

Ethics and Normativity*

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1. *Morality: why Darwinian deflationism fails*

Many modern ideas about the nature of morality are strongly influenced by the kind of historical or genealogical approach that began to emerge in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most famous proponent of this was Charles Darwin. In his *Descent of Man* (published in the 1870s) Darwin displays what can be called a 'reductionist' attitude to human morality: instead of providing us with insight into ultimate meaning and value, our faculty of moral judgement is simply a product, or by-product, of how our ancestors happened to have evolved in the struggle for survival.

In the course of Chapters 4 and 5 of the *Descent of Man*, which are about the evolution of our moral sensibilities, Darwin uses a highly significant phrase – the 'so-called moral sense'.¹ His reductionist approach sees conscience, and other so-called 'higher' impulses, as merely one or more of many natural feelings that have developed under selection pressure. Altruism and self-sacrifice, for instance (to take an example he discusses), may have arisen because tribes in which this trait is prominent 'would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection'.² The crucial point Darwin is making here is about the purely natural origin of our moral feelings; they are in this respect just like any other ingrained drives and inclinations – part of our natural, animal inheritance. Indeed, he implies that the difference between moral and non-moral feelings is rather like the difference between human dispositions and those occurring in other primates: the difference may be considerable, but in Darwin's view it is 'certainly ... one of *degree*, and not of *kind*'.³ There is nothing special, nothing specially exalted, about morality or about the conscience or moral sense that supposedly detects

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¹ '... actions are regarded by savages ... as good or bad, solely as they obviously affect the welfare of the tribe ... The conclusion agrees well with the belief that the so-called moral sense is aboriginally derived from the social instincts...' Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* [1871; 2nd edn repr. 1879] (London: Penguin, 2004), Ch. 4, p. 143.

² 'A tribe including many members who ... were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. At all times through the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase.' Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Ch. 5, p. 157-8. Modern evolutionary theorists would see this apparent endorsement of group selection as problematic, but, with the aid of genetic theory, could easily adjust the story, rewriting in terms of the advantages of prevalence within a given population of an individual gene or genes linked to altruistic behaviour.

³ Darwin, *Descent*, Ch. 4, p. 151.

moral values. The entire phenomenon of morality can take its place, in principle, as simply another part of the natural world.

This classic Darwinian position is a bold one, but it faces serious problems. For when we normally think of the domain of morality it does appear to differ in kind from anything found in the ordinary observable natural world.

Moral values, to begin with, appear to be *objective* – they do not seem to be a function of my personal preferences and desires, or even those of society in general. Cruelty and arrogance are objectively wrong, and remain so irrespective of whether I have a taste for them. Even if arrogance became universally admired, that would not show it was right or good,⁴ only that human beings had become more corrupt (something that is, of course, all too possible).

Second, fundamental moral values are *universal* – not in the sense that they are as a matter of fact respected always and everywhere, but in the sense that their validity and scope is independent of the variations of local history or geography. Conceptions of virtue do of course differ in different epochs and tribes – something that Darwin highlights; but that does not count decisively against objectivity and universality. The wrongness of slavery, for example, or the goodness of compassion, may not be universally acknowledged in all ages and areas, but that does not prevent their reflecting perfectly objective and universal truths about virtue and value. After all, the truths of physics are very far from universally acknowledged, but that does not at all count against their being universal and objective (it is just that they take a lot of time and effort to uncover and understand properly).

Thirdly, moral values are *necessary* – cruelty does not just *happen* to be wrong, but is wrong in all possible worlds. We may of course transgress such fundamental norms, and often do, but (as the nineteenth-century logician Gottlob Frege put it in a rather different connection, discussing the truths of logic and mathematics), they are rather like ‘boundary stones which our thought can overflow but not dislodge’.⁵

