIntyrean view by stressing that possessing expertise does not by itself enable one to speak intelligently about a given work of modern art. Part of what makes modern art distinctively modern is its ability to extend the risk of the work beyond the traditional canons for judging poetic expression.

This realization of the total risk involved in modern aesthetic assessment can be extended in analogy to our modern ethical scene of disagreement as we have redescribed it in the introduction to this chapter. The modern ethical dilemma, recognized as such, risks the possibility of total misunderstanding between the parties *or* can be resolved only by a transformation of those same parties. Cavell's unique contribution to our study of fundamental disagreement is to isolate and explore this dimension of ethical thinking.

From this perspective, we can understand MacIntyre and Williams as both tacking in two different directions to resolve this scene by avoiding it. In MacIntyre's case, the fact that we always find ourselves in possession of some canons of ethical action by virtue of belonging to social institutions might appear to resolve this sort of conflict in one of two ways: MacIntyre might identify these conflicts with the sort of conflicts that prompt a conversion from one tradition to another, or he might argue that the kind of confrontation that Cavell describes is really only relevant to "ethical experts" within a tradition. In the former case, these conflicts are experienced by individuals, but can only be meaningfully resolved by the transformation of the individual in response to the demands of the traditions, mediated by the actual institutions that actualize those demands, with which they are confronted. In the latter case, the ordinary person will not confront these doctrinal difficulties in the ordinary reproduction of the tradition in their

everyday lives and the result of the confrontation can only be the internal revision of one of the disputant traditions. MacIntyre's view thus slides between two extremes: in the first case, the conflict requires a total transformation of the individual, but the broader tradition remains indifferent to the conversion of a particular person. In the second case, the tradition needs an overhaul, but this will require the work of experts, insofar as the institutionally mediated transformation that is required will be in the domain of the experts proper to the practices of the relevant set of institutions. Conversion, we might say, or ecumenical amelioration, but nothing in between.

The individual conversion is also available to Williams. This is treated explicitly in "The Truth of Relativism", *Truth and Truthfulness,* and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* as I have discussed it above. As long as the conversion in question is made in good faith and with an eye to livability, it simply remains to Williams to acknowledge the possibility that some people might find themselves driven by the dynamics of their identity to personal transformation. Williams's characterization of other transformational responses to fundamental disagreement are put in terms of the virtues of truthfulness.

Though MacIntyre and Williams both attempt to dramatize the sites of ethical conflict and they both reflect on cases personal and institutional, Cavell's account provides a new form of institutionally mediated determinacy that has not yet been addressed in either their accounts or in mine. This may seem wrong on its face: though Cavell considers the bidirectional challenge that modern art poses, we might think that he hardly avoids the criticism I have made of MacIntyre above that he restricts his analysis of such conflicts to the domain of experts. Cavell is acutely aware, in "Music Discomposed" as elsewhere, that artistic criticism and its object have become

(or been) the domain of elites (or elitists). It is not hard to detect exactly this tension in his description of the critic:

> The critic will have to get us to see, or hear or realize or notice; help us to appreciate the tone; convey the current; point to a connection; show how to take the thing in.... What this getting, helping, conveying, and pointing consist in will be shown in the specific ways the critic accomplishes them, or fails to accomplish them. Sometimes you can say he is exposing an object to us (in its fraudulence, or genuineness); sometimes you can say he is exposing us to the object. (The latter is, one should add, not always a matter of noticing fine differences by exercising taste; sometimes it is a matter of admitting the lowest common emotion.) Accordingly, the critic's anger is sometimes directed at an object, sometimes at its audience, often at both. But sometimes, one supposes, it is produced by the frustrations inherent in his profession. He is part detective, part lawyer, part judge, in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike, and in which the public not only, therefore, confuses one with the other, but does not know that one or the other has been committed; not because the news has not got out, but because what counts as the one or the other cannot be defined until it happens; and when it has happened there is no sure way he can get the news out; and no way at all without risking something like a glory or a crime of his own. (Cavell 2002 [1969], 176-7)

Here we imagine the critic not solely as an expert in the sense of someone that excels by the standards of a tradition, but also someone who is attempting to articulate the broader challenge that a work presents for the rest of us. Lumped into the challenge of articulating the conflict addressed by a particular work of art is the reflexive challenge of not only clarifying but *reposing*

the work by repeating it in the criticism, which carries its own risks. Cavell reflects well what we already know about criticism: doing it is difficult, conveying the weight of what you are criticizing is even harder, and communicating the work in a manner that actually does transformative work is almost unheard of.

So where is the relevant site of institutional conflict that can provide us with the view that is missing from my portrait of Williams and MacIntyre, if not in the London Review of Books or in Art Forum[72]? It will have to be captured by an institution of ethical life that is simultaneously common and personal, risking redundant repetition through its activities, intimately involved in the reproduction of traditional mores, and holding the possibility of bringing together and transforming wildly disparate lives. It is with this in mind that I turn to Cavell's treatment of "remarriage" in the Hollywood comedies of the 1930s.

4.2 *Cavell's Concept of "Remarriage"*

In "Being Odd, Getting Even" Cavell argues for a *postural* account of the self-consciousness that he thinks is proper to modern fundamental disagreements in terms of shame:

> To begin with, the idea that there is something about our mode of existence that removes us from nature, and that this has to do with being ashamed, of course alludes to the Romantic, or the post-Kantian interpretation of that problematic, of self-consciousness, a particular interpretation of the fall of man. But put Emerson's invocation of our loss of

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[72] For Jürgen Habermas the proper institutional life of the contemporary moral enterprise is in international law, with its main institutional operation in the United Nations. We may, however, think that the institutional stance of the United Nations embodies precisely the sort of modern stance that we were previously trying to avoid. So we will need another site of international institutional conflict for our perspective. I want to argue that the appropriate institutional "scenes" are those of the *failure* of institutions or their crises. By orienting ourselves via the operation of institutions in crisis, we can gain the proper sort of perspective on the maintenance and development of our ethical life in common.

shame in apposition to his invocation of our loss of uprightness, and he may be taken as *challenging,* not passing on, the Romanticized interpretation of the fall as self-consciousness, refusing to regard our shame as a metaphysically irrecoverable loss of innocence but seeing it instead as an unnecessary acquiescence (or necessary only as history is necessary) in, let me say, poor posture, a posture he calls timidity and apologeticness. I will simply claim, without now citing textual evidence for it (preeminently the contexts in which the word "shame" and its inflections are deployed throughout Emerson's essay) that the proposed therapy in these terms is to have us become ashamed of our shame, to find our ashamed posture more shameful than anything it could be taken in reaction to. One might say that he calls for more, not less, self-consciousness; but it is better to say that he shows self-consciousness not to be the issue it seems. It is, I mean our view of it is, itself a function of poor posture. (Cavell 1988, 106)

The risk involved in addressing these conflicts is that we will attempt to evade them by treating them as *non*-conflicts. We can do this by taking them to be a matter of simply not straying from some given or natural set of requirements for human beings, whether modern or non-modern. We can also evade these conflicts by failing to recognize that they have bearing on us personally, that they make require something of us only if we desire them to. This is where the language of posture comes in: responding appropriately is not a matter solely of accepting a particular set of axioms or recognizing a reasonable overlap in interest. Rather, Cavell tells us that Emerson would have us reconfigure our posture, here meaning that we should not simply reassess our propositional moral beliefs according to a standard of consistency or reflective equilibrium, but rather that we should reconsider our relationship to those values which are already evinced in the

activity of our ordinary lives. This is a matter of turning shame against itself, and thus of recognizing that our seeming insufficiency should be understood as a spur to undertake our commitments in a different light.

This remains too abstract if it is not tied to a particular institutional site of conflict. Cavell does have, however, an alternative institution at his disposal, namely that of marriage, more specifically *remarriage*. In his *Pursuits of Happiness, Cities of Words,* and *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome,* he appeals to the image of marriage as a progressive institution:

> The title "remarriage" sets as the most notable narrative feature of the genre that its members, unlike classical comedies concern not a young pair's efforts to overcome an obstacle and get together in something called marriage (where the obstacle is a social prohibition generally represented by a senex figure, and older man, usually the girl's father) but rather a somewhat older pair's efforts to overcome a threatened divorce (say an inner obstacle to the marriage) and to get together *again, back* together. (Cavell 1990, 103)

The remarriage comedy is a comedy that finds its subject *en media res*, already constituted with a history individually and in common, rather than a comedy organized around people just starting out in their personalities and relationships. It is in this sense a *self-conscious* comedy in that it is founded on an awareness of the failure of one approach to the differences between the parties and is premised upon the resumption of the relationship despite those differences. It is thus necessarily a genre organized around *transformation*, or *reposturing*, of these differences and the consequent reconfiguration of the relationship.

This interpersonal dynamic, though, does not exhaust the genre as Cavell understands it.

This kind of genre can only take shape and prosper in a particular context that provides it with its characters and setting:

> Our films may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgment (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the view each holds of the other. (Cavell 1981, 17 – 18)

The "remarriage" comedies are to be understood in light of the historical feminist achievement of achieving women's suffrage in the United States. Cavell argues that the remarriage comedies all respond to this *new* dilemma of how to reconceptualize the relationship between the sexes that already has its own history and problems. Cavell says that the object of this project is "the new creation of a woman", that is, making something explicit about what it is to be a woman that has not, as of yet, reached conscious artistic expression. The "remarriage" in "remarriage comedies" is not, then, a complete reinvention of the sexes, nor is it an invention of a new woman out of whole cloth, but a reposturing of the relationship between men and women.

