Intuition and Genealogy[1]

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1. Traditional intuitionism and the 'eternal verities'

The term 'intuition' has ancient roots in philosophy. The Latin verb *intueri* means to see, or to look upon. And as used in the seventeenth century, for example in Descartes, intuition refers to the intellectual faculty whereby I see that certain truths hold, or that certain things are good or to be pursued. The underlying metaphor, which goes back to Plato, is one of seeing something clearly in the light of day, right there in front of you. Curiously enough, Descartes, like Plato before him, actually thought that the ordinary sense of sight (seeing with the eyes) was problematic and unreliable as a guide to reality. But both philosophers were nevertheless happy to use corporeal vision as an analogue for the process of direct intellectual intuition. The sorts of example Descartes gives are generally mathematical rather than moral: I just *see* that nothing (not even an all-powerful malicious demon) could make false what I now apprehend when I contemplate the proposition two plus three makes five.[2] Once I grasp the proposition, moreover, my automatic spontaneous assent follows. Or as Descartes puts it, 'I spontaneously incline in one direction [i.e. I judge that the proposition is to be affirmed] because I clearly understand that reasons of truth point that way.' But in the course of the very same sentence (in the Fourth Meditation) he goes on to suggest that exactly the same holds in the moral case. Just as truth is to be affirmed, so goodness is to be pursued. And so in the moral case, I spontaneously incline in one direction [e.g. I judge that a certain type of action is to be pursued] because I clearly understand that 'reasons of goodness' point that way.[3]

So Descartes can be thought of as an early example of a moral intuitionist. And his views hold up remarkably well, it seems to me, if we transpose them into our own contemporary philosophical scene. The claim will be that, when faced with a compassionate act for example, I can just *see* that it is good, or to be pursued. Or to use the currently fashionable 'reasons' talk (which, as I've just indicated, Descartes anticipates), I just *see* that the fact that an action manifests sympathy with someone in distress is a reason to pursue it (or to choose or commend it). Or I just see that the cruelty of an action gives me reason to avoid it. The appeal here is not to some kind of supposed special type of 'moral experience' (as some critics of twentieth-century intuitionism falsely took it to be claiming), but rather to what we are naturally and spontaneously inclined to believe. The Cartesian parallel with simple mathematical judgements (followed by several British moral philosophers in the following century)

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[2] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641), First Meditation (AT VII 36: CSM II 25). 'AT' refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and 'CSMK' to vol. III, The Correspondence, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l991).

[3] Descartes, Fourth Meditation, AT VII 57-8: CSM II 40.

makes this very clear. It is a parallel that might raise some hackles, since it might be taken to imply that basic moral truths are supposed to be analytic; but as Philip Stratton-Lake has expertly showed, there need, be no such implication: the intuitionist can construe basic moral truths as self-evident synthetic truths; and this is by no means an obviously absurd notion.[4]

There are four characteristic and widely recognized features of the basic moral truths so intuited, namely objectivity, universality, necessity and normativity. With regard to the first, *objectivity*, it's worth noting that when intuitionism was regularly and summarily dismissed around the middle of the twentieth century, many people were in the grip of subjectivist conceptions of ethics that (in retrospect) we can see as partly a hangover from the positivist era. But in more recent times, the steady and growing revival of cognitivism in ethics has cleared away much of this kind of prejudice against intuitionism. Moral truths, most moral philosophers now want to say, are *objective*: they are not merely 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, only that human beings had become more corrupt (something that is, of course, all too possible). Second, *universality*: conceptions of value and virtue do of course differ in different epochs and societies – something that the critics of intuitionism used to make great play with – but there can still be core moral values that hold always and everywhere. The wrongness of slavery, for example, or the goodness of compassion, may not be universally acknowledged in all lands or all historical periods, but that does not prevent their reflecting perfectly objective and universal truths about virtue and value. (Compare scientific laws, which hold universally, but are certainly not acknowledged everywhere and always.) Thirdly, *necessity*: cruelty does not just *happen* to be wrong, but is wrong in all possible worlds. We may of course transgress this and other fundamental norms, and often do, but they are, to use Frege's image (which he applied to the truths of logic and mathematics) rather like 'boundary stones which our thought can overflow but not dislodge'.[5] And finally (the focus of discussion in so much recent moral philosophy) *normativity*: moral principles exert an authoritative demand or call upon us, whether we like it or not.

