The Self, the Good Life and the Transcendent*

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Preamble

I should like to begin by recording my heartfelt gratitude to Nafsika Athanassoulis and Samantha Vice, for their labours in putting this volume together. As one who has edited a number of collections of papers, I know only too well how much work is involved in such a task. It is rather like running a conference: those who have never done it may join in perfunctory thanks to the organizers, but have no real idea, when they arrive to give their presentations, of the time and effort that has been expended to make the event possible. It is a particular source of pleasure that the two editors of this volume are former doctoral pupils. Teaching is sometimes often looked down on in comparison with 'research' – mistakenly, in my view, since the two are integrally related, and without the discipline of having to communicate ideas face to face, philosophy can sometimes become tortuously introverted. But in any case, there can be no greater privilege than supervising really gifted students; and when they go on to take their place in the profession and become friends with whom one can continue fruitful philosophical dialogue, then 'the cup runneth over'.

As I write this, I am also moved by a powerful sense of gratitude for the careful attention that has been devoted to my work by all the friends and colleagues who have been kind enough to contribute the various essays in this volume. Much philosophical research consists of a continuing dialogue in which ideas are presented, objections developed and responses articulated; and it is pleasing enough to have one's own work subjected to that dynamic process. But a Festschrift is more than just a further instalment of the dialectical activity we all engage in throughout our philosophical careers. It performs something of the function of the 'retrospective exhibition', displaying a gallery of ideas worked out over a span of time, and enabling one to see connections and contrasts that were not always apparent at the time. It is far from easy to evaluate one's own ideas; the eyes of critics are generally much more acute. And when the discerning eyes of one's peers uncover in one's work insights they judge worth discussing, or thoughts they consider worthy of further reflection, this is the most valuable reward for one's labours that could be imagined. I am truly grateful.

The format of 'objections and replies' is a tried and trusted one in philosophy, going back to the birth of the subject at the hands of its self-styled midwife, Socrates,[1] and receiving its most polished treatment in the early-modern period, in the criticisms and responses Descartes arranged to have included in the first edition of his masterpiece, the *Meditations*.[2] The process is an exacting one, and when the objections are as sensitive and

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* This is the typescript of an essay the definitive version of which was published in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (London: Palgrave, 2008), Ch. 10, pp. 231-271. As will be clear from what follows, the essay is a response to the various papers that formed the first nine chapters of the volume.

[1] Socrates, remarking that he himself was the son of a midwife, describes himself as a 'midwife of the soul' in the *Theaetetus* [*c*. 380 BC], 148-150. The idea that philosophy proceeds dialectically clearly goes back to Socrates himself, and is preserved in the dialogue form adopted throughout Plato's writings (though in some of the his later works it becomes not much more than a stylistic device).

[2] René Descartes's *Meditationes de prima philosophia* ('Meditations on First Philosophy') was published in 1641, along with six sets of objections together with the replies of the author; the second edition of 1642 contained a seventh set. The terms 'Objections' and 'Replies' were

thoughtful as those offered in the present volume, the result is wonderfully illuminating for an author. But in the contemporary philosophical scene such exchanges, as we all know, are by no means always so fruitful, and (since a 'reply slot' in a Festschrift traditionally offers an author the chance for a few general reflections before getting down to business) I should like offer a brief preliminary word on the possible dangers of the adversarial style – a style many see as inseparable from the 'analytic rigour' that has become the slogan of contemporary anglophone philosophy.

Most professional philosophers will at some point have attended conferences at which the megastars of the subject – that handful of truly giant intellects that dominate each generation – have been questioned about their published work. Yet it is not always a salutary experience to witness the cross-fire in which fiendishly ingenious critics devise objections of mind-boggling intricacy, only to be floored by counter-arguments of equally furious complexity; there is sometimes just a tiny sense that what is at stake on both sides is less a sincere quest for the truth than the imperative of protecting the ego. There is a connection here with the theme of self-concern, which has been one of my own philosophical interests. Without a special commitment to our own projects, I have argued, the scope for a worthwhile human life would be drastically curtailed. But the projects themselves, it has to be added, exert their own requirements; and if the project in question is philosophy – defined by its founder, Plato, as the loving pursuit of wisdom – then winning an argument is, or ought to be, less important than coming closer to the truth.