The possibility of these films as works of art depends on there being this *non-obvious* reinvention, a process that needs undertaking but is not resolved in advance or dismissed as unneeded. These expressions do not all fit some set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather they constitute a genre through their mutual response to their context and to one another:

> The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures, and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member

of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance. There is, on this picture, nothing one is tempted to call *the* features of a genre which all its members have in common. First, nothing would count as a feature until an act of criticism defines it as such. (Otherwise it would always have been obvious that, for instance, the subject of remarriage was a feature, indeed a leading feature, of a genre.) Second, if a member of a genre were just an object with features then if it shared *all* its features with its companion members they would presumably be indistinguishable from one another. Third, a genre must be left open to new members, a new bearing of responsibility for its inheritance; hence, in the light of the preceding point, it follows that the new member must bring with it some new features or features. Fourth, membership in the genre requires that if an instance (apparently) lacks a given feature, it must compensate for it, for example, by showing a further feature "instead of" the one it lacks. Fifth, the test of this compensation is that the new feature introduced by the new member will, in turn, contribute to a description of the genre as a whole. (Cavell 1981, 28-9)

The genre is not best understood, then, by some feature list, but by comprehending it as a response to what it takes to be a common inheritance. In place of the passive reception of a tradition, the aesthetic object is understood to be part of this inheritance by our *undertaking* responsibility for it. This is a version of accountability in values; not adherence to a given rule, but identification with a common response. What distinguishes these two activities? We can say adherence to the rule leaves it implicit, at the limit leaving the activity itself implicit among some broader activities which we are performing, such that it is primarily a matter whether or not you

have achieved conformity to it in the judgments of yourself or others. Identification with a common response, on the other hand, requires the positive recognition, in this case of an inheritance and a problem that animates it, and an intervention into that inheritance that not only affirms it but also contributes to it.

Genre, on this understanding, is co-constituted by those aesthetic productions that take accountability for the same set of conditions. This means, as mentioned above, that they are, in turn, constituted by the conditions that call for expressive recomposition:

> It may be helpful to say that a new member gets its distinction by investigating a particular set of features in a way that makes them, or their relation, more explicit than its companions. Then as exercises in explicitness reflect upon one another, looping back and forth among the members, we may say that the genre is striving toward a state of absolute explicitness, of expressive saturation. At that point the genre would have nothing further to generate. This is perhaps what is sometimes called the exhaustion of conventions. There is no way to know that the state of saturation, completeness of expression has been reached. (Cavell 1981, 30)

I have paused here to dwell on Cavell's understanding of genre because it has a bearing on how we understand the self-conscious process of resposturing introduced above. Each work entered into the canon of a genre, on this view, is responsible not only for the conditions which it has taken on, but for the genre as a whole, and for making a *particular* contribution to that genre. Cavell's thinking of the genre work here non-coincidentally rhymes with his understanding of remarriage. Both respond to something that pre-exists them, both (performed well) take accountability for what has come before, both live and die according to whether they produce

something that expresses something as-yet unexpressed about the context that produced them, and both, we shall see, understand themselves to be comprised and compromised by compositional elements that make a demand on them.

I should pause to note two amendments to this treatment of genre-as-problem. The first is that the problem to which the genre responds should not only not be thought of as requiring a single rule-bound response in its integrity as a problem, but rather allowing for a complement to it, as in a complementary genre[73]. The second is that the unbound character of our response, just as it enables the possibility of a contribution to the genre through a response to the problem that animates it, also, and by the same token, enables the total failure of performance that can land us in what Cavell calls "skepticism". Skepticism in this sense is a response to the failure of intelligibility such that one resorts to epistemological considerations in order to resolve it. This mode of response is characterized by an attempt to secure the intelligibility of our response through certainty about its relationship to the problem to which it is endeavoring to respond. "What rule," this skeptic asks, "Can I follow such that this will never happen again?"

It is with this understanding of reposturing, remarriage, and genre in mind that we can

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[73] Cavell speaks explicitly to this in the case of remarriage comedies, whose complement and "negation" is the "melodrama of the unknown woman". In his book on these films, Cavell writes of them:

> [M]arriage in them is not necessarily reconceived and therewith provisionally affirmed, as in remarriage comedy, but rather marriage as a route to creation, to a new or an original integrity, is transcended and perhaps reconceived. […] The route to this alternative integrity is still creation, or what I might call metamorphosis – some radical, astonishing, one may say melodramatic change of the woman, say of her identity. But this change must take place outside the process of a mode of conversation with a man (of course, since such a conversation would constitute marriage). (Cavell 1996, 6)

The genre of remarriage does not exhaust the historical problem that it responds to, and can in fact provide access to a mode of expression that deals with the same set of problems in an alternative manner. Genres are not exhaustive, though they can be exhausted.

return to a notion of what it is to perform a rule that is familiar to us from MacIntyre's work now

restated in Cavell's argot:

> A performance of a piece of music is an interpretation of it, the manifestation of one way
>
> of hearing it, and it arises (if it is serious) from a process of analysis. (This will no longer
>
> be the case where a piece just *is* its performance, where, say, it is itself a process of
>
> improvisation.) Say that my readings, my secondary texts, arise from processes of
>
> analysis. Then I would like to say that what I am doing in reading a film is performing it
>
> (if you wish, performing it inside myself). (Cavell 1981, 37)

So what is it that is being performed in these comedies? Cavell tells us it is a *conversation* and,

because, he tells us, "criticism is [...] a natural extension of a conversation", a conversation

about conversations (Cavell 1981, 7). Each film stages the conversation between its romantic

leads in order to reframe what conversation is and what it is capable of, in particular what kinds

of relationships it can enable[74]. And then these conversations become a kind of criterion that

exists at the intersection of our ordinary ethical life and the political complement to that life:

> The pair is attractive, their wishes are human, their happiness would make us happy. So it
>
> seems that a criterion is being proposed for the success or happiness of a society, namely

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[74] The very existence of an ethical conversation as a conversation (or a disagreement as a disagreement), Cavell argues, is to keep open the topic of that conversation. In this sense, the clarificatory enterprise of a conversation cannot simply be a matter of getting clear about we already know or the simple statement of facts. In *The Claim of Reason* he writes:

> If a moral question is competently raised, then a moral response *must* allow a discussion whose conclusion will be the fuller particularization of the positions in question. (You may *call* the discussion closed, but then *that* articulates your position. The definitive is the self-defining.) If it is ever competent about whether you ought to keep a promise (and it will not be competent in a practical context if all it means is, Is it convenient?) then the answer cannot simply refer to rules. (Cavell 1979, 303)

In this sense, a moral question is asked when it is in need of clarification by further elaborated expression, not when it is in need of banishing by a pre-established complex of norms.

that it is happy to the extent that it provides conditions that permit conversations of this

character, or moral equivalents of them, between its citizens. (Cavell 1981, 32)

The "remarriage comedies", then, are not straightforwardly political, but rather political by virtue

of demanding of politics that enables certain positive activities of a happy life. But rather than

simply laying down what those positive activities are, as some other perfectionist accounts of

ethics and politics might do, Cavell instead argues that the remarriage comedies present us with a

conversation that must be enabled that will in turn enable the possibility of our reposturing. This

reposturing can only be exhausted through performance, if it can be exhausted at all. This brings

us, non-coincidentally, to Cavell's explicit consideration of Rawlsian proceduralism.

4.3 *The Cavellian Procedure*

So what differentiates Cavell's aestheticized account of ethical conflict, artistic practice,

and criticism on this view from MacIntyre's, Williams's, or the Relativist's? Understanding this

requires that we consider Cavell's cryptic response to Rawls's argument that we consent to the

conditions of justice that inform the institutional design we find to be fair upon due reflection. In

response to Rawls's assertion that "the measure of departure from the ideal is left importantly to

intuition" Cavell writes that "Consent to society is neither unrestricted, nor restricted; its content

is part of the conversation of justice" (Cavell 1990, 108). What can this mean?

Cavell puts it in terms of Rawls's two principles of justice:

Now take Rawls's claim that "the force of justice as fairness would appear to arise from

two things," one of which is the requirement that all inequalities be justified to the least

advantaged (p. 250). Here is further instance of the conversation of justice. Can it go

forward? Those who are least advantage dare apt to put up with the way things are, keep

quiet about it, not initiate the conversation of justice. Their silence may be a sign of demoralization or it may signal a belief that whatever can be done for them is being done by the normal political process. But their mood may shift drastically with events, and resentment may flare. Rawls says, "Those who express resentment must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them" (p. 533) – another instance of the conversation of justice. Show this to, converse with whom? It may be part of the resentment that there is no satisfactory hearing for the resentment. (Cavell 1990, 108)

The argument from the principles of justice, on Cavell's understanding, is not sufficiently concrete. The strength of *A Theory of Justice*, as Rawls understands it, is that it clarifies principles and interpretations of those principles at work in the everyday practical reasoning of a wide variety of agents. However, while this generality lends Rawls's argument its strength, Cavell criticizes it precisely for its generality. He does not, I take it, emphasize that the determinate history of the interlocutors who are taken to be party to the agreement has seen them in conflicts that undermine the plausible commonality of Rawls's assumptions (this, I take it, represents what is shared in the critical strategies of Carol Pateman and Charles Mills). Rather, I take Cavell's argument to be that Rawls fails to take seriously the *conversational* element of the conversation of justice.

The idea here is that Rawls's intentional decision to leave the consensus that he is attempting to capture in the two principles of justice under-explained misses something important about the everyday way that this consensus is reproduced. Cavell consistently argues in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* that this does not *in principle* undermine the two

principles of justice or the consequences of their proper interpretation. Rather, it leaves them *partial*, and thus vulnerable. However, Cavell's criticism is not the (typically) conservative point that Rawls is missing some positive predicate of human nature that stands in need of recognition in the procedure he outlines. Rather, something *procedural* is missing. This procedure is the conversation, expressed, in a representative manner, by the dramatized possibility of remarriage. Not responding to this need, Cavell argues, is to miss the form of self-consciousness, of reposturing, that enables the Rawlsian procedure. This is not, for Cavell, simply a matter of incorporating another element into the clarifying procedure of Rawlsian reflective equilibrium, but rather to take seriously the perspective of ordinary life that enables democratic life-in-common by favoring the perspective of the institutional rule-establishing technocrat. While there is a temptation to say that Rawls and Cavell are simply doing different things, and at times it appears as though Cavell agrees with this assessment, it is clear that Cavell thinks that to fail to engage with the aspect of modern ethical self-consciousness he discusses is to leave oneself vulnerable to a particular kind of undermining.