These striking features of core moral truths were part of the reason why in an earlier age they were characterised as 'eternal verities'. And the faculty of intuition that enabled us to grasp them was widely construed (as it was by Descartes, for example) as part of the divinely bestowed endowment of our human nature. '*Ingenium rectum a Deo accepi*' was how Descartes put it: 'a reliable mind was God's gift to me', or perhaps better, 'I received my mind in good shape from God'.[6] For Descartes, the *lumen naturale*,

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[4] Philip Stratton-Lake (ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Introduction, pp. 18ff. I have learned much from Stratton-Lake's lucid and insightful work in this and other areas of moral philosophy.

[5] Frege regarded the laws of logic as wholly objective, holding independently of contingent facts about human psychology. They are 'fixed and eternal . . . boundary stones set in an eternal foundation, which our thought can overflow, but not dislodge'. 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] Descartes, *Conversation with Burman* [1648], AT V 148: CSMK 334. The remark is reported by Frans Burman in an interview he conducted with the philosopher; Descartes's own published formulations are closely similar; see Second Replies, AT VIII 144: CSM II 103.

the God-given natural light, enables the intellect to perceive the eternal truths of mathematics and of morality: finite and weak though our intellects may be, what we *are* able to discern clearly is true; and that includes the universal, objective, necessary and normative truths which 'reasons of goodness' point us towards (such as that compassion is admirable and generosity is good).

Now many, perhaps most, contemporary intuitionists have of course abandoned the theistic outlook that informed the ideas of many early-modern intuitionists; but uprooting intuitionism from its traditional metaphysical soil does, so I shall argue in this paper, raise certain questions about whether it can survive transplanting into a wholly secular environment.

2. Intuition secularized?

What exactly replaces the authority attaching on the traditional view to the deliverances of the divinely imparted natural light? Although the issue is seldom raised in this form, we can discern, I think, a certain residual disquiet among today's intuitionists about the status of our moral intuitions within an atheistic worldview. Stratton-Lake, for example, describes our moral intuitions simply as 'reflections of common sense',[7] and he implicitly acknowledges that it may at first seem dubious to accord common sense such an important normative role. Common sense is of course a slippery notion: one might think of how 'commonsensical' the geocentric view of the solar system once seemed; or one might, more generally, be worried that common sense might turn out to be just a name for the considered view that happens to be held for the present by 'me and my mates' (to use David Lewis's phrase). But Stratton-Lake argues that that we have no alternative way of proceeding: 'the only way of establishing moral truth is by reflection on what we really think once the relevant concepts and principles have been clarified …'[8]

The thought here, a perfectly reasonable one, is that since philosophizing about ethics cannot be conjured out of thin air, reliance on a data-base of intuitions is unavoidable. Theories must be anchored somewhere. And indeed, the need to rely on intuitions might seem to have an even more basic importance than that. For suppose we take an anti-theory stance, denying there are general generative principles in ethics, and insisting on the need to look case by case at the particular shape of individual moral dilemmas or predicaments. Such inspection will still presumably require intuitions – an intuitive grasp of which features of the particular case are morally salient or important. So whether we are theorists or anti-theorists, none of us, it seems, can dispense with intuition.

Yet the residual disquiet remains, I think, about the status of these intuitions in a secular worldview: how are they apt to provide us with knowledge (or reliable beliefs) about a moral domain that is supposedly objective, universal, necessary and normative? For some philosophers, of course, this won't be a problem, namely those (such as John Mackie, Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn) who deny that there *is* any truly objective domain of morality. [9] Our intuitions, on their view, will simply be a kind of interior projection of the plans and projects we have decided to pursue, or are disposed to favour, and will have no independent validity or normativity. Consider for example the

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[7] Stratton Lake, *Ethical Intuitionism,* Introduction, p. 26.
[8] Stratton Lake, *Ethical Intuitionism,* Introduction, p. 27.
[9] John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); for Gibbard, see below, at notes 9 and 10.

