

# The Good Life and the “Radical Contingency of the Ethical”\*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

“*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*” (L.P. Hartley).<sup>1</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is hard to deny that things might easily have been different.<sup>2</sup> A fervent Catholic in Belfast may reflect that she might easily have been a Protestant had she been brought up a few streets away. An urbane modern European who regards human sacrifice as inconceivably abhorrent might well have regarded it as quite the done thing had he been born in ancient Mesopotamia or Peru. How disturbed should we be by this apparent *contingency* in our deepest beliefs and attitudes? This will be the question I shall mostly be concerned with in this paper. The way we answer that question has crucial implications for the ancient philosophical project of trying to determine how one should live. Bernard Williams was very pessimistic about the viability of that project, at least in anything like its traditional ambitious form; and the eloquent articulation of the grounds for such pessimism – centring on the problem of contingency – was among his most potent philosophical legacies. For those among us who harbour the hope that that the ancient project is still one we can reasonably address, it is a matter of some importance to see if we can find a way of defusing that pessimism.

## 2. CONTINGENCY AND GENEALOGY.

In the last book published in his lifetime, Williams summed up one of the recurring themes in his philosophy by speaking of the “radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions”, namely that “they might have been different from what they are”.<sup>3</sup> This observation coheres with Williams’ interest in the aetiology of ethics, and its subversive potentialities. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose ruminations on the ‘genealogy’ of ethics had a certain fascination for Williams, evidently intended those ruminations to be unsettling: the claims of Christian morality to command universal allegiance, for example, are supposed to be undermined once we see its origins as stemming from the craven desire of the herd to protect themselves against those of superior energy and power.<sup>4</sup> In similar, albeit rather more nuanced, vein, Williams made the striking point that in ethics (unlike science) “reflection can destroy knowledge”.<sup>5</sup> And the kind of reflection he had in mind was aetiological and historical.

---

\* This is a draft of an article the definitive version of which was published in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 2, pp. 25-43.

<sup>1</sup> *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), Prologue, opening sentence.

<sup>2</sup> Hard to deny, but not, of course, impossible, as witnessed, for example, by the metaphysical system of Spinoza.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Towards the Genealogy of Morals [Zur Genealogie der Moral, 1887]*, Essay 1.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1985), Ch. 8, p. 148.

To uncover the historical roots of a cultural phenomenon is not, of course, necessarily to show it is suspect. The subversive forays of Nietzsche in ethics (or Freud, in religion) would be less troubling than they are if they rested merely on a crude genetic fallacy. Williams himself, moreover, was quite clear that the availability of a plausible genealogical story need not necessarily be demoralizing (he cites Hume's account of the genesis of the 'artificial' virtue of justice as an example of a historical or quasi-historical story that has no real tendency to undermine our commitment to that virtue, and to its value).<sup>6</sup> So the contingency that he took to be disturbing is not merely a function of the contingencies of history. We came to where we now are by a historical path that might, presumably, have been otherwise; but there may still be respects in which the path can be judged to be a productive and worthwhile one – one that has traversed fruitful territory and led us to a place where we are glad to have arrived.<sup>7</sup>

Though the fact that our ethics has a history need not necessarily unsettle us, the historian's perspective does characteristically involve a certain distancing, and this feature may take us nearer to discerning what it is that bears the weight of Williams' worries. His pejorative use of the term 'local' is highly significant in this connection. Caught up in the everyday discourse of the 'local culture' to which they belong, people may subscribe to certain ethical values; indeed some of the very concepts they use (what Williams famously called the 'thick' ethical concepts)<sup>8</sup> may embody certain implicit judgements about what is to be admired or condemned. But the cultural historian, from a more detached perspective, may be able, while fully understanding the discourse and its rules, to prescind from its implicit values: he may even be able to "see a whole segment of the local discourse as involving a mistake."<sup>9</sup> From this there arises a possible threat to our *own* current conceptions, which can be extrapolated, as it were, from our ability to apply such a critique to previous cultures. Witch-hunting provides a convenient paradigm: we can now, when we look back, identify the cultural milieu in which 'witches' were persecuted as embodying pervasive errors.<sup>10</sup> Such errors, to our present eyes, did not simply involve particular misjudgements – burning the wrong people from time to time – but rather arose from the fact that the entire segment of discourse relating to witches embodied (we can now see) deeply suspect concepts and unfounded classifications.

Cashed out in this way, however, the worry appears to be not so much about contingency as about *error*. The fact that our ethical discourse might have been otherwise is not in itself the problem, so much as the fact that it might be mistaken. If we can retrospectively condemn segments of past ethical systems as unstable, because they can now be seen to have rested on mistakes, might not future generations be able to pass similar scathing judgement on our own ways of talking and judging, indeed on whole chunks of our current moral discourse, and its associated array of concepts and classifications?

---

<sup>6</sup> *Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> To put it another way, history and genealogy may sometimes provide what Peter Railton has called a *vindictory explanation* as opposed to a *debunking explanation*. See Railton, "Morality, Ideology and Reflection", in Edward Harcourt (ed.), *Morality, Reflection and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Ch. 5, p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> The issue is by no means of merely antiquarian interest, as may be seen for example from the troubled history of the South African Suppression of Witchcraft Act (1959). See J. Hund, "African Witchcraft and Western Law, Psychological and Cultural Issues", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vo. 19, No 1 (2004), pp. 67-84.