I do not return to Rawls's liberalism at length here to digress into political philosophy, but rather to establish that Cavell's affinity for and disagreements with the most prominent proceduralist approach to ethical conflict in English-speaking philosophy[75]. Accounts of our ethical life that are limited to pre-existing institutions or a form of minimal cooperative agreement are *inappropriately reflective* of the sort of work done in what Cavell calls the conversation of justice. In the Preface of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* Cavell writes:

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[75] For a recent comprehensive consideration of the impact and limitations of the Rawlsian view see Katrina Forrester's 2019 *In The Shadow of Justice.* Particularly relevant for my purposes is her discussion of Williams's and Cavell's critiques of the Rawlsian view in Chapter 8 "The Limits of Philosophy".

When the conversation of justice is directed to the constitution of the original position, and intuition is checked by principles, the conversation of justice comes to an end in a state of reflective equilibrium. To prove that at any time within the circumstances of justice [...] there is an optimal resolution to this conversation (a set of principles whose choice will receive optimal agreement) is one of Rawls's notable achievements. There is, so far as I can see, no such proof to be expected that the conversation of justice has an optimal, or any, resolution, when it is directed to the constitution of our actual set of institutions. It seems to me that Rawls is taking encouragement from the proof concerning the resolution for the original position, to regard 'above reproach' as a rational response to the question of affirming a plan of life in our actual society. Whereas this bottom line is not a response but a refusal of further conversation. Sometimes the invitation to such a conversation must be refuse. [...] The ambiguity in 'left to intuition' [regarding the compliance of actually existing institutions with the principles of justice] conceals the assumption, or picture, or premiss, I think, that intuition can only be checked, or rationalized, or brought into reflective equilibrium, by principles." (Cavell 1990, xxv)

Rawls provides us with an ideal solution to ethical conflict in the form of a set of "optimal" but not "optimizing" principles. He does not pretend, nor can he argue on behalf of, a similarly foolproof set of principles or arguments for actual determinate conversations about institutional design. It is important to note that Cavell, as mentioned above, also does not think that he can resolve these conflicts "in advance" with philosophical argument. But, he argues, he can make the case for what perspective *allows for* the conversation about actual institutional design, and,

moreover, resolution of informal ethical conflict. It is on the basis of this thought that he argues

for a form of perfectionist proceduralism that some have characterized as Kantian but is perhaps

better characterized as Romantic[76].

By "perfectionist", I mean that Cavell takes the nature of normative concepts to be

closely related to human nature. By proceduralism, I mean that Cavell argues that ethical

response is not properly characterized in terms of the positive end to which it is put, but rather by

the activity which is proper to it. The challenge laid out for Cavell, then, is to characterize human

nature in such a way that it consists in a form of activity not defined by any particular positive

content. It is the first task of his argument to this effect to address the parochialism that draws

one to a Rawlsian proceduralism, predicated on the idea that the activity proper to justice is

whatever is in accord with those conclusions reached in the original position. The first essay in

Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome takes up exactly that challenge. The key through-line in

that essay is that there is an often-underdiscussed *receptive* aspect to modern thought. It is

precisely this receptive aspect that is not explicitly addressed by Rawls in his procedure; the two

principles of justice, Cavell reminds Rawls, rest on received forms of life and depend upon a

particular form of that receipt. While this is under-thought in Rawls, Cavell thinks, it is not

lacking in Rawls's progenitor Kant. Kant's Categorical Imperative, Cavell thinks, is an attempt

to characterize this modern mode of receipt. What is important for Cavell's purposes is that the

limit of this receipt is the Kingdom of Ends, the perfectly rational community which, in turn,

must be the governing ideal of every community of practical reasoners and simultaneously the

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[76] Consider the exchange between Paul Guyer and Alice Crary for a recent discussion on the relationship between Cavell and Kant.

rule necessary for thinking of oneself as an agent. Cavell, however, is more interested in a Romantic transfiguration of the "Kingdom of Ends" that expands upon the Kantian expression of how we should think about this form of receipt:

> It sounds as if Kant is confusing, or rather somehow identifying, an incentive *of* pure reason, with which reason could provide the will, with an incentive *to* reason, an interest with which the will could provide reason. But suppose that the intelligible world is "the city of words," say Utopia; and suppose that the world of that city not a "something" that is "outside" (i.e. "beyond" "the world of sense"---what is the process Kant figures as taking a standpoint?), but is, as it says, "No place," which perhaps suggests no place *else*, but this place transfigured. (*Walden* is the instance I know best, this pure pool of words, which not everyone sees, but anyone might see, at Walden Pond, and hence where not?) Then all thinking needs to be an incentive for is thinking itself, in particular for stopping to think (say not for action but for passion), as if to let our needs recognize what they need. (Cavell 1990, 20)

Cavell thinks that, if Kant argues that the impetus to respond reflectively to situations that provide cause comes from a faculty called Reason itself, he is mis-perceiving the nature of this reflection. Rather, the impetus for reasoning comes particular sorts of circumstances for which our conventional attitudes can provide only part of the response. This self-consciousness cannot, Cavell thinks, be something *over and above* our ordinary attitudes, something *added* to the everyday response. Rather, it has to come from a *reposturing* of that response[77].

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[77]Cavell is here on the heels of very old criticisms of the Kantian practical doctrine: namely, that there is a gap between its formal requirements and the ordinary situations in which practical reasoning is called for. In this particular case, Cavell argues alongside those who take there to be a gap between what Kant thinks of as *particular*

Cavell (following Emerson and then Heidegger) characterizes this reposturing response as *thoughtful* or more particularly identified with the activity of *thinking. Thinking* here refers to a manner of being receptive in order to assess our needs, not in the manner of the application of rules as judgments but in the manner of reflecting on our experience of the world that is *responsive* to the *processual* character of experience. The point of adding this further qualification to reposturing is to get away from the emphasis on rule-following native to the Kantian view of self-conscious response. Thinking, as an activity, takes on valences familiar from the image of remarriage*:* dealing with a situation calling for novel response through a self-conscious, re-characterization of the material at hand.

4.4 *Two Senses of Compromise in Self-Conscious Response*

I have attempted to characterize Cavell's response to Rawls by explaining his account of Emersonian *resposturing* as *thinking.* This is thinking not in one of its generic senses of the exercise of some perceptual and judgmental capabilities, but rather thinking in the more determinate sense that it is expressed in comedies of remarriage. But this explanation as I have provided it thus far still remains too indeterminate. I have explained that, for Cavell, the rationality of the "contract" of clarified moral reasoning presented in *A Theory of Justice* is flawed because it tries to separate our ordinary interests, that is, those interests that we have by virtue of our "comprehensive doctrines," from those interests that we have by virtue of being a particular kind of rational agent in an implicitly "contractual" community organized around the

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interest, that is, those interests that we have by virtue of circumstance (taken in the broadest sense) and the "interest" that we *should* have by virtue of being rational creatures on this reading of Kant's *Groundwork.* We should, we might think, have a motivation to act in a manner that accords with the *CI,* but that we have such a motivation is not an essential fact about us. If it was, we might think, Kant would not need to write a book showing us that the Rational thing, that is, the Moral thing, was worth doing.

distribution of basic goods and responsibilities. However, the appropriate way to conceptualize

this continuity of ordinary interests and "material interests" is *not* by resorting to a flat-footed

universalism that calls for us to give up the plurality of our "comprehensive doctrines" in favor

of some common alternative. Nor is it to skeptically argue that we should give up on

characterizing the process that produces the kind of community that can embrace Rawlsian

principles of justice. Rather, the kind of ethical life appropriate to the community organized

around the distribution of basic goods and responsibilities and a variety of comprehensive

doctrines calls for us to recognize the manner in which such a society is *already engaged* in a

form of thinking. This thinking is a "transfiguration" of *each* comprehensive doctrine through a

recognition of our collectively participating in a "compromised" society "in reform". Cavell

returns to the Kantian language of autonomy to explain the relationship between thinking and

reform:

> This is a way of formulating the idea that freedom is obeying the law we give to
>
> ourselves, which is to say: freedom is autonomy. Formulating this idea rather from the
>
> side of what I say (authorizing the laws) than from the side of what I listen to (obey,
>
> subject to the law) is meant to bring forward the way a compromised state of society,
>
> since it is mine, compromises me. This idea is essential to my understanding of
>
> Emersonian Perfectionism, that is, a perfectionism understood not only to be compatible
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> with democracy but its prize. The idea that the mode of character formed under the
>
> invitation to the next self, entering the next state of society, is one capable of
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> withstanding the inevitable compromise of democracy without cynicism, and it is the way
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> that reaffirms not only consent to a given society but reaffirms the idea of consent as a

responsiveness to society, an extension of the consent that founds it. (Cavell 1990, 28)

There are two targets of this paragraph I want to address here. First is the flat-footed characterization of ethical life in the reading of Kant that I introduced above: we might think that any society that does not submit fully to the requirements of a utopia akin to the Kingdom of Ends (though the KoE is not, of course, exhausted by being a representation of any particular political state of affairs) is illegitimate and thus does not warrant our consent. Second is a narrow democratic functionalism that understands the benefit of democracy to be the fairness of the outcome of its procedure.

As for the first understanding of ethical life as life in-common, if we do think that any society that does not abide by a rule like the Categorical Imperative is legitimate we are presented with an additional self-conscious gesture. Despite the fact that we think that we are living in an unjust society, we still find ourselves participating in it. Cavell explores two forms of response to this fact. Cavell characterizes the "cynical" response as one that rejects the justice of democracy outright as a half-measure. A second and related kind of cynicism comes with assuming that the fact of one's participation in an unjust community attests to one's unconditional consent to it. Each of these responses rejects "compromise", either in the sense of "compromising" oneself, having one's integrity breached, or in the sense of "compromising" with another, of coming to a common agreement that does not accommodate the initial (or "ideal") understanding of the parties.

In contrast, the aim of the perfectionist response as Cavell understands it is to recognize that the community of democracy is *founded on* compromise, and that this compromise does not require us to relinquish our comprehensive doctrine, but rather to take a second-order stance

towards it as "under reform". What is important to Cavell is that this compromise is not the compromise of a halfway meeting. This is not an *aggregative* approach to compromise that addresses itself to those situations in which we must come to a quantitative resolution, as in a Rawlsian division of shares. Cavell's compromise is, in an important way, *previous to* any quantitative dealing; to be able to come to terms with the other party in a parlay requires a previous understanding in common characterized by Cavell's compromise.