And fourthly and finally, moral values are, in the current philosophical jargon, *normative* – that is to say, they exert an authoritative demand or call upon us, whether we like it or not. This last is a remarkable property, which what used to be called the ‘eternal values’ (truth, beauty and goodness) all share – they carry with them the sense of a *requirement* or a *demand*. Some languages, Latin for example, have a special grammatical form, called the gerundive, to express this notion. Thus, the Latin word *amandus* (from *amare*, to love) means not just that something is loved, or even that it is ‘lovable’ (in the rather weak sense that it tends to be loved, or is apt to be loved), but rather that it is *to be loved*, that it ought to be loved. This kind of ‘gerundive’ flavour seems to attach to truth: the true is that which is worthy of belief – *to be believed*. And similarly the beautiful is that which is worthy of admiration, *to be admired*, and the good is that which is worthy of choice, *to be pursued*. Truth, beauty and goodness therefore seem to be rather ‘queer’ properties (as the philosopher John Mackie once put it⁶): they have this odd, magnetic aspect – they somehow have ‘to-be-pursuedness’ built into them. Why is this queer or odd? Because it seems incompatible with any purely *naturalistic* or scientific account of these properties; for it is not easy to see how a purely natural or empirically definable item could have this strange ‘normativity’ or

⁴ There are of course important differences between ‘right’ and ‘good’, but I shall not be exploring them in this paper, since they do not affect the main thrust of my argument.

⁵ Gottlob Frege, *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* [*Die Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, Vol. I, 1893], transl. M. Furth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 13.

⁶ John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), Ch 1, §9.

choice-worthiness somehow packed into it. So it starts to look as if thinking about these normative concepts is sooner or later going to take us beyond the purely natural or empirical domain.⁷

Some philosophers think that this is making a lot of fuss about very little. For example, we have recently seen the rise of so-called ‘buck-passing’ accounts of value. The American idiom, to ‘pass the buck’, means to shift responsibility to someone else. So ‘buck passing’ accounts of value shift the emphasis away from normative notions like ‘good’ and ‘ought’, onto much less puzzling and more down-to-earth factual notions that seem to underpin them. What makes a knife good is simply that it has certain ordinary natural or observable features (such as sharpness) which give me reason to choose it, if I want to cut something. And similarly, what makes charity good, for example, is simply that the relevant actions have certain ordinary natural properties (e.g. reducing suffering) that give me reason to perform them.⁸

Yet although it is obviously true that goodness and badness are connected with ordinary features of actions in this way (the ordinary observable features providing *reasons* for us to choose or avoid things), it is unfortunately all too clear that many people are not responsive to such reasons. Many people delight in cruel or vicious behaviour; and the suffering of others that *we* may regard as a reason for them to desist, simply is not recognized by them as a reason to stop. We may say: ‘Yes, but whatever such vicious people may say or feel, the suffering of their victims *is* a reason, an *authoritative* reason, for them to desist’. But then we seem to be appealing to some kind of moral demand that remains in force *no matter what* – no matter how many people transgress it, or refuse to recognize it. In short, although the ‘buck-passing’ account of value seems right in grasping how goodness and badness point beyond themselves to ordinary natural features of actions that provide reasons to choose or avoid them, it does not appear to explain how some of those reasons possess *authoritative normative power*.

The conclusion of the argument so far is that the Darwinian or naturalistic approach to ethics is in trouble when it comes to explaining genuine moral values—genuine in the strong sense I have been discussing, which is manifested in the fact that they provide conclusive reasons for action whether we like it or not.

2. *Conscience and its origins*

Now there is an obvious way of trying to block this conclusion: one could just deny that there are any values of this sort: one could say that the traditional notion of eternal values is a fantasy, or that the whole idea of an objective, universal, necessary, normative standard is an illusion, or a sham. Darwin himself is too cautious to say this outright, but he does frequently note the findings of anthropologists and explorers about variations in moral norms from culture to culture, and indeed the total absence of some of our most cherished values in what the Victorians called ‘savage’ peoples.

The general message from *The Descent of Man* is that there is no ultimate court of appeal in the face of such variations. Instead of a moral absolute called ‘goodness’, we simply have an efficiency criterion; when we talk of the ‘standard of morality’, the only serious scientific test can be ‘the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full

⁷ For more on this and the other aspects of moral value discussed here, see John Cottingham, *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), Ch. 2, and *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 3.