Yet on further reflection this thought does not, in itself, seem any more unsettling than the thought that our current scientific discourse, for example, might one day be seen to embody pervasive errors. Simple induction leads us to suppose that some, perhaps a great deal, of our current science will in the course of time need revising, perhaps radically. Yet that possibility, or even likelihood, seems not so much a reason for despair or paralysing anxiety as a reason to bear in mind our fallibility, and meanwhile do the best we can – taking care not just to apply our concepts as carefully as possible, but to keep a wary critical eye on the concepts themselves, and to be prepared to probe the presuppositions which they encapsulate.

Such recommendations are hardly new: it was Socrates who famously urged that “the unexamined life is not worth living”,<sup>11</sup> thereby inaugurating the very process of critical philosophical inquiry. Admittedly Socrates was seen as a stingray,<sup>12</sup> but the paralysis he produced was not supposed by him or anyone else to be the inevitable result of critical distancing *per se*, but simply a result of his success in spotlighting actual confusions and inconsistencies in the beliefs and attitudes of his interlocutors. Perhaps Williams’ heightened awareness of the possibilities of error in our current ethical discourse can be construed as Socratic in spirit; but if so it does not in itself seem enough to justify his ethical pessimism. For why should not the very reminder of the possibility of error serve as a stimulus for scrutiny and improvement, rather than a generator of permanent paralysis?

### 3. LEVELS OF CONTINGENCY

Our preliminary conclusions do not so far seem to give much support to Williams’ view of the contingency of our ethical conceptions as something with disturbing implications. But before rushing to judgement, it will be useful to explore in more detail what exactly such alleged contingency amounts to.

Things might have been different. At the most basic level, this may be construed *biologically*. We human beings might have been different. We might have been tigers; we might have been lambs. Actually, of course, that makes no sense. A single evolutionary process, we may grant, led to the rise of species like the sheep and the tiger, and us, but the branch of the ‘tree’ of life to which we humans belong diverged so far ago from that which produced these other mammals that it is incoherent to suppose that *we* might have been such creatures.

Nonetheless, there are concerns that do seem to be raised once we adopt a biologically informed genealogical perspective on our origins. Our human nature came into being, let us grant, as a result of various complex evolutionary pressures, which might, under different circumstances, have produced creatures very similar to us but with slightly different characteristics. This Darwinian thought may seem to put pressure on the comfortable Aristotelian conception of a determinate human nature, oriented towards a goal that represents the good for its kind. If species are fluid, capable of modification under the influence of random mutation and selective environmental pressure, then a slightly different creature, with presumably different ‘goals’ and ‘goods’ might easily have replaced us (or might still do so). So the good for humankind seems to lose its exalted status as a kind of loadstar to guide the course of our lives, and becomes instead but one of many possible patterns of flourishing for creatures of our type, liable in due course to be superseded.

---

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Apology* [c. 399 BC], 38a.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Meno* [c.380 BC], 79e

Such worries turn out under scrutiny to be of negligible force. To begin with, the evolutionary changes here invoked are going to be ones that operate over many millions of years. We do not know exactly when ‘modern’ homo-sapiens came into existence, but there is good reason to suppose that our species has remained biologically stable for many millennia. And certainly the human beings with whom Aristotle or the Buddha or Jesus were concerned were, in all respects relevant to biological flourishing, pretty much identical with us. Even if there were not ample scientific proof of this (including, for example, that from DNA analysis), the indirect evidence from a whole range of literary texts, such as the epic poetry and drama of the ancient world, provides an overwhelming case for supposing that its inhabitants were beings for whom the basic biological determinants of well-being were no different from what they are for us today. If there is any contingency that threatens the equilibrium of our ethical conceptions it is not going to be found in by looking at the realm of biology and the alleged instabilities to be discovered there.

*Culture* is a different matter. Here we see massive and recognizable changes over historically manageable periods of time. It is not just, as Williams himself so eloquently demonstrated, that if we go back far enough, for example to classical times, we find ethical appraisal and its associated virtues arranged around rather different priorities (for example concerns about shame and honour) than those which receive primacy in later ethical writers.<sup>13</sup> Even if we go back a generation or two, to the world of our own parents or grandparents, we find conceptions of a good human life incorporating models of what sort of behaviour is to be admired and emulated that are very different from our own. As but one example, influential in the childhoods of many born around the middle of twentieth-century, one may consider the virtues which are taken for granted as characterising an admirable life in C.S. Forrester’s novels about the imaginary British naval hero Horatio Hornblower – a character whose exploits are set in the Napoleonic wars, but whose conceptions of virtue unmistakably reflect the ‘stiff-upper-lip’ ideals of the British officer of the second world war period and its aftermath. The standards Hornblower sets himself include the firm suppression of the emotions and an even firmer ban on their overt expression, rigid adherence to obligations associated with rank and station, punctilious observance of accepted norms of military and class deportment, and a disdain for, or at least a constant willed subordination of, private and family concerns as against those of professional duty. It is an ethos which we can recognize, and perhaps admire; but even in the relatively short time that has elapsed since those books were written (the 1950s), a host of social and cultural developments have eroded its attraction as an unquestionable model for the good life – or at the very least its appeal has ceased to be able to operate upon us in quite the way it did then.