It may be tempting to call this a bare acknowledgment of the difference between the parties, assenting to an assertion that this difference exists and is intelligible to both parties. This is no doubt an important part of Cavell's account of compromise. But Cavell's argument is built around the idea that this is not sufficient to capture the kind of "reform" that Cavell is trying to express here. The recognition of difference can undoubtedly be an entry-point into Cavellian compromise. But the full-throated form of Cavellian compromise only comes to bear in instances of *fundamental disagreement.* Consider his explicit treatment of Wittgenstein's famous "turned spade" passage in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*:

> The trial may end soon, your spade turned. But that is not, for perfectionism, the end of the confrontation, since its point was not argument. (Let us hope there is no law against cultivating with your spade just there.) It becomes the perfectionist moment, where one begins showing how to manage individuation, its economy, the power that goes into passiveness. (Cavell 1990, 31)

The reflective attitude that characterizes thinking, Cavell would have us believe, is one in which we come to fundamental insight into the intimate relationship between individuation and response. This intimate relationship can be broadly characterized as an understanding that being

an individual requires that we *let other individuals be* without thinking that their being different is an indictment of our way of expressing ourselves. Every conflict between us amounts to an opportunity for "reform", that is, to develop our individuality, to distinguish ourselves, and to develop our capacity for response as part of that process.

The relationship, on this view, between fundamental disagreement and acting in a manner responsive to the situation that was the cause of the disagreement are not at odds. Rather, the fact of the persistence of the disagreement, as in the conversation of the estranged partners in the comedies of remarriage, attests to something continually inexhausted and unexpressed in the disagreement. For Cavell, this inexhausted resource, which he associated above with genre, attests to the unperfected in our response to the conflict. This in turn calls for a form of response that not an intentional cultivation of *ignorance* or a form of *indifference* to the other; it is not simply a matter of letting be in the sense of "turning away", of not caring what we do, but instead of using our *distance* from the other person's moral understanding and self-expression as an opportunity for development of our own. An appropriately self-conscious relationship is thus enabled by fundamental disagreement that is dependent upon our ordinary conduct of life, but allows us (in principle) new forms of expression *because* it enables us a perspective on the disagreement that *sees it as* containing something inexhausted. In this sense, being *compromised* is not to diminish one's capacity but instead to *extend it* in a manner only enabled by the conflict which makes a demand upon us.

What is important about the transfiguration of our ethical beliefs in Cavell's argument is that the limit of our ethical commonality does not, it should be said, mark the endpoint of justification in one way that he makes very explicit. That is, we might imagine that we can make

a sort of transcendental/anthropological/moral claim that goes like this: when we hit the end of normal justifications in common, that is, when we reach the kind of fundamental disagreement that was the impetus to the argument of this dissertation, we are not thereby *limited* in our ability to continue to develop our common ethical understanding. The argument that we had meaningfully exhausted our capacity for common ethical understanding at these crisis points is one way of understanding the would take the form of the argument that Cavell describes Kripke as making in the essay titled "The Argument of the Ordinary" in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome.* On Kripke's understanding of the Wittgensteinian argument, when we hit "bedrock", we have reached the end of justification, except in the sense that we are now *justified* or warranted to continue on with how we ordinarily conduct ourselves. Cavell is very careful to avoid this argument by drawing a direct analogy to Wittgenstein's argument about the "property-like" character of pain:

> In the scene of instruction the common background against which I define the *this* that I do is not available, not because it is, as it were, denied in my philosophical determination to assert my uniqueness, but because along with my reasons our common world of background has become exhausted. ("Reaching bedrock" is disputable.) If someone replies, "the absence of justifications precisely means that you have *not* reached bedrock, that on the contrary philosophy must now go to work," this hyperbolicization of "bedrock," if it finds no metaphysical satisfaction, will end in the (skeptical) declaration that there *is* no foundation, anywhere. I am not—I mean Wittgenstein is not, in the *Investigations*—exactly trying to stop it. (Cavell 1990, 72)

In short, Cavell is arguing that Wittgenstein's argument is *not* that the end of justification

provides some kind of warrant, but rather that insofar as we have reached the end of some form

of justification, we think that we have "exhausted" those things in common which give the

practice its content. This is not an exhaustion in a normative-transcendental sense according to

which we say, "We could not possibly continue on here, for reasons that have the force of logic."

Rather, the exhaustion in question has the form, "Everything that we have tried so far, including

tried-and-true conventional solutions, have failed to establish the commonality in question."

Now the key for Cavell is that he has a second thought on this matter, namely that this

understanding of exhaustion has a bearing on how we should proceed that includes the

responsive exemplarity that I have described above:

> I conceive that the good teacher will not say, "This is simply what I do" as a threat to
>
> discontinue his or her instruction, as if to say: "I am right; do it my way or leave my
>
> sight." The teacher's expression of inclination in what is to be said shows readiness—
>
> (unconditional) willingness—to continue presenting himself as an example, as the
>
> representative of a community into which the child is being, let me say, invited and
>
> initiated. (Cavell 1990, 72)

The point of exhaustion is where the perfectionist thought is that one should and will exemplify

(in the educational case) by virtue of conducting oneself appropriately, acting in a manner that

serves as an invitation to a life in common. Cavell, following this passage, goes on to say that the

relationship between peers in this case is one in which I am not simply *licensed* to proceed with

some kind of transcendent or other more ordinary assurance that I am right to do so. He instead

says that coming to understand how to proceed is something that we do observing the

exemplification of the other that demonstrates for us how to continue conducting ourselves.

There is a simple commonality here with MacIntyre that I mentioned above: both say that the impetus to *continue on*, that is to develop the way that I do things comes from outside of myself, whether outside of my tradition or outside of my individual person. For MacIntyre this is a matter of a tradition demonstrating (e.g. institutionally) how to bypass and incorporate certain conflicts between practices or individuals. While he inherits from Aristotle the idea of edification through exemplification, the structure of tradition hems in the kinds of challenges that I can present to an expert practitioner. This is not to say that there is not competition or development between expert practitioners, quite the opposite. Rather, it is to say that for MacIntyre there is a minimal role for Cavellian exemplification outside of the reign of experts. As I pointed out above, there is undoubtedly a way in which we are all "exemplifications" and "exemplifiers" of the roles and practices of the tradition for MacIntyre. However, the fact that the intelligibility of our roles and practices is granted to us by the institutions of the tradition (exemplified in its expert practitioners) limits this ordinary exemplification.

4.5 *Cavellian Compromise in its Broader Context*

At the end of the last section, I clarified that Cavellian "reposturing", in its particular guise as "remarriage" understood as a "compromise", was and is the characteristic form of Romantic self-consciousness for Cavell. It remains to this section to clarify the differences between this view and the other views of modern ethical self-consciousness I have reconstructed, and to explain how they are mobilized in the view I introduced in the last chapter. The best route to this clarification will lie in ascending back up the argumentative hill we had to climb down to clarify Cavell's view on the possibility of an ethical self-consciousness able to productively respond to fundamental disagreements.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I dealt specifically with moral relativism. I argued that some forms of moral relativism avoided this conflict altogether. It was, in fact, the specific appeal of this form of moral relativism to circumvent the purported challenge of fundamental disagreement. This perspective comes in a number of varieties, but what was crucial about each of them, for my purposes, was that each of these denied fundamental disagreement as a problem. If it recognized fundamental disagreement as a problem, then its proponents argued that the only form of ethical self-consciousness necessary the fix that problem as such was the self-consciousness appropriate to the recognition of moral relativism. That is, the self-consciousness that could simultaneously recognize, in a manner realist or contractualist, that there is no interesting contradiction between holding that what is right for one group of people may be wrong for another.

This form of self-consciousness was also critical for MacIntyre's account; it is a necessary part of the development of any tradition to be able to recognize itself as a tradition and thereby see its limits in its practices and institutions. But, for the MacIntyre of the *After Virtue* trilogy, one could not simply stop there. When two traditions find themselves at odds with one another, the response cannot be some attempt to activate some pre-existing neutral arbitrating capacity or *simply* to refer to reason in calculative manner (i.e. we should not appeal to "what will make people happiest?" as though a utilitarian calculus could solve the problem from a third-person point of view). MacIntyre thinks that, insofar as the clash between traditions presents one of the traditions with a serious problem on its own terms, it must (if its institutional practitioners do sincerely take it to be a problem) develop it out of the resources that it has available to it. If the tradition cannot do so, it either goes into crisis, and/or finds itself enveloped

by that tradition which is able to find an answer to its crisis on its own terms, or in terms sufficiently sophisticated to convince the practitioners of the crisis-laden tradition that it marks an improvement on that tradition in the sense of a *deepening* (importantly, as we know from Chapter 2 above, characterized in opposition to the simple image of "forward progress" MacIntyre associates with modern progressivism).

The distinctions, however, between the MacIntyrean perspective and the Cavellian one are numerous. Ethical self-consciousness of the sort Cavell considers is juxtaposed explicitly with deference to tradition, and any expression instead is dependent upon continuously *demonstrating* its justification and is *always* susceptible to critique or challenge. There is a sense in which this is holds for MacIntyre's view as well; he critiques exactly those conservatives who think that tradition is some untouchable reservoir of unchallengeable wisdom. Recalling MacIntyre's critique of Rawls can help us to make the distinction between MacIntyre's position and Cavell's a little bit finer: claims, for example, on the organization of family life or the social mores made on me by someone from outside of my community, a non-practitioner in my common institutions and practices, cannot have any real hold on me or make a claim on me. So while it is true that tradition, on MacIntyre's understanding, is not infallible, there are real limits to traditions and criticism from outside of those limits has no claim upon me. In MacIntyre's 1980 critical review of Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason,* he praises Cavell for recognizing the role of "background of necessities and agreements" for any concept at all to get its bearing, but then criticizes Cavell for his insistence on the ordinary against the philosophical. He argues that *The Claim of Reason* avoids "the recurrence in every area of human thought and practice of rival interpretations, and rival types of interpretation, of events and actions" to which philosophy

is the appropriate response (MacIntyre 1980). Cavell attempts to evade, MacIntyre thinks, the ways in which ordinary criteria are interconnected and have bearing on one another in a manner that requires explicit reconstruction. The only way to recover this program, on MacIntyre's view, is to recover one of the philosophical traditions that recognize the positive role of the philosophical in the ordinary, of which the two options are "that which looks back to Aristotle and that which looks back to Hegel" (MacIntyre 1980).