game of 'chicken pull', practised by the Hopi Indian tribe as described by Richard Brandt: the young men of the tribe compete by burying a chicken up to its neck in the ground and then riding by on their horses to see who can manage to pull it out of the ground by its neck.[10] Commenting on this case, Allan Gibbard observes in a recent lecture that 'if you or I had been brought up like Brandt's Hopi, we too would have seen nothing wrong with a game that hurts a chicken'.[11] But this does not ultimately matter for Gibbard, since there is no real fact of the matter about whether animal pain is worth avoiding. The sentence 'it's wrong to hurt chickens', on Gibbard's view, simply 'voices a plan to weigh the pain one causes an animal, chickens included, strongly against an activity.'[12] Facts about our adoption of such plans and projects will fit comfortably into the natural empirical world, and will be straightforwardly subject to the contingencies of our developmental history. Our 'common sense' inclines us, by our lights, to count animal pain as important; the Hopi's common sense, by their lights, doesn't, and that's really all that need be said. This conception of morality is one where there are no hostages to normative realism (in the Gibbard/Blackburn scheme of things there is only a pale 'quasi-realism' that does no more than mimic it); and so nothing is lost by reducing moral judgements to mere expressions of our plans, passions, preferences and projects.

So the subjectivists and projectionists, whatever the other problems with their views, are at least in the clear on this point. But for intuitionists (and indeed others who want to hold on to normative realism), the kind of evolutionary puzzle symbolized by the Hopi case is I think worrying. In a secular worldview, where our intuitions are simply a function of the way our species happened to develop, biologically and culturally, why should our so-called 'common-sense' intuitions be accorded any normative force. To put it crudely, why would natural selection make me an indicator of normative truth?

3. Normativity and evolution
The problem of vindicating genuine normativity within an naturalistic worldview is not a new one, but began to surface in Darwin's the *Descent of Man*, published in the 1870s. Darwin at times comes near to saying that the traditional notion of eternal values is a fantasy, or that the whole idea of objective, universal, necessary, normative standards is an illusion, or a sham. He 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 some 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 vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are subjected.'[13] On this deflationary view, we human beings just invest our moral values with a kind of mystique, an aura of power; but all they really amount to are inventions, or projections from the desires and drives

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[10] Richard B. Brandt, *Hopi Ethics: A Theoretical Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), discussed in Alan Gibbard, *Evolving Moral Knowledge* (Lindley Lecture: University of Kansas, 2009).

[11] Gibbard, *Evolving Moral Knowledge,* p. 9.

[12] Gibbard, *Evolving Moral Knowledge,* p. 13.

[13] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* [1871/1879] (London: Penguin, 2004), Ch. 4, p. 145.

that we happen to have evolved to have in the struggle for survival. Altruistic impulses, Darwin observes, might well contribute to a tribe's success. Of course there are social rules and norms – that's a matter of history or social anthropology. But these (so runs this line) 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 takes, when, in a telling phrase, he meditates 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*.'[14]

A decade or so earlier, John Stuart Mill, writing from an entirely secular perspective, in his essay *Utilitarianism*, had taken a similar line. He there defines 'the essence of conscience' as 'a *feeling in our own mind*; a pain more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty'.[15] He adds various qualifications to reflect normal linguistic usage – 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. The feelings, he observes, 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.'

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 terms 'internal sanctions', and he wished to enlist these in the service of his own utilitarian ethics. But sanctions, as understood by Mill, are no more than 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' (ibid.). This may well be true, but it is hardly relevant to the question at hand: does conscience have genuine authoritative power or not?[16]

For the secularist, it is hard to see 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 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 one 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.' One may object that we nonetheless have natural dispositions to kindness and compassion, which 'common sense' finds admirable. But as Joseph Butler observed, it is equally true that '… other

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[14] Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Ch. 4, p. 140.
[15] J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], Ch. 3, emphasis supplied.
[16] This part of the discussion draws on my 'Conscience, Guilt and Shame', in R. Crisp (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the History of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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.' 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.'[17]