'Rigour' is also a debateable virtue. As one who is more sympathetic to the so-called 'continental' tradition in philosophy than some of my colleagues, I have often felt suspicious of those on the 'analytic' side of the divide who assume that compulsively cautious throat-clearing must signal great clarity and precision of thought, as if locutions like 'it seems to me as if I may now be being appeared to red-ly' must automatically trump declarations like 'the conceptuality of redness posits itself phenomenologically in the domain of subjectivity.' Both sorts of jargon tend to make me see red. But questions of style aside, what surely matters in philosophy is that the considerable time we devote to argument and counter-argument should be sincerely motivated by a desire for a better understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Ever more intricate definitions and ever more minute analysis may, but need not necessarily, contribute to that process; and as philosophy becomes more and more academicized and professionalized, they can often work against it. In the scramble to get published, managing to formulate an argument so elaborate that it is difficult or impossible for a journal referee to refute it may end up being a far less risky strategy than trying to be maximally accessible in articulating one's deepest beliefs about what we can know or how we should live.

Philosophy, as Pierre Hadot's work so eloquently reminds us, is a way of life – a way of caring about how we live.[3] It is, to be sure, a kind of intellectual caring, that involves 'following the argument where it leads';[4] and no disparaging of the tortuous excesses of analytic philosophy should allow us to forget the importance of clarity and logic, for without them we succeed in saying nothing. But it is not a purely intellectual caring. The truth, or at least the interesting truth, involves, as Heidegger observed, the

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suggested by Descartes himself, who wrote 'I shall be glad if people make me as many objections as possible, and the strongest ones they can find. For I hope that in consequence the truth will stand out all the better.' (From a letter to his editor, Marin Mersenne of 28 January 1641.)

[3] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), Ch. 3. Originally published as *Exercises spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987).

[4] Plato, *Republic* [c. 380 BC] 394d. The actual phrase is: 'wherever the argument takes us, like a wind, there we must go' (*hopē an ho logos hōsper pneuma pherē, tautē iteon*).

disclosure of what is hidden; and what is hidden, as Freud so brilliantly saw, cannot be forced out by logic alone.[5] All of us who frequent seminar rooms and conferences will, I am sure, have had the experience of seeing a shaft of light suddenly burst forth when, after tedious swathes of grinding analysis, a speaker suddenly lets slip an example or a metaphor or an anecdote: at once the imagination, or whatever we call that not always accessible creative core of ourselves, is stimulated, and we see not just *what* is being said, but why it is being said – where the speaker is 'coming from'. We begin to glimpse that part of his or her worldview that he or she cares about enough to want us to share. We see (I am speaking of times when philosophy becomes a joy, not a job, when philosophical ideas take flight because they are presented not just to further a career, or to gratify the ego, but from a wholehearted conviction of their beauty or truth or goodness) – we see at last the point of all those hours of furrowed brows and chewed nails and coffee-damaged stomachs, as the strange, irregular, awkward pieces of the jigsaw start to move into place, and a coherent picture, or part of a picture, begins to form.

It may be clear from some of the above that I see philosophy as a way of trying to reach an integrated view of the world; integrity, indeed, has increasingly come to seem to me the master virtue in philosophy, as in the ethical life generally. For that reason, the 'retrospective exhibition' I am confronted with in these essays is a humbling experience. In the first place, particularly as my attention has been drawn to things I said up to thirty years ago, I have been acutely conscious of how much I got wrong:

Par montaingnes et par valees
Et par forez longues et lees,
Par maint peril, par maint destroit,
Tant qu'il vint au sentier tot droit…

By rocky crags and valleys steep,
through trackless forests dark and deep,
with many a danger night and day
until he found the one true way. [6]

But if it has taken me so long to stumble towards what I hope is a more connected picture, I am also struck by the integrity of my interlocutors in this volume, many of whom have over many years held consistently and clearly to their distinctive philosophical allegiances, while I have been struggling. All the contributions, moreover, have re-enforced my growing conviction that there is no such thing as fruitful compartmentalization in philosophy (again, any more than in life itself). Issues of partiality and self-preference, I have been helped to see, are not just a topic in 'ethics', separate from issues in philosophy of religion or spirituality; questions about rationality and how it is related to the unconscious parts of the mind are in turn interlinked with ethical questions concerning self-development; and theoretical problems in theology are not just abstract metaphysical and cosmological puzzles but are intimately intertwined with central philosophical problems about human nature and the good life.