By contrast, the aim of the Cavellian perspective as I have articulated it above is to recognize that mapping the interrelations of the assumptions "behind" our ordinary concepts cannot, by itself, do the important work of interrelation that MacIntyre thinks it can. At best, it can create a reproduction of what we already know about our own concepts. At worst, it devolves into a metaphysics or social ontology that can only produce obstinance to the work of philosophy[78]. The aim of his philosophy is to draw us near to what demands a response and simultaneously to draw us away from the circumscription of that response. The issues involved in our life-in-common really are enough, not only to make an inter-traditional claim on my capacity to enter into a contract to contribute to a common material good, but also to force me to meaningfully *respond* to the state of affairs in which my way of life can meaningfully exist while

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[78] Alice Crary writes on this theme in her article on Cavell's inheritance of J.L. Austin's moral philosophy. She explains that for Austin, as for Cavell, the "philosophical" attempt to isolate moral statements from the actual performance of moral activity is tantamount to moralism, the attempt to make ethical life a matter of purely semantic understanding. This robs ethical life of its broader dimensions of moral feeling, and thus demands an "austerity" that interferes with further moral development. She writes: "Since [antiperfectionist] rejoinders fail to take seriously the (widely objective) possibility that limitations of emotional endowments may directly impair moral judgment, they also fail to take seriously the (similarly widely objective) possibility that insistence on making emotional engagements conform to prior moral judgments may have a tendency to prevent us from overcoming certain impairments" (Crary 2006, 59).

"compromised' by this contract.

MacIntyre and Cavell, in short, share an emphasis on the developmental context that supports the versions of modern morality that they criticize. Alongside this developmental emphasis is a methodological assumption that, in both cases, is justified (in the style of the hermeneutic circle) from inside of the argument that it is deployed to make. This is the assumption that philosophy can *meaningfully speak* about this development and that it can thus conceptualize and reconceptualize ordinary life. In MacIntyre's case, this assumption takes the form of the tradition-institution-practice triad, which illustrates how theory is deployed in ordinary life. In Cavell's case, this assumption takes the form of the *poesis* of everyday life and the dramatization of the omnipresence of the skeptical challenge, the threat that we always have the capacity to become unintelligible to ourselves and to others. This is Cavell's peculiar form of individualism: his emphasis on the scene of reproduction of ordinary life and language is what he imagines differentiates his view from the non-modern and metaphysical ones he hopes to obliquely contest[79].

We might think that there has to be a clear limit to this "rearticulation" of one's ordinary life. After all, in the last chapter Bernard Williams provided us with at least three different

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[79]In Cora Diamond's "Losing Your Concepts" she identifies both the pessimistic MacIntyre of *After Virtue* and the Cavell of *The Claim of Reason* as two thinkers that have argued that it is possible to lose our use of moral concepts. For Cavell, this is particular to a kind of skepticism evinced by the moral philosopher who attempts to reduce morality to a baseless form of persuasion. For MacIntyre, it is a matter of the institutional supports and practices of morality having corroded. Her argument is that this can only appear to be so because of the narrowness of the conception of language in the tradition of Analytic philosophy to which MacIntyre and Cavell respond. Diamond thinks that these seeming impasses can only be resolved through a new attention to the ways in which human language actually operate as part of our ordinary ethical life. Though attention to the broader dimensions of our linguistic life is undoubtedly important to complicating our understanding of ethical language beyond the neat categories of praise and blame, both Cavell and MacIntyre want to insist upon the real dangers of total ethical incomprehensibility that remain importantly possible even in ordinary ethical life.

arguments why we should take the demonstrated fact of fundamental conflict to *free us* from demands that we need to rearticulate our own perspective:

1. **The Argument Against External Reasons**: Williams made an extensive argument for why we are mistaken to think that we have some kind of "external" obligation to other people (let alone other cultures) that attempt to make a claim on us.

2. **The Argument for a "Relativism of Distance":** In making this argument Williams held that certain "forms of life" and their challenges had no real bearing on our activity insofar as we cannot imagine them being a form of life that we could reasonably inhabit or take up.

3. **The Argument for Moral Minimalism:** Williams argued that a properly "genealogical" approach to the Enlightenment means understanding it as a culling of presumed non-modern principles until we are left with a minimum set of virtues of cooperation.

These arguments are each complemented by a Williamsian view of ethical transformation in *Shame and Necessity.* The transformation of the individual, on this view, has its source in conflicts between individuals. However, this does not mean that it should or does issue from a sense of moral obligation or contractual breach. The feeling of guilt associated with this trespass, Williams thinks, have their place. But, as described last chapter, guilt is *limited* by the contractual relationship that provides it with content. It is circumscribed by *shame*, which is an emotion that takes its content, not from pre-existing relationships and the persons that undertake them, but in the transformation of those relationships and persons. Shame, we will remember, is the emotion proper to reform of the individual and the society of which they are a part.

Williams's argument, then, addresses another dimension of the reproduction of ordinary

life that is misrecognized in what he thinks of as modern moral philosophy. He shares with

Cavell the idea that there is room for a properly modern ethical self-consciousness, but also

shares with MacIntyre a skepticism about a positive moral rationalism. What distinguishes him is

his emphasis on a negative role for modern ethical self-consciousness. While there is room for

transformation and conversion on his view, he circumscribes the Cavellian site of fundamental

disagreement by denying it any critical role in modern ethical self-consciousness. For Williams,

the moral result of fundamental disagreement can rarely be more than the shedding of contingent

prejudice. There are some brief examples, as cited in the previous chapter, of his engagement

with the possible broader implications of this sort of encounter, but they are largely left

suggestive.

This limitation is also suggested in Williams's "methodological" considerations of "what

philosophy can do". On Williams's view, the skeptical enterprise of philosophy can be *clarifying*

in a subtractive manner. On this view, philosophy lies atop the body of our ordinary lives and

values and largely dedicates itself to clearing away the flights of fancy and imagination that are

endemic with the ordinary use of language and argument. Despite his distaste for Kant, Williams

shares with him the idea of philosophy as self-consciousness of Reason's limits. Consider his

description of the appropriate attitude towards moral understanding in *Ethics and the Limits of*

Philosophy:

> The point of bringing in this conception is not that philosophy, which could not tell us
>
> how to bring about conviction, can tell us how to bring about confidence. It is rather that
>
> this conception makes it clearer than other models did why philosophy cannot tell us how
>
> to bring it about. It is a social and psychological question what kinds of institutions,

upbringing, and public discourse help to foster it. The first questions that should come to

mind about ethical confidence are questions of social explanation. (Williams 1986, 189)

This clearly demarcates the limit of self-reflective reason, and thus of philosophy, at the border

of a social investigation. Questions about "institutions, upbringing, and public discourse" are not

philosophical, or, at the very least, cannot be solved by philosophy. There is thus a case to be

made maintaining a version of the modern Kantian (really Humean) division between the

rational and empirical, transposed here into the division between practical and the reflective.

If for no other reason, Cavell's unique articulation of fundamental disagreement is

valuable because he articulates what it would mean to take it seriously such that it would require

a unique response. I have argued above that this response does not fall into the conceptual ambit

of conversion, because conversion requires only the articulation of two traditions, their limits,

and the acceptance of one over another in light of who one is (and thus what one wishes to be).

Nor does it simply delineate the edge of moral philosophy in the broad sense of philosophical

reflection on ethical conflict. Cavell does argue that it marks out the limit of one approach to

moral philosophy that insulates it from ordinary evaluation more broadly. It is precisely because

Cavell's argument opens onto a broader evaluative vista and does not fit neatly into an

empiricist-rationalist or normative-descriptive dilemma that it makes another kind of ethical self-

consciousness intelligible.

4.6 *Tradition, Truth, and Exemplarity*

In the last chapter I introduced an understanding of fundamental disagreement

encompassed two modes of ethical response. The first mode was traditional, in which the

common institutions of ethical life persist and provide us with identities via defined social roles

that are understood in terms of their functions and corresponding responsibilities. This argument

incorporated elements from Alasdair MacIntyre's view, but did not simply stand in for his entire

perspective. The second response was an inter-traditional one that took as basic the person at the

exhaustion point of a tradition, where ordinary forms of ethical responsibility either did not

supply or appeared to be insufficient[80]. Similarly, while this figure took elements of Williamsian

skepticism as rudimentary, it did not reduce to Williams or his position. The question remained:

how to think these figures together given that they begin with two contrasting understandings of

persons?

This is best approached by thinking of the two modes as two aspects of the same

performance of ethical response. That both the intra- and inter-traditional forms of response are

performance accords with their being something undertaken. Both of them are thus *takings-to-be*,

responses to what the agents in question take to really be there[81]. But what distinguishes their

performances is where the locus of response is: in the case of the intra-traditional response, the

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[80] In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* Hegel famously reformulates Kantian morality by contextualizing it as an element of a broader ethical life that provides people with their common social identity. In the context of these social roles, the individual of Kantian morality is revealed to be simply an aspect of a broader ethical order unified by the state, which brings together the person as the member of the family with the person as individual within civil society. This gesture is inverted by Habermas's "discourse ethics" approach to morality, which takes ordinary, traditional ethical life to be recontextualized by an intertraditional set of norms that are implicit in treating the person as capable of reason. My account here explicitly mirrors these two theories of complementary ethical registers, but intentionally moves away from the theory of right and the accompanying account of quasi-transcendental norms of discursive personhood. My account begins, instead, with the person as the achievement of tradition and the opposing but unified image of the person as the exhaustion of a tradition.

[81]This allows us to dissolve the tensions identified in the views of MacIntyre and Williams in the last chapter. Both thinkers, I argued, wanted to preserve the immediacy of our ethical life even as they gave us reason to redescribe it in terms that undermined that immediacy. Recognizing that the perspectives that each of them take as the locus of modern ethical self-consciousness are located in different regions of ordinary ethical life allow us to retain that immediacy not by mediating it through a reflective second-order contextualization that threatens it, but determinately through the disagreements or exhaustions that require a reassessment of the matter considered and a corresponding change in the locus of agency in the person undertaking it.

response is taken to be to an institution as actualized in a person's performance of that institution's practices. I respond to you as a son, but I respond to you as *your son.* In the inter-traditional response, I respond to the truth of what *I take myself to be*. At the limit of what it is to be an Indian daughter and an American daughter, I respond by exemplifying what it is to be someone who exemplifies both. Crucially, there is no pre-established criterion here for which form of response is appropriate *over and above* the "direction" of the response. The border of the "tradition" to which I respond cannot be drawn at the physical border of the country, the border of what I take myself to be cannot be drawn at a set of basic agential capacities[82].