The strong kind of authority or normativity he sought was in Butler's view to be found within a theistic metaphysics. Since his time, of course, especially in recent years, there been much philosophical energy devoted to trying to show there can be normativity in a purely natural universe. But (though this is much too vast an area to survey here), in my view all that this work has delivered, in the moral or practical arena, is *conditional* normativity: the idea that certain natural features of things provide reasons to choose or commend them *given that* we have certain projects or purposes. If the purposes 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 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. [18] 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 if our ethical conceptions might have been otherwise, if they are a product of a purely contingent chain of events, it seems to follow that they are in principle subject to alteration and revision. They might have been different, and we might in the future decide to change them. As Friedrich 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 man invented the value judgements good and evil, we can start to ask what value to these value judgements themselves possess.[19] His conclusion was that 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 why, asks Nietzsche, 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 …*'? Nietzsche here envisages a

[17] 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*).*

[18] '[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 a way that vindicates them against possible rivals.' Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Ch. 2, p. 20. See further J. Cottingham '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.

[19] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* [*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887], Preface, §3.

new, revised, morality in which the supposed goodness of compassion loses its authority over us, and some other chosen project, such as the will to power, takes over, providing us with reasons to steel ourselves *against* impulses of love and mercy, and harden our hearts against compassion and forgiveness.[20] This may seem scary, but it is the logical conclusion of a worldview which grounds ethics in no more than a contingent genealogy.

4. Is contingency so damaging; and does theism solve anything?
It will appear that the conclusion towards which I am moving is that secular intuitionism is unstable because of the hostages it offers to contingency. 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 seriously to undermine their authority. This raises two major questions: is contingency really so damaging; and second, does the theistic based approach really do anything to solve the problem?

As to the first question, despite the contingencies and vicissitudes of our evolutionary and cultural history, it seems 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 these accounts from epoch to epoch, or culture to culture, there will necessarily be a vast amount in common. So why not just live with this contingency? Why should not our ethical 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 continent origins destabilizes it. But why should not an objector take on board the contingency and simply point out the advantages of the morality system that has emerged from the evolutionary and historical flux? For example, why should not the traditional morality system be the set of values that, as a matter of fact best serves the interests of humanity?

To answer this, I cannot do better than quote from Christopher Janaway in his masterful 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.[21]

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

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[20] See for example Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], §37.
[21] Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), P. 248.

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.[22]

What about our second question – whether a traditional theistic metaphysics does any better in underwriting the authority of our moral intuitions? From an *epistemic* point of view, the answer I think must be no. The theist can declare that conscience is the God-given light of moral intuition, but that move will not help us to discern *which* of our intuitions reflect normative reality. It is instructive here to compare what Descartes had to say about the natural light that he saw as God's reliable gift to the human mind. The deliverances of the natural light, according to Descartes, are true, because bestowed by God; and it follows that clearly and distinctly perceived mathematical and moral truths are divinely guaranteed. But this is certainly not supposed to generate any easy answers or epistemic short cuts. As Descartes remarked to a critic who questioned him on this point, 'there are few people who correctly distinguish between what they in fact perceive clearly and what they *think* they perceive.'[23] All the work is to sort out *which* of our judgements are genuine deliverances of the natural light. Believing in the divine voice of conscience doesn't short-circuit the hard work of ethical reflection, or help us to know which of our intuitions succeed in reflecting normative reality (any more than believing in a divine cosmic architect short-circuits the hard work needed to do physics). It merely offers us confidence that that our reflective engagement in these areas is a search for answers that will be objectively right or wrong.

If theistic metaphysics offers no epistemic short cuts, neither does it offer any *explanatory* short cuts. If we say our fundamental ethical intuitions are implanted in us by a deity, then such divine action (even if we could have epistemic guarantees that it had occurred) does not in and of itself explain or validate those intuitions. For we can surely make sense of the idea of an all-powerful deity implanting *evil* intuitions in us. This of course is a variant of the 'Euthyphro problem', which in many quarters is still considered an insuperable barrier to giving any serious consideration to theistic based ethics. In fact, however, the Euthyphro dilemma only works against an obsolete and now widely abandoned version of 'divine command theory'. Certainly, something's being arbitrarily commanded or implanted by a very powerful person clearly doesn't in itself make it good; so however powerful God may be, goodness cannot be explained as a function of his will or command. But recent developments in theological ethics, notably Robert Adams's so-called 'modified divine command theory', neatly block the Euthyphro-type move, by making morality a function of the commands of a *good and loving God*, a God of supreme justice and mercy.[24] This manoeuvre succeeds to the extent that it is no longer possible to wheel in the Euthyphro-type argument as a knock-

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[22] For more on this, and for some discussion of recent attempts (e.g. by John McDowell) to defuse the threat of contingency in ethics, see my 'Human Nature and the Transcendent', in '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.