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[5] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §44, p. 262; and Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 1916-17], Lecture XVIII, trans. J. Riviere (London: Routledge, 1922).

[6] Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain* [c. 1175]; my translation is somewhat free, but preserves the rhyme-scheme and metre. I should add that I identify merely with the struggle of the Chevalier du Lion, without presuming to claim arrival on the right road.

All this has encouraged me to think more about the position I have gradually come to adopt in my most recent work, which is that the ethical and the psychoanalytic and the religious quests are very tightly intertwined indeed, and that philosophizing itself is an integral part of all these extraordinarily demanding and vitally important processes. I am not venturing to say – would that I could – that those of my writings that are discussed in this volume form an integrated picture; but what contributors to the volume have taught me, coming at many different aspects of my work from many different perspectives, is how much implicit or explicit overlap nevertheless obtains. In offering some reactions to the wonderfully rich reflections which my discussants have so generously provided, I shall inevitably have to pass over much of value; but if there are issues which I shall be forced for reasons of space to neglect, this should certainly not be taken to imply that they have not given me much food for thought. Indeed, I am heartened by how many stimulating topics will remain for me to tackle after responding to the relatively small subsection of important points that can be addressed in the pages that follow. If I may end this preamble by beating once more the drum of philosophy as a way of living, in our subject, as in our lives, the piecemeal approach is never ultimately satisfying; so it is one of my many debts to those who have contributed to this volume that they spurred me on afresh to the task of constant self-examination, the continuing intellectual and moral search to discover what needs integrating and what discarding as we struggle to grow.

Partiality and Spirituality

The integration project, to which I have just been alluding, is one that Samantha Vice, in her impressive opening paper for the volume, has firmly in her sights.[7] As she rightly observes, much of my work on ethics has focused on our special concern for our selves and our immediate circle – a concern that some ethicists have frowned on, but which I have championed as being the core of the good life. Along with others, I have drawn on the 'integrity argument' developed by perhaps the most insightful moral philosopher of our times, Bernard Williams,[8] in order to cast doubt on the coherence of wholly detached and impersonal conceptions of a worthwhile life: is there not something self-defeating about recipes for the pursuit of the good that alienate human beings from the very selves that are supposed to be seeking that good?[9] I have also used the notion of integrity in order to mount a slightly more edged, but I think justified, ad hominem argument against those austere impersonalists who insist in their books and articles that all resources should be globally allocated on a basis approvable from a detached and impartial perspective: are they not sometimes conscious of a momentary sense of dissonance between their stated ideals and the actual distributions of time and resources (salaries and promotions and research grants) on which their comfortable careers depend? Self-awareness (to invoke another recurring concept in my work) is often in surprisingly short supply among intellectuals – and I certainly do not exempt myself from that charge, nor mean to deny that impartialists who have written on global poverty have performed a valuable service in challenging our current attitudes. If self-scrutiny is formidably difficult for human beings, those whose lives are cushioned by security and wealth may find it well-nigh impossible.

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[7] S. Vice, 'The Insignificance of the Self: Partiality and Spirituality', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 9-30.

[8] B. Williams 'Integrity,' in J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 108-117, and B. Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981), pp. 1-20 and 40-53.

[9] Compare J. Cottingham, 'Partiality, Favouritism and Morality', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1986), p. 365.

This is perhaps the point of the saying about the rich man and the eye of a needle.[10] And without self-scrutiny, the chances of achieving integrity are virtually nil.