This results in a number of immediate complications. First, both of these modes of response are intricately related to one another in a manner we can fairly call "dialectical". By this I mean that what I take the institution to be will be intimately related to what I take myself to be, and what I take myself to be will use as its materials the common social identities to which I respond. Second, either form of response retains the capacity to come "out of joint" from the

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[82] If one wants to find productive fundamental disagreement one will often have to cross a border, either culturally, economically, or physically. Consider the case of the expulsion of the Acadians from their colony in Le Grande Dérangement and their 19th-century transformation via marriage into non-Acadian culture. In the wake of postbellum economic and political transformations of Acadian culture, particularly the assimilation of the upper class of Acadian gentry into the larger institutions of American Southern life, lower class Acadians intermarried across cultural and racial boundaries at a significantly accelerated rate, requiring a transformation of cultural life and the introduction of a new linguistic hybrid. Carl Brusseaux writes:

> The cultural exchanges resulting from intermarriage gradually transformed the base culture, even in areas of Acadian demographic and cultural domination. Exogamous marriages, for example, were largely responsible for the introduction of Creole and European folklore, music, and cuisine into Acadian culture. Cross-cultural transfers through intermarriage were also responsible for the gradual linguistic homogenization of all working-class Francophone groups in rural south Louisiana, including the Acadians. By the early twentieth century, Cajun French had become the lingua franca among the lower classes in the prairie and bayou countries. (Brusseaux 1992, 109)

The transformation of the ordinary ethical life of these lower-class Acadians is institutionalized in a new dialect of an old language, marking both a continuity with their institutions before the cultural exchange and a new form of life with its new practices.

other. This can happen in variety of ways. I can take the institution and the practices appropriate

to it to provide me with resources that it does not have, and consequently fail to see the

circumstance as calling for an inter-traditional form of response. I can take the institution and the

practices to which I should respond to be too distant from me to merit a response, and thereby

fail to see it for what it is. I can wrongly take myself to be in a novel situation beyond the ambit

of the institution, and thereby perform in a manner that is redundant or inappropriately

solipsistic. I can fail to assess the situation at all, and thus risk unintelligibility in my conduct or

in my lack of response. These are all logically necessary possibilities that are not exhausted by

the conditional structure of the response[83].

These failures correspond, non-coincidentally, to the moral emotions of shame and guilt

as Williams describes them in *Shame and Necessity.* Crucially, Williams's understanding of

Ancient Greek shame *does not* require the sort of account of fundamental disagreement which I

have articulated above. This is because we can understand this shame as intra-traditional. This is

how Williams focuses on the emotion in his treatment of the example of Ajax's suicide in the

play by Sophocles. Ajax's shame reflects his self-understanding within the bounds of the

tradition he takes himself to be a part of. The limit here is an entirely internal to Ajax's self-

identity. His shame is a part of his response to his appearance to an internalized other that is an

actualization of the honor code of Greek warrior society. It is easy to imagine an analogous case

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[83] This does not, it should be noted, "solve" Williams's Owen Wingrave case for us. Whether or not Owen has reason to follow in his familial tradition will be a matter of literature, that calls for us to attend to the particularities of the broader world of which he is a part and the desire that brings him into conflict with it. This is the basis on which we can start to have a conversation about whether or not his conflict with his father is based on a fundamental disagreement.

where the reaction is self-development or transformation within the bounds of the tradition as one already understands it, insofar as that understanding of the tradition retains its character as I transform myself in order to do right by it. We know shame, as an emotion, is not the special province of fundamental disagreement.

Nonetheless, shame can also operate inter-traditionally. It can do so insofar as is not just a repository of the values of the tradition of which we are a part. Williams writes:

> Whatever [shame] is working on, it required an internalised other, who is not designated merely as a representative of an independently identified social group, and whose reactions the agent can respect. At the same time this figure does not merely shrink into a hanger for those same values but embodies intimations of a genuine social reality – in particular, of how it will be for one's life with others if one acts in one way rather than another. (Williams 2008, 102)

When the coordinates of that genuine social reality stretch across traditional boundaries, so does the figure of shame. Shame deals with an action as a *limit* to who I am; it requires that I recognize that it expresses something determinate about me and thereby establishes a limit. This is precisely why we can be made to feel inadequate as part of being an alien in another's culture, and why we can be humiliated by our lack of culturally appropriate table manners at the in-laws[84]. Our capacity for shame extends as far as our life does, whereas we might think, alongside

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[84] We might think it more appropriate to characterize this as "embarrassment" of the sort that we might feel when we wander into deli with no particular idea of the protocol for taking a number, standing in line, or the appropriate area to stand and wait for our order to be up. But this is a much less serious example than the one above; I may have harmed my standing with my in-laws permanently, I may feel as though I am insufficiently attentive to my partner's heritage, I may feel this reflects my American narrowness of experience. Each of these involves what and who I am, the proper locus for shame.

Williams, that our capacity for guilt stops at the edge of our established institutional relationships.

"Exemplarity" in the sense I have introduced it in this chapter is the response to a unique situation of fundamental disagreement that requires a performance that expresses the particularity of that disagreement. This involves compromise, in the sense of recognizing the possibility of a life in common with those with whom we fundamentally disagree, and can involve the shame of failing to meet the challenge of the disagreement on the terms already available to us. Cavell writes:

> Consent from above is an acknowledgment of one's sense of being promised by the persistent failures of democracy and shows the persistence of one's consent to this shameful condition of society by living now in an illustrious monarchy, hence one reachable from here (and for those of us here, only from here); which means living as an example of human partiality, that is to say, of whatever Moral Perfectionism knows as the human individual, one who is not everything but is open to the further self, in oneself and in others, which means holding oneself in knowledge of the need for change; which means, being one who lives in promise, as a sign or representative human, which in turn means expecting oneself to be, making oneself, intelligible as an inhabitant now also of a further realm [...] and to show oneself prepared to recognize others as belonging there; as if we were all teachers, or, say, philosophers. (Cavell 1990, 125)

This description of ethical self-consciousness might seem a bit extravagant, but its multiple formulations capture the demand made on us by fundamental disagreement. Some of the fantasy here is grounded when we acknowledge that this represents one procedure of ethical life. Further,

it amounts to a sobering clarification that the end of this state is the development of practices and

institutions in common, which cannot banish the possibility of inter-traditional disagreement in

general. These modes of response simply clarify the goods to which our performances attend,

and thereby enable consistent responses, therefore sustained relationships, and thus new kinds of

life in common.

Conclusion

This dissertation began with the challenge of a fundamental disagreement. What, I asked, was the appropriate response that form of disagreement which appears to provide us with no rational recourse? The first and (for some) most commonsensical answer was to resort to one or another form of Moral Relativism. I explained Moral Relativism as a cluster of views organized around a set of overlapping ideas. These included: that there are no moral facts of the matter, or that considering moral matters in terms of facts was a kind of category error; that what was morally right or wrong to do depended on one's social role, either within or between societies; that there was something wrong, incorrect, or more broadly inappropriate about attempting to adjudicate between the views of different "cultures". I introduced this cluster of views not in order to say that the observations that informed them were fundamentally mistaken, but that those same observations could be readily incorporated into another point of view that would make better sense of them. Following in what I took to be a vaunted tradition, I argued that clarification of the place of moral disagreement in our lives would provide this view.

This clarification began with a corrective from Alasdair MacIntyre. I brought his traditionalist moral perspective to bear in order to link together institutions, practices, and traditions into the complex web of ordinary ethical life. The aim of this intervention was to draw us away from the gray world of modern moral rationalism and back to the ordinary judgments

and evaluations that make up the important bulk of our life in common. It was also an attempt on my part to begin to redraw the delineations of ethical life, hopefully moving away from legal-national groupings and instead focusing on an integrated web of social roles that provide us with our identity and character through a set of virtues appropriate to those roles. MacIntyre's thoroughgoing functionalism and skepticism about modern moral institutions provided the new baseline for my argument. This same skepticism, however, left Alasdair MacIntyre's view open to persistent criticism by his own lights. What, he asked, was the source of modern moral philosophy and the market and state institutions that he felt actualized it? What perspective did we need to be able to assume in order to understand these institutions for what they were, and what sort of rational capacity did this require in us? His transition from 1981's "ideological" view of modern morality to his later "super-structural" view of modern morality marked his ongoing struggle with the actuality of our ethical life and the emphasis on individuality that has been the persistent theme of work on the matter.

It is no surprise, then, that I turned to the work of Bernard Williams, who, for decades, skirmished with MacIntyre's view even as he shared his own skepticism about modern morality. I summarized his arguments about the failings of Kantian-style moral rationalism that, he argued, failed to take seriously the differences between persons and persisted in category errors in its understanding of ethical life. I sketched out various entry-points to his own modern moral minimalism, inspired by Nietzsche's criticism of the causal efficacy of morality, his reconstructed Ancient Greek view and its criticism of the modern moral over-reliance on guilt, and his Thucydidean realism about historical conflict. I particularly focused on his work on moral relativism which takes the claims of moral relativism to be claims about *distance* both

metaphorical and literal. I especially wanted to emphasize the culmination of his work in *Truth and Truthfulness.* I focused on this book because it represents his attempt to defend himself on a flank that he is not known for paying attention to: his arguments against skepticism. I did my best to reconstruct Williams's views about indispensable human virtues through his "genealogy" of truth and to make sense of the significance of his patchwork view of historical narrative.