Humans are ingenious, versatile creatures – that is our strength. We seldom rest content with existing ways of doing things, but constantly devise, from generation to generation, new patterns of living, new models of conduct, new modes of social interaction. We are also, of course, powerfully shaped by inherited tradition, however much we might want to deny it. But traditions, if they are living traditions, are constantly subject to re-interpretation and modification as each generation responds to changing social and environmental pressures. There does indeed seem to be a radical contingency here, and one whose implications can seem unsettling. The code that guided a character such as Hornblower gained its strength and authority over him from

---

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

a certain aura of necessity. For such a person, deviations might, under the pressure of fatigue or hardship, sometimes have seemed tempting, but they were immediately ruled out: in the kind of phrase that recurs throughout the novels, “however much he might have wanted to, he could not, simply *could* not, bring himself to contemplate it.” This *given-ness* of an ethical code, the sense that it provides the fixed framework for ethical deliberation, rather than being itself a possible subject of deliberation, is precisely what seems threatened by reflection about its contingent historical origins and its likely future modification, or even demise.

#### 4. VARIETY AND CONVERGENCE

Ethical contingency, as understood at the stage of the argument we have now reached, draws its disruptive power not just from the fact of there being conceivable alternatives to our present ways of doing things, nor from the possibility that some of our ethical practices and beliefs may involve error, but from the actual existence, in our recent or earlier history, of alternative ethical codes to our current ones.<sup>14</sup> These alternative codes, moreover, though they may not present themselves as live options for our allegiance, are not ones we can airily dismiss as ‘primitive’ or ‘obsolete’ (Williams was adamant about the dangers of such ‘patronizing’ attitudes).<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, they may contain many elements we can recognize as perfectly serviceable in their own terms, and indeed even admirable, or able to teach us something. All this throws our own current conceptions into relief: instead of constituting a self-evidently appropriate way of mapping out the domain of the ethical, they appear as simply a map of one local part of the territory, which has no intrinsic title to qualify as a better dwelling place than any of the others.

Yet perhaps this result is not as troubling as it first seems. To see this, it is worth opening our eyes to the variety of conceptions of the good life already to be found, not diachronically, by looking back over time, but synchronically, within our own contemporary culture. There are many lives we already count as good: the life of the scholar, the life of the craftsman, the life of the farmer, the life of the musician, the life of the teacher, the life of the doctor. Different individual talents and circumstances call for different models of virtue, and the contingency here seems entirely benign; for who ever supposed that talk of ‘the good for humankind’ demands a ‘one size fits all’ account of excellence. To think that the good life must require a monolithic account of virtue would be as absurd as insisting that everyone in society should try to cultivate

---

<sup>14</sup> Compare Nietzsche: “Just because our moral philosophers knew the facts of morality only very approximately in arbitrary extracts or in accidental epitomes – for example as the morality of their environment, their class, their church, the spirit of their time, their climate and part of the world – just because they were poorly informed and not even very curious about different peoples, times and past ages – they never laid eyes on the real problems of morality; for these emerge only when we compare *many* moralities. In all ‘science of morals’ so far one thing was *lacking*, strange as it may sound: the problem of morality itself; what was lacking was any suspicion that there was something problematic here. What the philosophers called ‘a rational foundation for morality’ and tried to supply was, seen in the right light, merely a scholarly variation of the common *faith* in the prevalent morality; a new means of *expression* for this faith; and thus just another fact within a particular morality; indeed, in the last analysis a kind of denial that this morality might ever be considered problematic – certainly the very opposite of an examination, analysis, questioning, and vivisection of this very faith ...” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil [Jenseits von Gut und Böse]*, 1886], §186, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> *Shame and Necessity*, p.10.

the excellences of the brain surgeon. Many different patterns of living can be good, and there is nothing unsettling, for the accomplished painter who happens to be unmusical, in the thought that had things been different she might better have cultivated the skills of the violinist. Even types of calling which we might now often look on with a dubious eye – the life of the recruiting sergeant, for example, or the life of the sharpshooter – may be lives towards which under certain circumstances (e.g. when the nation is threatened by invaders) we may feel admiration and gratitude. Again, different circumstances call for different visions of how one should live, and the contingency here seems entirely benign.

Nevertheless (and this perhaps brings us closer to Williams' underlying worries about ethical discourse), in order for us to decide whether all these different particular modes of life can count as ethically admirable we seem to need more than a long shopping list of particular activities and excellences. We seem to want them to fit into, or at least be consistent with, some more general template, by reference to which we can say that they are all authentic forms of human flourishing. That requirement seems to be equally if not more pressing when we do not merely consider the variety of roles and excellences within our own society, but start to look across, from the 'local' ethical culture, towards other culturally diverse societies elsewhere on the planet, or at the ethical cultures of past ages

One way of meeting the 'general template' requirement would be to find sufficient overlap between all the various local human cultures and epochs to be able to say that all the different ethical discourses converged on certain universal ethical values. Perhaps all human beings have certain typical needs and desires that underlie the apparent differences in the way their various cultures are structured and these might supply the wherewithal for a non-local grounding of ethics. Williams, however, was very pessimistic about this possibility. A project of basing an objective ethics on agreed considerations regarding human nature is, he warned, "not very likely to succeed", given the wide variety in human societies and forms of life, and the "many and various forms of human excellence which will not all fit together into a one harmonious whole".<sup>16</sup>