[23] Descartes, *Meditations,* Seventh Set of Objections and Replies (AT VII 511: CSM II 348).

[24] Robert Merrihew Adams, 'A New Divine Command Theory', in R. Shafer Landau (ed.) *Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), Ch. 24: 'My new divine command theory of the nature of ethical wrongness … is that ethical wrong *is* (i.e. is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. I regard this as a metaphysically necessary, but not an analytic or *a priori* truth' (p. 245).

down objection to any theistic based ethics. But I think there is nevertheless a price to be paid, which is as follows.

In stage of the dialectic we have reached, the secularist is faced with the challenge of explaining what strong normativity or authority our ethical intuitions can have. If the theist proposes that they derive that authority from being implanted in us by God, and then adds that God is himself morally good or perfect, then this additional clause means that we don't any longer have an *explanation* of morality, or of the normativity of conscience – for the simple reason that the self same moral and normative terms that we were trying to explain in the first place re-appear as properties of the *explanans*. Moral values exert normative authority over us because they derive from God; and why does God exert normative authority? – because he instantiates moral value. As an explanatory account this is clearly circular. In fact the situation is structurally exactly the same as what we find in the Platonic theory of forms. The goodness of ordinary objects derives from their participation in the Form of the Good – which (we are then told) is itself good. Whatever this type of account is supposed to achieve, it clearly cannot offer a non-circular account of what goodness consists in. And what goes for the Form of the Good goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for God.[25]

So if God does not fill either an epistemic or an explanatory lacuna when it comes to normativity, what, one may ask, is achieved by invoking him? That depends on the other parts of our worldview. If we take the deflationary line about morality that Darwin, Mill and Nietzsche all in different ways took, then the question will not even arise. But the heavy cost of this deflationary route will be to abandon any notion of robust normative reality. That, I submit, is something that is very hard to do with integrity, when we focus, clearly and sincerely, on the character of our deepest moral intuitions, which seem to exert a call on us that is not of our own making.

The intuitionist, at all events, characteristically rejects deflationism and insists on a robust normative reality. But what account can now be given of that reality? How can it be that the human mind is an 'instrument of transcendence', in Thomas Nagel's striking phrase,[26] taking us beyond the flux of our contingent and fluctuating inclinations and projects, beyond the bundle of traits and characteristics we happen to have evolved to have, towards something objective and absolute that demands our allegiance? Some recent ethicists have responded to this by maintaining that the moral values we cognize are are sui-generis items that somehow exist independently in their own right. Thus Russ Shafter 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'; while Eric Wielenberg asserts that they are 'part of the furniture of the universe'.[27] Yet while this kind of moral realism is perhaps a theoretical possibility, unless the bald claim that values 'just exist' can be convincingly fleshed out, it seems to make the relationship between values and the rest of the

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[25] See further J. Cottingham, 'The Source of Goodness, in H. Harris (ed.), Harriet Harris (ed.), *God, Goodness and Philosophy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 49-62.

[26] Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 85.

[27] See R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 46, 48. For the comparison with physics, see 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Non-naturalism', in Shafer Landau (ed.) *Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), Ch. 8. For the 'part of the furniture' view, see E. J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 52.

'furniture' of the universe very obscure.[28] A more recent alternative is Derek Parfit's 'Non-metaphysical, Non-naturalist Normative Cognitivism': irreducibly normative ethical truths, providing us with decisive reasons to act, are true, 'as true as any truth can be', yet have *no* ontological implications. Nothing makes them true – they are just true.[29] For all Parfit's undoubted genius as a moral philosopher, this seems to reach explanatory bedrock far too abruptly for comfort, and leaves the domain of strong ethical normativity in the end mysterious.