MacIntyre and Williams, on my view, have two mirrored issues in their understanding of modern ethical self-consciousness. MacIntyre's view, we might think, is too "totalizing" while Williams's is too "minimalist". MacIntyre retains his issues with making sense of his tradition as *one tradition among many.* and thus both *contingent in particularities,* but still *necessary enough for the intelligibility of human life at all* in its practices and attendant theory, to both be able to acknowledge difference and simultaneously secure the descriptive and realist claims about moral life that MacIntyre wanted to make. Williams retains his half-measures with historical reasoning and backtracks into a set of quasi-transcendental cooperative virtues because his view is primarily organized as a *response* to a set of traditional and modern moral views that he finds no meaningful basis for in lived life. This requires him to lean on a set of expectations about what "we" can say that are justified through his "genealogical method". It is tempting to call this a Goldilocks Problem and simply say that the truth is somewhere in the middle. But rather than reduce Williams and MacIntyre to a crude spectrum in which I occupied the happy medium, I argued that both of their issues could be better understood in the light of Stanley Cavell's intervention.

In my chapter that focused on Cavell's work I introduced a series of interrelated concepts that he used to cast light on the "sweet spot" of fundamental disagreement. Introduced through

the Emersonian invocation of "reposturing", Cavell articulates a double meaning of the "compromise" that properly attends a productive fundamental disagreement. This kind of compromise becomes intelligible as soon as you understand that it is not mutually exclusive with self-expression. This form of self-expression is best understood through Cavell's concept of "exemplarity", the attempt to live in light of the compromise that one finds oneself in. Finding that I do live in common with my neighbor from another religion, and that my explanation of how the actuality of my life, as part of our life in common, expresses my own faith, and then finding that I fail to convince him that our life, like my life, entails my theological dedication, opens onto the opportunity to transform the traditions to which I belong. What this transformation consists in cannot be laid out in advance, but Cavell would have us believe that "justice as fairness", the justice of equal persons, is only possible alongside this possibility of transformation. Even further, the possibility of this transformation is the criterion and thus impetus for "justice as fairness". The possibility of remarriage constitutes one of Cavell's descriptions of this transformation.

The silver thread throughout these chapters was my own view, sketched in outline in my introduction and making itself increasingly apparent as the work wound on. Each of these three thinkers provided me with criteria that I applied to any view that was going to do right by the ethical conflicts to which Moral Relativism responded and the philosophers considered here took to be indicative of the modern moral condition. They included the condition that any such account should not be transcendental, should not be exhaustive, should not be triumphalist, should not be morally realist, and should not be moralistic. Such a position also needed to take account of the persistence of "traditional" values and the institutions appropriate to them, the

spectral character of forms of life, and the role of exemplarity in response to fundamental disagreement.

The interrelated arguments I wanted to motivate were as follows:

1) The three philosophers are right that there is something missing from our account of moral life in several varieties of modern moral rationalism.

2) The forms of ethical response appropriate to situations that depend upon inter-traditional and intra-traditional reasoning are interestingly different in kind.

3) The difference between the inter-traditional and the intra-traditional responses is constituted by the "direction of fit" of the concepts appropriate to the response.

4) The response appropriate to intra-traditional moral reasoning will involve evaluation according to the standards of our institutionalized social roles.

4) The response appropriate to inter-traditional moral reasoning will involve evaluation according to the standards of Sincerity, Accuracy and Authenticity

5) The response appropriate to inter-traditional moral reasoning will require exemplification, deviation from pre-existing practices and institutions that nonetheless remains in a dialectical relationship with those practices and institutions

6) This kind of self-conscious exemplification holds out the promise of "compromise", coming to a new form of life together in a transformed dialectical relationship with the received mores of one's received practices and institutions

This is essentially an argument about a particularly modern form of ethical self-consciousness that has its roots in conflict between participants of traditional forms of life in fundamental disagreement. The reflective procedure identified with this self-consciousness does not simply

replace traditional forms of life, but links them together, first through particular exemplifications and, if the relationships are not exhausted by particular expressions of the fundamental conflict, concretizes into institutions of common ethical life. This is not a procedure that is best understood on the model of a rule or law, nor is it helpfully illuminated by considering it "decided in advance". It has its roots in our ordinary experience of ethical life and does not "rise above" that ordinary experience by placing us outside of it, but is better thought of as changing it from inside.

Persistent issues remain for the view I have described here. Alasdair MacIntyre might argue that it sneaks in, through a seemingly unobtrusive route, an essentially modern point-of-view that does not match the phenomenological experience of ethical life in an interdependent community reproduced according to tradition. By and large, he might say, people have no issue identifying the tradition they are a part of any more than they have difficulty identifying the religion to which they belong. To introduce another inter-traditional dimension to ethical life is just to bestow confusion with an integrity that it does not natively possess. These inter-traditional conflicts, even if they do exist, are typically resolved through conquest, negotiation, or mutual neglect, rather than some kind of transformation in the practitioners involved.

I would argue that this understanding of my argument rests on a misunderstanding of the dramatic content of my claim. We should not be surprised, on my view, that people have little difficulty tracing the broad cluster of institutions nearest to them. But, as can easily be seen if we look more closely, those institutions are often mediated by other, bigger institutions that reach over oceans and across borders. The argument I have made here is that these institutions rest on the ongoing mediation of inter-traditional conflict. Oftentimes this is controlled by laws,

currency, and arms, but these standardized mediations cannot exist without the possibility of the mediation of the conflict by the transformation of the parties.

In a similarly skeptical vein, I can easily imagine Bernard Williams arguing that I pay too much obeisance to a traditional life that has largely been eclipsed, in America and Britain at least. In countries where adherence to forms of organized religion is trending downward and modern culture has taken on the appearance of the autonomous form of life to which each of these authors responds, it may seem a little ridiculous to give received relationships of accountability as much credence as I give them. Without wading too much into the facts of the matter, I think that this dismissal is a little hasty. While I think that Williams undoubtedly captures a real current in Enlightenment thinking that has been handed down to us, too much skepticism about received mores can verge on cynicism. Cynicism is no crime in itself, but when it misses the ordinary content of human lives by trying to assimilate the experience of the core capitalist countries of the 20th- and 21st-centuries to humanity at large, we might think that we are occluding an important aspect of contemporary ethical life.

If this response seems too cavalier, this is not because I do not take the challenge seriously. Rather, it is because Williams does not think of his work as "a philosophy for everyone" or one meant to be universally convincing. That would be at serious odds with the explicit framing that he gives to his own work. While *Truth and Truthfulness* is attempting to lay out the conditions for cooperation in any community whatsoever, the final historiographical chapter of that book self-consciously attempts to explain its own context through relating the kind of history that Williams thinks his conceptual history enables:

It has been the aim of this book to show why there is no one reason for preferring the

truth, and to explain why many people much of the time do not even ask for a reason, and

rightly so. If the genealogy of truthfulness is vindicatory, it can show why truthfulness

has an intrinsic value; why it can be seen as such with a good conscience; why a good

conscience is a good thing with which to see it. To say that living in the truth is just a

better way to be is a perfectly good answer. But it is not going to impress everyone, and it

runs the risk, as answers in that style do, of implying that there are no other answers to

the question why, if we are trying to make sense of the past, history is better than myth.

(Williams 2002, 263)

This is followed by a discussion of the relationship of the virtues of truth to Judith Shklar's

"liberalism of fear" entirely in keeping with the reconstruction of Williams's negative account I

have given in this work. The values provided by the Williamsian account valorize themselves on

the basis of their capacity to *avoid* certain political ends, and they will be attractive to people

outside of the liberal societies that Williams takes to be his focus because they enable the evasion

of "totalitarian" dangers: these are the danger of what many take to be serious harms of moral

overreach, the most readily available of which are those of the last century. Williams self-

consciously writes from within this liberal frame with an eye to its internal clarification in hopes

that will performatively show its attractions clearly and unproblematically, which means being

frank about his argument's limits and fragility.

    I share much of this conception about what accounts like my own and Williams's can do.

That said, I have tried to argue here that where he draws the limit to our capacity for sincere and

accurate self-conscious regard threatens impinging on our Authenticity. While I do not imagine

that would be a particularly compelling argument to Williams, it might take on a more poignant

appearance when placed as an internal criticism of the kind of position Williams championed. In

Samuel Moyn's recent book *Liberalism Against Itself* he considers the legacy of the intellectual

interventions of the theorists of Cold War liberalism, foremost among them Judith Shklar, who

Moyn rightfully points out had a complex relationship to her own "liberalism of fear". This

argument has a number of interesting and controversial elements, but the crux of that book rests

on the limitations of this kind of position's ability to support itself:

> Worst of all, judged by its consequences not just in its time but ever since, Cold War
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> liberalism has failed. Every day, more and more, we see that its approach bred as much
>
> opposition as it overcame, and created the conditions not for universal freedom and
>
> equality but for the waves of enemies such liberals keep finding at the gates – or already
>
> inside them. Its anxious, minimalist approach to the preservation of freedom in a perilous
>
> world has been inimical to freedom itself, not merely to other ends like creativity,
>
> equality and welfare. (Moyn 2023, 7)

Events since 1991 give us good reason, we might think, to rethink the limitations of a defensive,

minimalist liberalism and its associated vision of ethical life. While the aim of Moyn's book is to

provide room for a recovery of a more robust and positive liberal vision, the aim of my project is

much more cautious. In the spirit of Williams's own intervention, I look to our own capacity for

ethical self-consciousness and find it even more limited in some ways than Williams does. While

his realistic outlook is premised on the idea that an interrelated conception of modern agency and

political history can largely replace outmoded narrative resources, my broader, more variegated view suggests our ordinary experience of ethical conflict furnishes broader and more diverse modes of response than simply warning again against liberal triumphalism and doubling down on theoretical austerity. This latter kind of response has its own "negative teleology" to it; the conclusion, however qualified, that the achievements and catastrophes of the last century put some positive possibility for the development of ethical life beyond philosophical attention is rightfully seen as its own sort of sullen triumphalism

It is harder to anticipate the lines of criticism that a Cavellian would take towards the position I described above. My treatment might seem too systematic for Cavell, retaining a kind of formalism that I reject elsewhere. It might remain too triumphalist, holding out the possibility of a transformation of life-in-common when Cavell's own understanding of exemplarity is a more individualized and individualistic phenomenon. One of the most important aspects of the form of self-consciousness Cavell describes is that it is always *in process*, never truly finished. This is why "good enough justice" is so critical to his account: certain kinds of political struggles have to have already been undertaken in order for us to arrive at the perfectionist aspect of our ethical lives. It may seem inappropriate, to Cavell or Cavellians, to deploy perfectionist arguments about the kinds of conditions that enable "good enough justice" in the manner I do above. I will depend upon the strength of my presentation of Cavell's arguments to hold my ground here.