⁸ For the ‘buck-passing’ account, see Tim Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are subjected.⁹ On this *deflationary* view,¹⁰ we human beings just invest our moral values with a kind of mystique, an aura of power; but they are simply human inventions, or projections from the desires and drives that we happen to have evolved in the struggle for survival. Of course, there are social rules and norms – that is a matter of history or social anthropology. But these (so this view holds) are reducible to natural phenomena – learned behaviour patterns, instilled social practices – which the empirical scientist can investigate and describe. This is the deflationary line that Darwin took when he meditated on ‘the imperious word *ought*’. ‘The imperious word *ought*’, he says in the *Descent*, seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a rule of conduct, *however it may have originated.*¹¹

A decade or so earlier, John Stuart Mill, writing from an entirely secular perspective, in his essay *Utilitarianism*, had taken a similar purely empirical or naturalist line. He defined ‘the essence of conscience’ as ‘a feeling in our own mind; a pain more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty’. He adds various qualifications – that the feeling must be ‘disinterested’, and connected with the ‘pure idea of duty’ – but the main effect of his account is a deflationary or demystifying one: to reduce the deliverances of conscience to nothing more than a set of psychological events or purely subjective feelings. These feelings, he observed, are typically ‘encrusted over with collateral associations’, derived from the ‘recollections of childhood’ and ‘all the forms of religious feeling’; and this, he claims, is enough to explain away ‘the sort of mystical character which ... is apt to be attributed to the idea of moral obligation.’¹²

Mill’s account purports to be simply a piece of empirical psychology, but it clearly has serious implications for the normativity of conscience. Painful feelings, linked to the violation of duty, function as what Mill called ‘internal sanctions’; and he wished to enlist these in the service of his own utilitarian ethics. But sanctions, as understood by Mill, are just causal motivators – means whereby a desired code may be inculcated into the population so as to reinforce allegiance; we are thus in the territory of *inducements for compliance*, not in the territory of *authoritative reasons for action*. Mill was sensitive to the objection that if what restrains me from wrongdoing is ‘only a feeling in my own mind’, one may be tempted to think that ‘when the feeling ceases, the obligation ceases.’ But he confines his reply to observing that those who believe in a more exalted and objective source of obligation are just as likely to transgress morally as those who think that what restrains them ‘is always in the mind itself.’¹³ This may be true, but it is hardly relevant to the question at hand: does conscience have genuine authoritative power or not?

For the naturalist (by which I mean someone who holds that there is no reality beyond the set of natural events and processes that have emerged from the Big Bang), it is hard to see how the answer can be anything other than ‘no’. In a neutral, Godless universe, where the planet and all its inhabitants are, in the end, simply accidental and temporary by-products of the debris flung out by the Big Bang, and where human

⁹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Ch. 4, p. 145.

¹⁰ Imagine a magnificent balloon floating in the air. If it is *deflated* it falls to the earth, no longer an object of wonder and admiration. So by calling an account of morality ‘deflationary’, I mean that its effect is to take away the sense of moral values as having a exalted power or authority, and present them instead as something much more ordinary and down to earth.

¹¹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Ch. 4, p. 140.

¹² John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], Ch. 3.

¹³ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Ch. 3.

impulses of conscience are simply a subset of many conflicting impulses that we happen to have evolved in the struggle for survival, it is hard to see how any one human faculty can have the special status of being (to borrow the phrase of Joseph Butler from the eighteenth century) ‘a faculty *in kind and in nature supreme over all others*, and which *bears its own authority* of being so.’ To be sure, we do as a matter of fact have natural dispositions to kindness and compassion. But as Joseph Butler observed, it is equally true that ‘... other passions [such as anger] ... which lead us ... astray, are themselves in a degree equally natural, and often most prevalent ...[and hence] it is plain the former considered merely as natural ... can no more be a law to us than the latter.’¹⁴ We are still far short of the traditional idea of conscience, which Butler aptly characterises as the ‘superior principle of reflection or conscience in every man ... which pronounces some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust.’¹⁵

The strong kind of authority or normativity that Butler sought was (in his view) to be found within a theistic metaphysics. Since his time, of course, especially in recent years, there has been much philosophical energy devoted to trying to show there can be normativity in a purely natural universe. But in my view all that this recent work has delivered, in the moral or practical arena, is *conditional* or *relative* normativity: the idea that certain natural features of things provide reasons to choose or commend them *given that* we have certain projects or purposes, or *relative to* certain contingently evolved biological or social structures. If the purposes, or the structures, were different, then the normativity would evaporate, or point us in another direction.