But what exactly is the worry here? Talk of the incommensurability of various forms of human excellence calls to mind Williams' famous 'Gauguin problem' (a problem he devised to explore the phenomenon of 'moral luck', but which, like so many of his fertile ideas, has many philosophical ramifications).<sup>17</sup> If artistic success may be achieved at the cost of abandoning moral commitments, and there is an incommensurability about the goods involved here, then the philosophical project of providing a rational map of the good life faces an impasse – unless of course we cede to the 'morality' system its demand for universal precedence (something that Williams saw no rational reason to do). Against this, however, I have argued elsewhere that the Gauguin case is not made out. Certainly there is no evidence that artistic excellence can be achieved *only* at the cost of sacrificing moral values. But more to the point, the very idea of some kind of inherent conflict here seems doubtful; for in so far as great art involves the full engagement of our human sensibilities and responsiveness to others, there is every reason to suppose that the cultivation of artistic and of moral sensibility are intricately interlinked. This is not to deny that many great artists have led highly egotistical lives (what might be called the 'Ingmar Bergman syndrome'); it is merely to

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Ch. 8, p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 2.

reject the romantic, self-exculpatory fantasy that addressing such failings might have threatened their artistic achievement.<sup>18</sup>

Of course it may not be possible for a given human being to pursue everything that has value in such a way as to fit all those pursuits into a “harmonious whole”. Yet this seems as much as anything a problem of time and resources: we are often forced to choose, and to make sacrifices, in order to achieve part of the excellence of which we are capable. This is perhaps not an ideal state of affairs: indeed, George Harris has in a recent book spent several chapters portraying it as a deeply tragic aspect of the human condition: “our values are pursued in a world that is very unfriendly and hostile to our efforts and ... our own deepest values war against each other with tragic results.”<sup>19</sup> But at the risk of seeming unsympathetic to Harris’s grief, we need to remember that many, perhaps most value-conflicts are hardly catastrophic: a comfortable Western academic bemoaning how his recreational hiking was cutting into the time available for wine-tasting might reasonably expect the response ‘Get over it!’<sup>20</sup> More seriously, it is of course true and important that we cannot achieve everything of which we are capable; but this seems to be a point about human finitude rather than about some intractable tangle of incommensurability. Our human mortality, and our weakness, put severe limits on the good that any one person can achieve in a lifetime,<sup>21</sup> and one result of this is that any plausible blueprint for the good life will have to find space for the concept of sacrifice. But a study of the psycho-dynamics of sacrifice (something, as far as I know, that few if any moral philosophers have undertaken) would I suspect fall very far short of establishing that it an inherently negative item on the balance sheet of human existence.<sup>22</sup> *Omnia praeclara sunt difficilia*, Spinoza reminds us: fine things are hard.<sup>23</sup> And the difficulty, the struggle, so far from being something always to be deplored from the standpoint of the good life, can surely be, for finite beings, a way of achieving a heightened awareness of the very preciousness of those goods we pursue.

As for Williams’ broader worry about the about the wide variation in human societies and ethical systems, this is an important fact, and can readily be conceded. And in the light of that, it can also be conceded that it is implausible to suppose a general account of ‘human nature’ will generate a single distinctive pattern for human

---

<sup>18</sup> See further J. Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), Ch. 1.

<sup>19</sup> George Harris, *Reason’s Grief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 15-16.

<sup>20</sup> The example is of course unfairly trivial. It should be noted in justice to Harris that he produces an interesting argument to show that any compromise strategy – one aimed at living the best life available to you given your interests and abilities – would still leave a “value deficit” (in the sense that that the rejected, second best, life would contain goods not included in the best life; *Reason’s Grief*, p. 216). As will be clear from what follows, I would not dispute the ineliminable element of sacrifice in the best human life, merely its interpretation as tragic.

<sup>21</sup> The point is exponentially multiplied when we consider the problems of organizing our collective arrangements in an attempt to accommodate the competing goals of different individuals: Harris’s worries about intractable value-conflicts certainly gain momentum when applied in the political and social dimension. (Compare for example the discussions of the tension between liberty and security: “the greatest system of freedom from constraint cannot be realized in the safest possible world”; *Reason’s Grief*, p. 218.)

<sup>22</sup> There seems to be a difference between merely missing out on something (unavoidably, I have to miss the cricket match if I want to go to the rugby), and sacrificing in the richer sense of consciously deciding to give up something important for the sake of some higher good (I owe this point to Daniel Callcut). There may, moreover, be goods (for example goods connected with moral growth and interpersonal development) whose very realisation is inherently bound up with a measure of sacrifice on the part of the agents involved.

<sup>23</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics* [*Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, c. 1665], final sentence.

flourishing. But working this up into a dire problem is surely rather like bewailing the fact that the specification of a particular species (e.g. the rose) will not in itself be able to determine all the properties that must be present in any flourishing variety of that species. The various different types of rose tended by the horticulturalist may all constitute valid examples of flourishing for that species; and what is more, despite their distinctive virtues and splendours they all have something in common – that characteristic form that makes them instantly recognizable as roses.

In analogous fashion, it seems to me that we can contemplate the fascinating variety in human cultures and ethical systems yet at the same time see all or many of them, in their different ways, as satisfying or approaching the conditions for human fulfilment. One of the achievements of the Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu and his screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga in their film *Babel* (2006) is to portray characters embedded in vastly different societies and cultures (the subsistence Moroccan herdsman, the Japanese middle class schoolgirl, the poor Mexican domestic worker and the wealthy American tourist), yet at the same time to disclose those diverse cultures as differing vehicles for the development of a common humanity, manifested in deep underlying common needs and desires – for physical security, for protection against vulnerability, for the development of personal relationships, for love and affection and family loyalty, and so on.