The allegation about my systematicity might go like this: my argument remains beholden to a view of the "rule" or "norm" that is precisely the target of the Cavellian argument. On this view, my argument is positing a set of standardized criteria that "stand apart" from our ordinary

criteria for evaluating moral disputes. There has to be some truth to this. My argument is

undoubtedly normative in the sense that I suggested in the introduction, that in clarifying what I

take to be varying forms of ethical self-consciousness I am making a claim about what they

should be (that they "have a grammar" to use a formulation common to Cavell and

Wittgenstein). The disagreement with Cavell cannot be there, since he is quick to argue

something very similar[85]. I would hasten to note that my account does not claim to be the only

ethical account, nor does it claim to exhaust our evaluative resources outside of ethics. While I

claim that the various forms of ethical response that I consider are interrelated in determinate

ways and organized in part according to their relationship to one another, that does not, I think,

impinge upon their relative autonomy.

To the second Cavellian claim, that I am overly focused on the enabling rules that might

allow one to adjudicate from a position of common moral agreement rather than focusing on the

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[85] Consider his explanation of Wittgenstein's (and his own) understanding of his criteria in *The Claim of Reason:*

> Wittgenstein's insight, or implied claim, seems to be something like this, that all our knowledge, everything we assert or question (or doubt or wonder about…) is governed not merely by what we understand as "evidence" or "truth conditions" but by criteria. ("Not merely" suggests a misleading emphasis. Criteria are not alternatives of additions to evidence. Without the control of criteria in applying concepts, we would not know what counts for evidence for any claim, nor for what claims evidence is needed.) And that suggests, according to what has so far emerged, that every surmise and each tested conviction depend upon the same structure or background of necessities and agreements that judgments of value explicitly do. I do not say that, according to Wittgenstein, statements of fact *are* judgments of value. This would simply mean that there are no facts […] (Cavell 1979, 14)

Our judgments of value and statements of fact are, on this view, just that, *our* judgments and statements. They depend upon "necessities and agreements" not as explicit or qualified charter, but as part of the activity of our life in common. Our explicit judgments and evaluations rest on this background, and, consequently whatever we can say about our capacity for ethical self-regard has to be a reflective part of this pattern of activity.

moral condition of mediating relationships between importantly different individual persons, I must also confess to some guilt. Though I have gone to pains to differentiate my view from a theory of justice, my view has bearing on how we should adjudicate in these cases. Insofar as I argue that the forms of ethical self-consciousness I consider here constitute real possibilities for us as ethical agents, I am arguing that the attempt to occlude them well remain importantly incomplete. This is not the same, however, as saying that a set of necessary and sufficient conditions must obtain in institutions of justice in order for them to be just institutions. While my ambition may reach beyond that of Cavell's when he thinks of himself from writing "from within" modern morality, this does not commit me to the other horn of a dilemma that requires a determinate set of standards and practices.

It remains to be seen, we might think, whether or not the kinds of institutions that I gesture at here will continue to develop according to the logic I have discerned in them. To the question, "Which institutions as they currently exist instantiate this logic?" the answer can only be an extended social history and analysis of these institutions. This marks the persistence in my position of the arguments in both MacIntyre and in Williams that philosophy is intimately related to arguments in and about history. It's with this in mind that I am going to pause here to address the relationship of my project to Hegel. It is a commonplace to argue that Hegel is the thinker of grand integration: the integration of the Classical and the Modern world, the integration of Greek mores with Roman law, the integration of the old metaphysics and the new epistemology, and the integration of the Aristotelian view of the natural world with the Copernican. My aim here has been significantly less ambitious, as I hope to have convincingly argued above.

Nevertheless, there is an obvious affinity in my attempt to interrelate modes of traditional and individual ethical response in a manner that suggests the Hegel of the dialectic between tradition and Enlightenment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or the interrelation of morality and ethical life in the *Philosophy of Right.* Both of us argue that, in order to get clear about our ethical experience, we need to be able to account for the role of our normative relationships while locating them in persistent and dynamic institution and for the individual experience of our misfit with those institutions. Both of us argue that a self-conscious understanding of conflict is central to understand the internal and external dynamics of ethical response. But if we think that the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* provides us with a definitive account of the integrated structure of the Idea and therefore of the possibilities of our self-regard, or we think that the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* exhausts our capacity for normative evaluative response in his treatment of property, the moral law, and the nation, then we will have to part ways. It is a consequence of my argument that I cannot claim this exhaustion of philosophy or of history. My account of the role of fundamental disagreement in our ethical self-consciousness is not meant to recontextualize it retrospectively as part of a theoretically intelligible whole, but rather to show how these conflicts remain fructive despite our attempts to avoid or otherwise dispel them. If, for Hegel, the discipline of History had to be articulated in light of the structure of the Idea that made it intelligible as itself, my much narrower ambition is to draw attention to how and why histories can express still-living disagreements as such and enable novel self-understandings as a result.

Some contemporary critical economic histories, including the recent work of Amy Offner in her *Sorting Out The Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in America* or Jamie Martin's *The Meddlers: Sovereignty, Empire, and the Birth of Global*

Economic Governance go a long way towards documenting the limits of the some of the institutions of international mediation predicated on the limited notions of accountability and related theoretical and practical norms I criticize here. These works are representative of two distinctive strands of argument in the contemporary literature on the history of international institutions. Offner's work shows the international development of the institutions of neoliberal austerity through the "testing" of it in the developmental states of Latin America and the re-importation of those practices and institutions into the capitalist core. *Meddlers*, by contrast, tells the story of the development of the first international economic institutions as they developed out of the imperial institutions of the 19th-century. Both of these approaches represent two axes of international mediation of fundamental disagreement through institutions of economic reasoning that rely on a narrow conception of the possibilities of institutional mediation and ethical responsiveness. As I mentioned in passing above, inattention to the developmental role of fundamental disagreement in ethical life can lead to extensive pathologies in large scale institutional relationships through their role in mediating the reproduction of ordinary ethical life. These critical remarks must remain suggestive here, but they preview the direction of my further writing on these topics.

Obvious positive exemplars are little more difficult to find. The alter-globalization movement as described by Geoffrey Pleyers, including organizations like La Via Campesina and the World Social Forum, provides a particularly illustrative reference point for my arguments. These institutions attempt to bring together people from diverse traditions in a manner that does not simply depend upon bare transactional relationships but attempt to self-consciously integrate those relationships into a broader and more persistent expression of a life in common. I should

note here, as I have above, that my account is not simply normative, but descriptive. It does not just articulate just articulate a *special* process undertaken in extraordinary conditions, but the connection of that process to the mediation of ordinary ethical life. Future work on the nature of sub- and supra-national institutions on my part can make my arguments clearer and provide them with the complement that might otherwise, to a Cavell or a Williams, seem under argued here.

This brings us to some of the methodological implications of the view I have argued for here. I take it to be one of the substantial strengths of this view that it requires us to look beyond the institutions of the nation-state to the particular functions and practices, both formal and informal, which bind people together according to relationships with according responsibilities. This philosophical anthropology will undoubtedly require discussion of states and their laws, but will not fixate on them as "abstract" entities or on any other similar form of self- or other-identification. This holds out the promise of getting concrete about the mediation of social life in a manner that lends itself to interdisciplinary analysis. My view, in this sense, shares many of the strengths of the Marxist tradition of the critique of political economy and the complementary analysis of the workings of the institutions and practices that rely on that discourse. In particular, it shares the conviction that the rule-based organization of social life rests on more basic set of reproductive relationships. I suggested in the introduction of this dissertation that my project has obvious overlap with the tradition of critical theory, and my future work will develop this affinity.

Marxists are not the only ones to hold such a view. The phenomenological tradition, particularly the idiosyncratic offshoot of that tradition descending from Heidegger, presents another possible affinity. Heidegger's far-reaching development furnishes a number of different

foci for comparison. In his *Being and Time*-era work, Heidegger's attention to the phenomenology of authenticity, his consideration of guilt, his attention to the encounter with the other, and his extended consideration of modes of response all make his view in that work a close cousin to my own. His later work dealing with passivity, event, and place are also of serious importance for my position. It is not a coincidence that each of the thinkers I have dealt with here cites Heidegger, whether critically or approvingly, across the breadth of their corpus. Future writing will, I hope, provide me with the opportunity to address these affinities beyond the scattered suggestive remarks that I make here.

Another route worth investigating goes through Deleuze, particularly the Deleuze and Guattari of *A Thousand Plateaus*, who focus on the intimate relationships and interdependencies between formal and informal institutions and the subjects appropriate to them in a wide variety of milieus[86]. Donna Haraway's work provides another possible point of connection for my work, albeit in a different vein. Her "Cyborg Manifesto" attempts to recast traditional social roles through intermediate figures that are not flatly dependent on those roles or simply replacements for them. Similarly, the tradition of postcolonial political and aesthetic thinking exemplified by the work of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* or Edouard Glissant in his *Poetics of Relation* remains an unexplored avenue at the end of this project. Both of these thinkers endeavor to conceptualize modes of response that move intertraditionally and that reframe traditional institutional identities in broader contexts that reveal those identities as partial products. The

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[86] For example, consider the infamous chapter on the "War Machine" in *A Thousand Plateaus.* Deleuze and Guattari argue there that two different modes of social organization are both intimately wound up in one another and dichotomously opposed. They explore how historical attempts to forcibly integrate these modes of organization have a wide-reaching, often asymmetrical, and detrimental effect.

proximity of these authors to my own view means they demand my future attention and response.

The variety of affinities I have listed to explore here strikes me as an asset. However, it may appear to others as a symptom of the view being overly ambiguous or indeterminate. It may help to think of this project as an attempt to establish one beachhead among many for an alternative tradition in Analytic philosophy, broadly construed. The focus of this project was to provide an account of fundamental disagreement and the important role that it plays in modern ethical self-consciousness that neither settles for the neat answers of deontology and utilitarianism nor avoids fundamental disagreement altogether. Key to this focus was that I found that project already underway, and I have attempted to show the guiding thread of this tradition (or genre) of which I count myself a part in the process of consolidating my own view.

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