It is this background of *contingency* that seems to me to undermine the traditional idea of strong normativity, mirrored in the authoritative intuitions of conscience. In the secular worldview, in which a random or accidental chain of events gives rise to a certain type of featherless biped with certain contingently evolved desires and inclinations and communal practices, ethics will be subject to what the distinguished moral philosopher Bernard Williams called a ‘*radical contingency*’, by which he meant that ‘our current ethical conceptions ... might have been different from what they are’, and that the conditions which brought them about are ‘not related to them in a way that vindicates them against possible rivals’.¹⁶ Had the evolutionary history of the planet, or our species, been slightly different, then our morality might well have been slightly or even radically different.

But notice the disturbing implications of this idea. If our ethical conceptions are a product of a purely contingent concatenation of events, if they might have been otherwise, then it starts to look as if they might be changed or overridden. As Friedrich

¹⁴ See further John Cottingham, ‘“Our Natural Guide . . .” : Conscience, “Nature”, and Moral Experience’, in D. S. Oderberg and T. Chappell (eds), *Human Values* (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 11-31.

¹⁵ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* [1726], II, 8, in J. B. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and also in D. D. Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists 1650-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969). For more on the philosophical issues arising from the notion of conscience, see John Cottingham, ‘Conscience’, in Roger Crisp (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the History of Ethics*, forthcoming.

¹⁶ ‘[A] truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are not obviously related to them in a way that vindicates them against possible rivals.’ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Ch. 2, p. 20.

Nietzsche put it, in the *Genealogy of Morals* (published not too long after Darwin's *Descent*), once we start to think about the conditions under which humans invented the value judgements good and evil, we can start to ask *what value do these value judgements themselves possess*.¹⁷ It is no accident that Bernard Williams's conception of ethics, and his scepticism about what he called 'the morality system', were strongly influenced by Nietzsche, and his idea that, once we accept that ethics has a genealogy, a contingent history, this frees us from acknowledging the authority of so called eternal moral values. As Nietzsche put it, we can, if we are strong enough, decide to *invert* eternal moral values. In a godless universe, where God is 'dead', then we are not subject to any higher authority, and so questions of value become merely a function of the projects we autonomously decide to pursue. So (as Nietzsche frighteningly suggests in one of the most disturbed and disturbing passages in Western philosophy), why should we not cut ourselves off from 'herd-animal morality' with its 'sympathy for whatever feels, lives suffers ... in [its] almost feminine incapacity to remain spectators of suffering, to *let suffer* ...' For there might (in Nietzsche's way of thinking) be conclusive reasons to steel ourselves *against* impulses of love and mercy, to harden our hearts *against* compassion and forgiveness, since such sentiments might get in the way of our will to power, or our passion for self-realisation, or some other grand project we happen to have.¹⁸

3. *Is contingency so damaging?*

The conclusion towards which I am moving, then, is that (broadly) Darwinian or naturalistic accounts of ethics are unstable because of what they imply about the contingency of ethics.¹⁹ The contingent origins of our moral intuitions, their emergence out of a developmental flux that does nothing to vindicate them, and the realization that they might have been, and might still be, challenged and changed – this cluster of connected worries seems to undermine their authority. But let me close by considering an objection to this conclusion: is contingency really so damaging?

In answering this question, I should first make some important concessions to the naturalistic framework for understanding ourselves, which, in my support for the idea of 'eternal values', I might seem to have been rejecting altogether. First, we humans are, to be sure, creatures who belong within the natural world, and any plausible account of human nature needs to acknowledge this. Darwin was surely right to insist on this point. Human beings are indeed formed 'out of the dust of the earth' (as the second chapter of Genesis puts it), and we have to understand ourselves as part of the vast natural process of the cosmos. In the second place, it is important to note that contingency need not imply a chaotic flux. Notwithstanding the pressure that Darwinian

¹⁷ 'Fortunately I have learnt to separate theology from morality and ceased looking for the origin of [good and] evil *behind* the world. Some schooling in history and philology, together with an innate sense of discrimination with respect to questions of psychology, quickly transformed my problem into another one: under what conditions did man invent the value-judgements good and evil? *And what value do they themselves possess?*' Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* [*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887], Preface, §3.

¹⁸ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], §37.