The dimension of integrity on which Vice focuses is a particularly interesting one, which, as it were, hoists me with my own petard. She brings into juxtaposition the spheres of moral philosophy and philosophy of religion and asks, in effect, how far my own advocacy of self-concern in the domain of ethics is consistent with my support for the religious idea of life as a spiritual quest. For is not the true spiritual path one that leads away from self-concern, and culminates in the abandonment of self: ‘whosoever would save his life shall lose it’?[11] This is an area, as Vice notes, that I have touched on in a recent paper, where I developed the idea of the ‘auto-tamieutic’ perspective (from the Greek *tamieutikos*, ‘relating to a steward’) – one that brings into focus the special and unique responsibility each of us has for understanding and properly developing their moral character, and the unique set of abilities that has been given to them.[12] I illustrated this by referring to the New Testament parable of the talents.[13] As a result of the genetic endowments we may have inherited, and been fortunate enough to have had fostered during our upbringing, each of us possesses a unique range of abilities and capacities for the production (in the widest sense) of human goods. It is self-evidently good that, other things being equal, beings with real opportunities for the production of goods should make use of those opportunities. Moreover, the good that is the development of this talent, or the deepening of this moral character, is something that cannot be realized except in the life of the individual that is me. As I put it in the paper just referred to, ‘I am the only vehicle for this good, its only potential implementer; if I do not realize it, it will eternally be lost.’[14]

Vice’s question, at this point, is whether the goals of spirituality do not cut across this demand on the individual to realize his or her own distinctive opportunities for self-development. One of our greatest religious poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins, burned much of his earlier poetry on becoming a Jesuit, apparently fearing that cultivating his poetic talents might turn him too much inward, and away from the service of God and fellow man that was his highest duty as a priest. Without more knowledge of the intimate

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[10] ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.’ (Matthew 19:24). There is some fascinating commentary on this text at *http://www.biblicalhebrew.com/nt/camelneedle.htm*.

[11] Luke 9:24. This is almost certainly one of the core authentic sayings of Jesus. Closely parallel texts occur later in Luke (17:33), in Matthew (10:39), and also (unlike many of the sayings found in the synoptic gospels) in John (12: 25).

[12] J. Cottingham, ‘Impartiality and Ethical Formation’, in B. Feltham and J. Cottingham (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 65-83; see section 2.

[13] A man travelling into a far country called three servants, and gave to the first five talents, to the second two, and to the third one. On return he called them to account, and found the first servant had used his five to make five more, and the second had used his two to make two more; but the servant who had received but one had ‘hidden his talent in the earth’. The first two are highly praised, but the third is censured and punished (Matthew 25: 14-30). Certain philosophical readers, for no doubt perfectly understandable reasons tend to ‘switch off’ when they hear a biblical reference, supposing that the argument must be degenerating into religious dogma. But such a reaction (like that of those who refuse to go to Shakespeare plays because his poetry has been ruined for them by their early experiences in the schoolroom) is one that I continue to try to coax people out of. Whatever one’s attitude to religion, biblical scripture is at the very least a fertile source of examples for moral philosophy, and the widespread failure to make use of it, whether it arises from prejudice or caution, or simply from an upbringing that bypassed the relevant texts, seems to me a sad waste of one the great riches of our intellectual and moral culture.

[14] ‘Impartiality and Ethical Formation’, section 3.

circumstances of Hopkins's life, it would be presumptuous to base any judgment on this particular case. But the general point raised by Vice seems clear enough: the 'inward turn' that exemplifies spirituality is supposed to be, as she puts it, 'in the service of an ultimate outward turn, to a value independent of oneself – whether God or morality or the Good'. She goes on to quote Simone Weil's vision of the highest good that is 'perfect and infinite joy within God' – but a joy that is so absolute and detached from any of the grasping concerns of the self that it is 'of no importance whether *I* am to share it or not.'[15]

Vice has succeeded here in raising a crucial concern, which it is not easy to lay to rest. But although I am indeed troubled by the tension she points to, I think there may be something fundamentally problematic in her 'disjunctive' conception of the spiritual quest, as it may be termed – that is to say the notion that the goal of spirituality may be 'God, or morality or the Good'.