This is not the naïve claim that all varieties of human society are equally good. Just as varieties of plant may be judged failures, because of susceptibility to disease, or limited tolerance to variations in climate or soil, so there are ethical systems that do not satisfactorily serve the needs of their members, or which may even exclude whole groups within society from the chance of developing their talents properly. But this brings us back to the point that some ethical systems, and their associated ‘thick’ concepts, may embody mistakes. And that, as we have seen, is a different concern from the concern about contingency as such. As far as the latter worry is concerned, our conclusion from this section must be that the manifest variety in ethical systems, and the fact that our own happens to be but one among many, need have no inherently unsettling force, provided we have good reason to think that the ethical system to which we belong subserves an authentic form of human flourishing.

##### 5. ULTIMATE CONTINGENCY AND MEANING

Our conclusions so far, while moving further than Williams would have countenanced in the direction of human essentialism (the idea of necessary and universal aspects of human nature), nevertheless does not escape the idea of contingency at a deeper level. Ultimately, we all share certain capacities and sensibilities because, quite simply, that is the way our species is, the way it has evolved. Must acknowledging this residual element of ultimate or ‘bedrock’ contingency be a cause for anxiety for the ethicist or the theorist of the good life?<sup>24</sup>

An example of a thinker who seems able to take such contingency on board with relative equanimity is David Wiggins:

---

<sup>24</sup> Compare Kant’s famous worry: “if all value were conditional, and thus contingent, then no supreme principle could be found for reason at all.” Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], Ch. 2, §32 (AK IV 428), trans. from Thomas E. Hill Jr and Arnulf Zweig, *The Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). ‘AK’ denotes the Akademie edition of *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900– ).



In philosophy as it is, there is a tendency for a first-order morality to be conceived as a structured array of propositions or judgments. But [it is better] to conceive of such an ethic more dispositionally, as a nexus of distinctive sensibilities, cares, and concerns that are expressed in distinctive patterns of emotional and practical response ... Such a nexus will be conceived by a Neo-Humean genealogist or aetiologist as something with a prehistory and a history as well as a present and a possible future.<sup>25</sup>

Wiggins is not unsettled by the terminus of contingency reached by these aetiological reflections, since he does not accept the widespread philosophical doctrine that in order to be sound our ethics requires theoretical justification. The “title to correctness” of our ethical understanding, he argues, “does not depend on its degree or articulacy or the immediate availability to the moral subject of propositional grounds adduced for it.”<sup>26</sup> The fact is that we inherit a certain nature, are inducted into a certain ethical culture, and develop sensitivities and capacities for practical appreciation and judgement; when to these are added certain frameworks of reciprocity and solidarity that naturally arise out of human beings needing to interact together in stable and productive ways, then, so runs the argument, we have all that we need, or should desire, to justify an ethical system. That does not mean that ethical disagreements cannot arise; but in our attempts to resolve those disagreements, once we have delved down to the bedrock level of our “distinctive sensibilities, cares and concerns”, then there is no more to say.

Could we rest content, as Wiggins suggests we should, with an ethics, a theory of the good life, grounded on this ultimately contingent base? Towards the end of his life, Williams appeared, against the dominant tone of his writings, to allow that this might be possible. In his Royal Institute Lecture of the year 2000, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline”, he canvassed a defusing strategy that would apparently enable us to swallow ultimate contingency without any fear of resulting dyspepsia:

If one goes *far enough* in recognizing contingency, the problem ... does not arise at all ... The supposed problem comes from the idea that a vindicatory history of our outlook is what we would really like to have, and this discovery that [our outlook] has the kind of contingent history that it does have is a disappointment, which leaves us with at best a second best. But ... why should we think that? Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours, or, more precisely, has both made us and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed that the outlook is, and the formation is significantly the same. We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for ... a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view...<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> David Wiggins, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> Wiggins, *Ethics*, p. 237.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” (2000), in the volume of collected essays of the same title, ed. A. W. Moore (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 191-2.

The defusing strategy is presented with great elegance, but it is not clear that it succeeds in allaying the disquiet that arises from confrontation with ultimate contingency. Both Wiggins and Williams represent that disquiet as at root an epistemic one, about the “title to correctness” of our ethical understanding (as Wiggins puts it), or about the (misguided) hankering for an absolute perspective to validate our ethical ideas for (as Williams). But suppose we lay aside such allegedly confused epistemic worries, and accept that there is nothing more to be had by way of ethical knowledge than what arises from the “first order activity of acting and arguing” within the framework of ethical ideas we happen to have, coupled with the second order philosophical activity of “reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them” and “the historical activity of understanding where they came from.”<sup>28</sup> What would there be left to be anxious about?

A life lived within the framework so described could surely meet most of the requirements of a good life. Consider an individual inducted into a given ethical culture, in the way envisaged by Wiggins and Williams; let us assume that circumstances of her life are such as to provide all the basic biological and social preconditions for human flourishing, such as being healthy, well nourished, emotionally nurtured, free from repression or exploitation, able to make her own decisions without interference, and so on. The social and ethical culture in which she finds herself allows, let us assume, for the flowering of a significant range of her talents and capacities, and also for the cultivation not just of a variety of enjoyable and satisfying activities, but also for the development of those moral sensibilities and dispositions that are indispensable for human beings if they are to live together in a stable and mutually fulfilling way.