¹⁹ The final two sections of this paper draw on material from my articles 'Human Nature and the Transcendent', in Constantine Sandis and M. J. Cain (eds), *Human Nature*. Royal Institute of Philosophy supplement 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 233-254, and 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical"'. In D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 2, pp. 25-43.

ideas put on the idea of a fixed and immutable human nature, any plausible developmental account of our origins will allow that there are stable features of the human condition that remain largely unchanged across vast periods of time. These stabilities are of course reflected in the ethical domain. For example, Aristotelian ethics aimed at specifying those excellences of character that enable us to flourish as the kind of creatures we are – possessed of drives and needs we share with other animals, yet also having the capacity for rational reflection; and it is striking how much of that ethics continues to speak to us today. Of course it is not entirely immutable: there may be room for dispute about which virtues need to be added to or subtracted from the list; but despite all ways in which our lives diverge from those of Classical Greece, there is ample evidence from literature and history and biology to believe our human nature has changed very little, if at all, since those days; indeed, in evolutionary and genetic terms, the whole human story since prehistoric times is the merest blink of an eye.

So despite the contingencies and vicissitudes of our evolutionary and cultural history, it is perfectly plausible to maintain that any account of human flourishing must be anchored in certain relatively stable, basic facts about human nature, and that, whatever the variations in the human situation from epoch to epoch, or culture to culture, there will necessarily be a vast amount in common. So, to come to the point at issue, *why not just live with the contingency?* Why shouldn't our ethical and intuitions simply reflect certain admittedly contingent but nonetheless relatively fundamental and relatively stable facts about our biological and social nature as it has evolved over time? Nietzsche's claim, as we have seen, is that becoming aware of morality's contingent origins destabilizes it. But why shouldn't an objector accept the contingency and simply point out the *advantages* of the morality system that has emerged from the evolutionary and historical flux. For example, why shouldn't the traditional (contingently evolved) morality system gain its authority from being the set of values that, as a matter of fact happens to best serve the interests of humanity?

To answer this, I cannot do better than quote from Christopher Janaway in his excellent recent study of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*.

Those conceptions of humanity's best interests that show morality in a strong light tend to be those that Nietzsche has argued to be part of the very same historical construct. For example, morality might be said to benefit the greatest number of people by its potential to protect them from some degree of suffering ... But, when we have read the *Genealogy*, we may be persuaded that many of the constituent assumptions here – that suffering is something in principle lamentable about life, that well-being consists chiefly in the absence of suffering, that the well-being of all humans matters equally, that values are preferable the greater the number they benefit – are all part of the same elaborate, contingent body of ideas and attitudes that is morality.²⁰

In other words, once the contingent genealogy of morals is accepted, then the authority we accord to our traditional moral intuitions will turn out to be contingent on our allegiance to the values of the morality system which our culture has developed— and yet that is the very allegiance that Nietzsche's arguments have called into question.

²⁰ Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), P. 248.

4. *The remaining options*

How might contemporary philosophers respond to these problems? Interestingly enough, much contemporary Western ethics is nowadays firmly objectivist, and committed to normative realism: it wants to retain the traditional idea of objective normative values, that are not simply a function of contingently evolved preferences or projects. But does it have the intellectual or ontological *resources* to support this strong normative realism?

I have already referred to the ‘buck-passing’ account, which holds that goodness is the second-order property some action or object has of providing reasons for choosing it in virtue of its natural, first-order properties. But I think this route will only provide *conditional* normativity. It will not yield the kind of authoritative demand that the intuitions of conscience were traditionally supposed to track— a call that appears to draw us forward and beyond ourselves, beyond the flux of our contingent inclinations and projects, beyond the bundle of traits and characteristics we happen to have evolved to have, towards something absolute and unchanging that demands our allegiance.

A somewhat different view that has many modern supporters is what might be called *strong realist non-naturalism*. This insists that values have a genuinely objective status: they are not reducible to natural facts and properties (hence the term ‘non-natural’), but exist as normative realities in their own right. Thus Russ Shafer-Landau tells us that values are ‘a brute fact about the way the world works’; or, in a later formulation, ‘moral principles are as much a part of reality as ... the basic principles of physics’.²¹ Yet on this ‘brute fact’ view, are we supposed to think (to put it very crudely) that values somehow float around, alongside planets and stars and galaxies? It is one thing to say values exist, but *how* do they exist?²² In fairness, Shafer-Landau goes on to concede that his theory is one with ‘very limited explanatory resources’.²³ But in that case, the danger is that it will not come down to much more than the mere assertion that moral values really (mysteriously) exist.