To take morality first, of the three classic ethical frameworks she mentions, utilitarianism, consequentialism and virtue ethics, all three both can and should (as she accepts) accommodate the 'care of the self', in the sense that anyone who adopts any of these frameworks will presumably be interested not just in the pursuit of the relevant ethical objectives, but also in the cultivation in him or her self of the kind of character which fits one for that task. But nevertheless, given the objective conceptions of the good espoused in these systems, does it follow, as she suggests, that the care of the self will ultimately be subordinated to a 'value independent of oneself'? Well, Aristotelian or virtue ethics is, as I have argued elsewhere,[16] inherently autocentric in its perspective – not in an egotistical sense, but in the sense that the central question for ethical inquiry is taken to be the question 'How should I live?' The primary objective is the achievement by each of us of a fulfilled or flourishing life. So there is no question here of an ideal in which the self is supposed eventually to drop out of the picture. In the case of standard deontological theory, I would argue for a similar ineliminability. Kantian respect for persons seems to me to put an indelible emphasis on the idea of the individual as *selbstgesetzgebend*[17] – as the unique individual locus of rational authority and responsibility. The self as an empirical concatenation of contingent desires may be destined for suppression or control, but the individual self as rational autonomous chooser is the core of the whole system. Finally, in the case of consequentialism, it is true that in some versions, notably the impersonalist utilitarianism of William Godwin, there is a vision of a kind of willed eradication of the self and its concerns: 'What magic' Godwin famously asked, 'is in the pronoun *my*?': how could one justify saving one's own mother from a burning building if it contained someone more worthy of rescue, judged from a detached and impartial perspective?[18] But since the very proposal of such overriding of personal ties has seemed to so many philosophical critics the strongest possible reason either for a radical softening of the consequentialist system to accommodate the legitimate concerns of self, or else for the complete rejection of the system on grounds of the violence done to human integrity, it

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[15] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace* [*La pesanteur et la grâce*, 1947], tr. E. Crawford and M. von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 37; cited in Vice, 'The Insignificance of the Self', emphasis supplied.

[16] J. Cottingham, 'The ethics of self-concern', *Ethics* 101 (July 1991), pp. 798-817, esp. p. 813.

[17] Autonomy, for Kant, is 'the basis of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature', according to which our will must be considered as *selbstgesetzgebend* ('giving the law to itself'). I. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], Ch 2; Akademie edition (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–), Vol. IV, pp. 436, 431; transl. T. E. Hill Jr and A. Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 236, 232.

[18] W. Godwin, *An Inquiry concerning Political Justice* [1793], from Book II, ch. 2. The pedagogue in me cannot forbear to note that 'my' is in fact not a pronoun, but a pronominal adjective.

is doubtful whether after all it offers a coherent vision of a viable ethics in which the self drops out.

If the specific moral systems so far mentioned do not quite fit the bill, Vice can and does nevertheless still claim that there is recognizable spiritual tradition concerned with the pursuit of the good in which some kind of self-extinction is the goal. She invokes the support of Iris Murdoch in reaching the conclusion that 'responsibly orienting one's life around an impartial Good can take one beyond oneself to something that has nothing at all to do with the self'. Perhaps it can. But it is here that I feel most acutely the disquiet about that disjunction 'God or the Good'. For the two, it seems to me, are very different.

Let me at once rephrase that more carefully. God is of course identified with the Good, in many of the patristic writers from Augustine onwards, in whose eyes he takes over, as it were, the logical space previously assigned to Plato's Form of the Good; he is the source of all truth and beauty and goodness. And that inaugurated a tradition in which God and 'the good' are quite often used almost interchangeably (indeed, I sometimes talk that way myself, including later on in this essay). But God, in the Judaic and Christian traditions, is very much *not* an impersonal Good. God is, on the contrary, 'a personal being – that is, in some sense a *person*',[19] and his relationship with his creatures is intensely personal. Jesus of Nazareth was certainly not a promoter of some impersonal ideal of goodness; all the evidence suggests that he was not some kind of detached impartialist but had very close relationships indeed with particular disciples and friends for whom he specially cared.[20] Moreover, he reportedly addressed God directly as 'Father' (the Aramaic term *Abba* is quoted at Mark 14: 36). And when the Christ of the Fourth Gospel thanks his Father that 'not one of those you gave to me has been lost' (17:12); or when in Luke the one sheep who is found causes more joy than all the others who were never lost (15:4-7), we have a vision of intimate and personal caring that is wholly incompatible with the self 'dropping out of the picture'. The Christian vision is perhaps hard for some contemporary philosophers to take on board, because they are so used to 'morality' being an abstract subject about abstract categories of obligation or value; in the moral metaphysics of Christianity, by contrast, ultimate reality is wholly and irreducibly individual and personal. This, surely, is the meaning of incarnational theology, in so far as its mystery can be deciphered: the good is never abstract, but from the beginning destined to be realised and manifested in human form, 'dwelling among us', so that its 'glory' is seen in an individual face that is 'full of grace and truth.'[21]