None of these various elements of a good human life seem likely to be undermined, for its subject, by reflecting on the fact that the ethical framework which structures her life is, in the various ways we have explored, ultimately contingent. But there is a further component of a good human life that does seem more vulnerable to such reflection, and that is *meaningfulness*. A good life for human beings needs to be not merely one that is healthy and flourishing and productive and morally sound, but also one that provides a sense of meaning or purpose. The twentieth-century French existentialists were expert at describing that sense of dislocation, or disorientation that arises when meaning ebbs away, and we are face to face with absurdity or futility. That mere contingency, mere ‘facticity’, threatens meaning is a worry that is not easily brushed aside.<sup>29</sup>

The nature of the worry can be seen by looking back to the more secure outlooks that obtained before modern anxieties about loss of meaning gained a foothold.<sup>30</sup> Within the teleological frameworks that informed much of the pre-modern Western ethical tradition, human life is held to be meaningful in virtue of a kind of fit or harmony between our human nature and the nature of the cosmos. In the Platonic and the Stoic traditions, for example, the world is fashioned in accordance with

---

<sup>28</sup> “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline”, p. 192.

<sup>29</sup> The term ‘facticity’ is variously used by a different writers, but I have in mind something like Heidegger’s sense, when he associates it with a feeling of being “thrown” into the world; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §29. (The term is used somewhat differently by Jean-Paul Sartre in his account of the nature of human freedom (*L’Etre et le Néant* [1943], trans. H. E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1957), Part IV, ch. 1, § iii).

<sup>30</sup> Though such anxieties of course have a long pedigree; witness the famous words of the ‘preacher’ in Ecclesiastes Ch 1.

principles of order and rationality, and we, who are part of that ordered cosmos, achieve the best of which we are capable by aligning ourselves with that rational order. In Christian cosmology, itself owing not a little to these Platonic and Stoic roots, our lives achieve their meaning and purpose when oriented towards that ultimate reality that is the source of all goodness and value.<sup>31</sup>

The ethical pessimism discernible in the bulk of Williams' work derives, it seems to me, from a certain lingering dismay at what one might call the 'cosmological' contingency with which we are confronted when such transcendent sources of meaning and value are rejected. To speak of existential *Angst* would be a trifle overblown for a writer of Williams' lightness of touch and disdain for grandiloquence. But his dominant pessimism about the ethical project seems to signal that even while urging himself to embrace contingency, he still has a residual hankering for a worldview that offers something more. Acknowledging that in the end "things merely *are*" (to borrow the apt title phrase from a recent book by Simon Critchley)<sup>32</sup> – in other words, abandoning any hope of a teleological framework to give our human lives a purpose and meaning – leads Williams in his mainstream work to what is finally a tragic view of the human condition. As he put it in his masterpiece, *Shame and Necessity*, it is a view that "refuses to present human beings [as] ideally in harmony with their world," and which "has no room for a world that, if it were understood well enough, could instruct us how to be in harmony with it."<sup>33</sup>

Williams, in the spirit of Nietzsche, closes the door here on the possibility of a supernatural or transcendent basis for meaning and harmonious living. Nietzsche himself, of course, imagined that the resulting impasse could be circumvented by some kind of act of will whereby humans (of an exalted type) could somehow create meaning and value for themselves – a confused fantasy that Williams, to his credit, was never tempted by.<sup>34</sup> I cannot, of course, make something valuable by choosing or willing it (as if I could make cardboard nutritious by deciding to eat it); indeed, this idea precisely puts the cart before the horse, since in truth my choices or acts of will can be worthwhile only in so far as their objects already have independent value.<sup>35</sup> What emerges from Williams' rejection of transcendence seems instead to be a kind of resigned acquiescence, an acceptance that we have to rest content in the prospect of a life grounded in no more than how things "merely are". Yet there is a tension here,

---

<sup>31</sup> For more on some of these themes, see Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 87-88; Catherine Wilson, "Soul, Body, and World: Plato's *Timaeus* and Descartes's *Meditations*", in S. Hutton and D. Hedley (eds), *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 177-191; J. Cottingham, "Plato's Sun and Descartes's Stove: Contemplation and Control in Cartesian Philosophy", in M. Ayers (ed.), *Rationalism, Platonism and God*. Proceedings of the British Academy, 149 (2007), pp. 15-44.

<sup>32</sup> Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> *Shame and Necessity*, p. 164. Part of Williams' project is to trace the antecedents of this tragic view to classical Greece.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche envisages a "new philosopher" with a spirit 'strong enough to revalue and invent new values.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil [Jenseits von Gut und Böse, 1886]*, transl. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §203.