Another strong realist, Eric Wielenberg (*Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*) asserts that moral truths are ‘part of the furniture of the universe’, and indeed constitute the ‘ethical background of every possible universe.’²⁴ This latter phrase suggests that we should think of values as purely abstract objects, perhaps rather like triangles or prime numbers. So if we are prepared to accept that abstract mathematical entities exist (waiting to be discovered and investigated by mathematicians), could we not perhaps accept that abstract values exist (waiting to be investigated by moralists)? Yet this kind of approach seems to invoke one mystery (the existence in all possible worlds of objective mathematical realities) in order to explain another (the existence of moral realities). If eternal mathematical and logical and moral reality is somehow involved in the very existence of things, yet cannot be explained in naturalistic terms,

²¹ See Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003): moral standards ‘just are correct’; they are ‘a brute fact about the way the world works’ (pp. 46, 48). For the comparison with physics, see ‘Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Non-naturalism’, in Shafer Landau (ed.) *Ethical Theory*, Ch. 8.

²² The so-called ‘redundancy’ strategy, of construing truth and reality claims as merely emphatic asseverations of the propositions they refer to – so that ‘*x is true/really true/part of reality*’ is merely a strong way of asserting *x* – is of course not available to the non-naturalist, on pain of retreating from the very normative realism that he is supposed to be propounding.

²³ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, p. 48.

²⁴ Eric J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 52.

then this is a remarkable fact (and, one might add, remarkably consistent with traditional theism); it seems the non-naturalist needs to *respond* to this, instead of just asserting that such realities are ‘part of the universe’.

As we noted earlier, the traditional approach to ethical objectivity (for example in Samuel Butler) was a religious one. And if we wish to retain the idea of a faculty which gives us insight into an objective, universal, necessary domain of value that has normative authority over us, then the traditional theistic framework at least offers a world-picture in which normativity is, so to speak, *comfortably at home*. The theist’s universe, after all, is, from first to last, a *creation*, already replete with meaning and value and intelligence. This may not solve any explanatory puzzles in the way a scientific explanation does, but then neither does a theistic view of anything else. As the distinguished theologian Herbert McCabe observed, ‘to say that God created the world is in no way to eliminate the intellectual vertigo we feel when we try to think of the beginning of things.’²⁵ And so it will be for value. For there is a certain vertigo in the idea that we contingent creatures— ‘imbecile worms of the earth’, in the phrase of Blaise Pascal— are called to transcend ourselves. As Pascal observed: ‘humanity transcends itself’. It is our nature always to strive to close the moral gap between what we are and what we are called to be.²⁶

Sooner or later, as we struggle through life, we seem compelled to acknowledge, the call to orient ourselves towards values that we did not create, and whose normativity cannot be explained merely as a function of a given subset of our various naturally evolved impulses and socially evolved standards. As Shafer-Landau puts it (and here I would wholeheartedly agree with him), ‘we humans have created for ourselves a number of different sets of conventional moral standards, but these are never the final word in the moral arena. The flaws and attractions of any conventional morality are rightly measured against a moral system that human beings did not create.’²⁷

Love, compassion, mercy, truth, justice, courage, endurance, fidelity— all these belong to a core of key values and virtues that all the world’s great religions (and the modern secular cultures that are their offspring) recognize, and which command our allegiance whether we like it or not. We may try to go against them, to live our lives without reference to them, but if we are honest we cannot deny their authority over us. So if we reject the theistic picture that provides a home for such authoritative values, and if I am right that there is no satisfactory half-way house of non-naturalist objectivism, then perhaps the only viable option remaining to us would be to maintain that the commanding authority of moral values is a massive illusion. That of course could be the case. But when we focus, clearly and sincerely, on the way such values are disclosed to us in our deepest moral intuitions, such a deflationary line turns out to be very difficult indeed to sustain.

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²⁵ Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2009).

²⁶ See John Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits and God’s Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), and Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 131.

²⁷ Shafer-Landau, ‘Ethics as Philosophy’, p. 62.