So uprooting the intuitionism from its traditional metaphysical soil is far from straightforward. 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 theistic framework at least offers a world picture in which normativity is, so to speak, naturally at home. On the theistic conception, the universe is the creation of an unsurpassably good God; in other words, it is something already replete with meaning and value and intelligence and purpose and goodness. This may not solve any explanatory puzzles in the way a scientific explanation does, for 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.'[30] But nevertheless the theistic picture will have a kind of cohesion: it will be a world picture in which ultimate reality is supremely good and just, and our deepest intuitions put us in touch with that ultimate reality. The choice will be between this picture and a picture where there are 'strange parts of reality',[31] namely strongly normative values that somehow exist in their own right; and the arguably even stranger Parfitian picture in which there are irreducible normative truths with no ontological basis whatever.

Let me end by returning to Descartes, with whom I started. The meditator described in the Third Meditation encounters something that calls forth responses of admiration and awe – something that he recognizes as exceeding his capacity to fully grasp. In a devotional passage that is often censored out in modern secular lecture courses he declares 'here let me pause for a while, and gaze at, wonder at and adore the beauty of this immense light, in so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it.'[32] In somewhat analogous fashion, I am suggesting that our responses to value are of this kind: as we struggle through life, we seem compelled to acknowledge, sooner or later, 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 natural impulses. As Shafer-Landau aptly 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 those a moral system that human beings did not create.'[33] Love, compassion, mercy, truth, justice, courage, endurance, fidelity – all belong to a core of key virtues that all the world's great religions (and the modern secular cultures that are their offspring) recognize, and

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[28] In fairness, Shafer-Landau is candid enough to acknowledge that bald, 'brute fact' ethical realism is a theory with 'very limited explanatory resources' (*Moral Realism*, p. 48).

[29] Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Vol. II, pp. 486-7.

[30] Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* [1957] (London: Continuum 2010), p. 102.

[31] The phrase is suggested by Parfit: *On What Matters*, Vol. II, p. 487.

[32] Descartes, *Meditations*, Third Meditation, AT VII 52: CSM II 36.

[33] Shafer-Landau, 'Ethics as Philosophy', p. 62.

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 gainsay their authority over us.

I am not here claiming to provide any sort of coercive argument for a theistic view of morality, or indeed an probabilistic one, if probabilistic is interpreted in the normal way, in terms of impartially and impersonally accessible evidence. Part of what I have tried to offer instead is a challenge, or appeal, to the integrity of the listener. Of course integrity is itself a moral category, and that indicates something important about the kind of 'evidence' we are speaking of. Just as the Cartesian 'encounter' of the finite mind with the infinite requires a certain kind of submission to the light, so the power exerted by moral values may require a change in the subject if it is to be fully apprehended. Moral realities, like religious ones, may be among the set of truths which are subject to what I have elsewhere called 'accessibility conditions': they do not manifest themselves 'cold', as it were, but require a focused and sincere receptivity on the part of the subject.[34] As Descartes observed, following a long theological tradition, it is always possible to refuse assent by turning away from the light.[35]

The traditional, theistic, form of intuitionism asserts that our moral intuitions are intimations of compelling value, which we did not create, and which demands our allegiance and calls us forward to transcend our nature. If we reject the theistic picture that provides a home for these intuitions, and if I am right that there is no satisfactory half-way house of non-naturalist objectivism, then we are left with either some kind of deflationary account that says the authority of morality is an illusion, or else a naturalist programme of reducing our moral impulses to a set of contingently evolved propensities. The complex philosophical issues involved in these alternatives are unlikely to be resolved any time soon; but I hope I have at least planted the thought that theism and moral intuitionism are natural partners, and that they cannot easily be put asunder.

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[34] See J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 5.

[35] Compare the Gospel of John, 3:19. For Descartes's position on the possibility of rejecting the deliverances of the irresistible light by turning away, see J. Cottingham, 'Descartes and the voluntariness of belief', *Monist,* Vol. 85, no 3 (October 2002), pp. 343–360, repr. in Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Ch. 11.