<sup>35</sup> The 'anti-Nietzschean' argument sketched here would of course require an entire paper to articulate and defend properly. I raise some of the relevant considerations in *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 3, esp. §2. See also section 2 of J. Cottingham "Impartiality and Ethical Formation," forthcoming in J. Cottingham, B. Feltham and P. Stratton-Lake (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality in Ethics*.

since the very acknowledgement implicit in that ‘merely’ carries with it a concealed yearning for more. Even as we insist on our finitude, at that very moment, as Pascal and Descartes remind us, we implicitly acknowledge the idea, at least, of something beyond it.<sup>36</sup> To construct a ‘closed’ theory of the good life, grounded in no more than how we actually are, can seem like a wilful attempt to assimilate us to beings without transcendent aspirations. Yet the ineradicable ‘restlessness’ of which Augustine eloquently spoke,<sup>37</sup> that powerful desire to reach beyond the given which Pascal referred to when he declared that “humankind transcends itself”,<sup>38</sup> are but two expressions of a perennial theme: it is the glory, or the wretchedness, of human beings never wholly to acquiesce in the confines that structure our existence. Thomas Nagel has put the resulting paradox with characteristic succinctness:

Given that the transcendental step is natural to us humans, can we avoid absurdity by refusing to take that step and remaining entirely within our sublunar lives? Well, we cannot refuse consciously, for to do that we would have to be aware of the viewpoint we were refusing to adopt. The only way to avoid the relevant self-consciousness would be either never to attain it or to forget it— neither of which can be achieved by the will.<sup>39</sup>

To make our ethical home within an entirely closed and contingent cosmos, and pretend that we are wholly comfortable so doing, seems a violation of our human nature. The options now seem severely limited. One would be a kind of ethical quietism, the attempt at a sort of willed complacency in the face of brute facticity. Another, equally evasive, would be the attempt to detach ourselves from our plight and pretend it doesn’t really matter much – the strategy of irony.<sup>40</sup> A third option would be defiance – the kind of response pioneered by Nietzsche and later perfected by Camus.<sup>41</sup> Yet to this there is a severe cost. Simon Critchley, focusing (in the book just mentioned) on the poems of Wallace Stephens, which so eloquently celebrate the ‘mereness of things’, ends up, with commendable honesty, acknowledging something of the self-defeating nature of such a defiant celebration of contingency:

[A]t the moment of saying “God is dead, therefore I am”, it is utterly unclear in what the “I am” consists. It is a mere leaf blown by the wind, a vapour, an ember, a

---

<sup>36</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [c. 1660], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), no 131; René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [1641], Third Meditation, ed. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn 1996), p. 35

<sup>37</sup> St Augustine, *Confessiones* [c. 398], Book I, Ch. 1: “*fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.*” (“You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds repose in you”.)

<sup>38</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 131: “*L’homme passe l’homme.*”

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd”, *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. LXIII, no 20 (1971), §VI. Reprinted in Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>40</sup> Pursued for example by Thomas Nagel, for whom it is enough to “approach our absurd lives with irony”, and to give up trying to “dragoon an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of a immanent, limited enterprise like a human life.” (“The Absurd”). See also Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>41</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* [*Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 1891], Part I; Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), final chapter.

bubble. The moment of the ego's assertion, in swelling up to fill a universe without God, is also the point at which it shrinks to insignificance.<sup>42</sup>

#### 6. CODA: CONFIDENCE, HOPE AND ETHICAL NECESSITY

Bernard Williams ended his most systematic reflections on the nature of ethics by appealing to the need to have *confidence* in our ethical practices in the face of radical contingency.<sup>43</sup> It is fair to say that this appeal, and the nature of the confidence involved, has largely mystified his critics and interpreters.<sup>44</sup> But (if a final aetiological hypothesis may be allowed) that aspiration to confidence seems very likely to be a wan, ghostly trace of the ancient theological virtue of *hope*. That virtue makes sense, for the believer, because it has, or is taken to have, an object; but if, by contrast, all you have is that “things merely are” – that we and the universe are “just there”, as Bertrand Russell<sup>45</sup> once put it – then confidence appears arbitrary. At worst, indeed, it would seem to be incoherent; for what, precisely, is the confidence supposed to be *about*? We already know the natural world is there – that, for the secularist,<sup>46</sup> is a matter of bleak awareness, rather than confidence. What is also presumably known or believed by the secularist is that the world is in no way hospitable to our activities or aspirations except, as it were, temporarily and purely by accident. He or she may, presumably, wish that it would continue to be hospitable for as long as possible to whatever she or he wants or plans to do; but has no particular reason to think the tiny window that has opened for the furthering of her projects, or those of her associates, will not at any moment close, irreversible and finally, for her and them, as it will inevitably, for the whole planet, sooner or later.

The shape of the difficulty finally emerges if one contrasts Williams' authentic pessimism with his later espousal of the ‘defusing’ strategy for accommodating contingency. In the defusing strategy, we are supposed to gain comfort from the thought that the same collection of random forces and circumstances that generated us human beings also generated the outlook we have: “we are no less contingently formed than our outlook”. The authentic earlier pessimism, by contrast, mourned the loss of “a world that, if it were understood well enough, could instruct us how to be in harmony with it.” Yet a faint trace of the earlier aspiration to harmony recurs in the defusing strategy: a certain sort of *fit* is still claimed to exist, since our (utterly contingent) outlook is no less contingent than our (utterly contingent) existence. “We and our outlook are not just in the same place at the same time”, as Williams somewhat enigmatically puts it. But of course there is no real harmony here, just a concatenation of contingencies. We happen to be a certain way, we happen to have certain desires, and to value things in a certain way, and that is all there is to say. This is something we can perhaps learn to put up with, or perhaps try heroically to celebrate in the manner of Nietzsche, before he went mad, or Sisyphus, before his torments broke him; but *confidence* seems sadly out of place.

---

<sup>42</sup> Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, p. 87.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 169.

<sup>44</sup> See for example Mark P. Jenkins, *Bernard Williams* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), p. 184.

<sup>45</sup> In his 1948 Third Programme debate with F. C. Copleston, reprinted in *Why I am Not a Christian* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 152: “I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all.”

<sup>46</sup> I use the somewhat awkward term ‘secularist’, rather than ‘naturalist’, since rejecters of the transcendent and the supernatural include those who would not class themselves as naturalists (for example, because they think that some things in the natural world have ‘non-natural’ properties).

So if confidence doesn't work, and we wish to put aside irony and despair, then what remains is hope. Since hope, unlike confidence, is a theological virtue, it takes us beyond those 'limits of philosophy' which are the implicit and explicit theme of so much of Williams' work. For those who can espouse it, hope enables us to reach forward, beyond the contingent circumstances of our situation, and aspire to align ourselves with objective, non-contingent values that represent the best that humanity can become. Though many aspects of our outlook may, to be sure, be dependent on the manifold contingencies that shaped us, we are nevertheless, on this traditional religious picture, innately endowed with glimmerings of eternal and necessary values – for example that cruelty is wrong, or compassion good, in all possible worlds. As G. K. Chesterton phrased it (albeit in characteristically mannered fashion):

Reason and justice grip the remotest and the loneliest star ... You can imagine any mad botany or geology you please. Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. ... But don't fancy that all that frantic astronomy would make the smallest difference to the reason and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of pearl, you would still find a notice-board, "Thou shalt not steal."<sup>47</sup>

These claims of universality and necessity are rhetorically phrased; but with the (perhaps surprising) current revival of various forms of ethical objectivism they are by no means so philosophically outlandish as they might have seemed during the heyday of ethical subjectivism in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> At all events, what turns out to obtain, on the traditional religious picture of a divinely-grounded ethics, is not, after all, the radical contingency of the ethical but its complete opposite – the radical necessity of the ethical: ethical truths, eternally generated by a necessarily existing source of goodness, obtain in all possible worlds.<sup>49</sup>

Such a worldview, if coherent, has obvious implications for the significance of human existence. The script, as it were, so far from being just a randomly assembled one that we have to make what sense of we may, instead becomes resonant with meaning.<sup>50</sup> Though it may take hard work to discern, and even harder work to pursue properly, there will be an objective teleological framework for human life; and if a pattern for the good life has been laid down for us,<sup>51</sup> then we have something to reach

---

<sup>47</sup> G. K. Chesterton, "The Blue Cross", in *The Father Brown Stories* [1929], repr. in *The Complete Father Brown Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, a subset of contemporary ethical objectivists, the so-called Cornell realists, would go so far as to construe ethical judgements as expressing necessary truths (albeit the necessity is taken to be of a synthetic a posteriori kind, and hence weaker than that envisaged in traditional theologically-based ethics). See for example, R. Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist", in G. Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181-228.

<sup>49</sup> I defend the idea of moral truths as necessary eternal verities in Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* Ch. 3. For an attempt to accommodate such necessity within entirely non-transcendent framework, see T. Metz, "God, Morality and the Meaning of Life", forthcoming in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (London: Palgrave, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> My argument here is, for reasons of space, highly compressed. It presupposes, in particular, the premise that a meaningful morality must be "more than a ... fragile disposition possessed by a percentage (perhaps a minority) of a certain class of anthropoids" (Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, p. 72).

<sup>51</sup> "Laid down for us" may raise eyebrows. An important task for anyone wishing to defend the philosophical coherence of the notion of a transcendent source of value and meaning is to

forward to, in the faith that our efforts need not be in vain. This does not imply some naïve supposition of guaranteed success; the human condition is such that in the pursuit of the good life there are always hostages to fortune along the way. But without hope in a non-contingent structure that grounds our human existence, and underlies our moral aspirations, the threat of futility or absurdity seems hard to banish completely. Some of our activities, to be sure, may still be satisfying, or achieve worthwhile things, and perhaps that is all we can, or should, aim for. But unless humans, *per impossibile*, find a way of stilling their transcendent aspirations, there will remain the background fear that all the frantic endeavours of those “imbecile worms of the earth”, as Pascal called us,<sup>52</sup> cannot succeed in making our lives as a whole ultimately meaningful. And in the absence of meaningfulness, we will lack one of the most basic ingredients of the good life for humankind.<sup>53</sup>

---

tackle the notorious Euthyphro dilemma; I say something about this in *The Spiritual Dimension* Ch. 3, §4.

<sup>52</sup> “What a chimera a human being is! What a novelty. What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; repository of truth, sink of uncertainty and error, the pride and refuse of the universe!” Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 131.

<sup>53</sup> A version of part of this paper was given at the University of Birmingham May 2007 as the opening keynote address for the Royal Institute of Philosophy one-day conference on “Happiness and the Meaning of Life”; I am grateful to many participants for helpful comments on that occasion, especially to Jimmy Lenman and Thad Metz. I am also most grateful to Adrian Moore for his valuable comments on the penultimate draft of this paper, and to comments from him and from Anita Avramides, Robert Frazier, Penelope Mackie and Howard Robinson at a discussion group at Oxford. I should also like to thank Daniel Callcut for his encouragement and for his perceptive comments, and John Kekes, for his thoughtful reflections which, while coming from a different perspective from my own, have nonetheless stimulated me to think further about my position.