Iris Murdoch's metaethics, rejecting the Christian vision in favour of a bizarre neo-Platonism, seems me, to put it crudely, too sophisticated for its own good. We would do better to hold on to the robust Aristotelian insight that if goodness does not exist in particular substances it does not exist at all. A cosmos of abstract entities hovering around, even if one could make sense of the idea, can hardly provide any plausible focus for spiritual aspirations, for to be united with something impersonal and abstract would be an experience (if that is the word) that had no meaning or concrete reality; as a logician might put it, genuine relations can obtain only between the terms of a predicate, not between a predicate and a term.

That point aside, there are, to be sure, spiritual visions in which the self is supposed to be eradicated. Buddhism provides the best known example. But this stems

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[19] Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 4.

[20] Compare his weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus ('see how he loved him!', said the bystanders; John 11: 35-6), or his special relationship with the 'beloved disciple' (e.g. John 19: 26-7).

[21] John 1: 14.

from a vision of the cosmos in which all personal relationships and attachments are illusory, and enlightenment comes from recognition of *anatta* – the absence of any personal self, in a sort of merging into the impersonal flux that is all there is. Although there is a noble and demanding ethics associated with Buddhism, its ultimate goal is the complete giving up of the self and its attachments and the resulting cessation of suffering (*dukkha*).[22] The 'loss of self' found in the theistic traditions is very different. What we are urged to give up is in reality not the self, but the ego – the ugly grin of the miser scanning his portfolio of stocks and shares, or the sneering grimace of the official who revels in his power over others, or the superior smirk of the academic delighted by his own cleverness and the 'importance' of his ideas. But when such illusory goods are abandoned, what is found, and what the long hard traditions of spirituality are supposed to fit us for, is an acceptance of vulnerability that opens our hearts to the possibility of grace, so that we can in the end achieve self-realization: for 'what does it profit for a man to gain the whole world *and lose himself*?'[23] This does not have to be put in religious terms, or at least it may be construed as a truth that connects with many aspects of ordinary human experience, such as are found when two people stop trying to control or manipulate each other and begin to learn to love through letting go: strength, as Paul so eloquently put it, is made perfect in weakness.[24] But what is aimed at through that process is not the disappearance of self, but its true flowering, where two people see each other 'face to face', not through the distorting glass of the ego, but in a way that enables us to 'know, even as we are known'.[25]

Integrity and Human Living

The theme of integrity recurs in the discussion on contempt that forms Max de Gaynesford's fascinating contribution to the volume.[26] There are times in my career, I must admit, when I have been sceptical of the merits of 'conceptual analysis' as a method in philosophy; this is no doubt a hang-over from the disquiet I used to feel about the 'ordinary language' conception of philosophizing that reigned when I was an undergraduate, when it sometimes seemed as if the great traditional aspirations of philosophy to understand the world, and how we should live in it, were all about to evaporate in a particularly drab form of lexicography in which one's nose was to be kept so close to the columns of the dictionary as to prevent any possibility of glimpsing the wider horizon. De Gaynesford's essay, by contrast, displays precisely the kind of subtle historical and literary awareness which are needed if philosophy is to make the 'humane turn' which I have advocated in my own work, and to which he alludes in his paper. Another important virtue of his approach is that it does not confine its linguistic investigations to the English language; he thus avoids that insularity and narrowness of vision found in that not inconsiderable subset of Anglophone philosophers whose linguistic chauvinism sometimes seems almost equal to that of the legendary Frenchman, who is reported to have observed, in all seriousness, that the great advantage of the French language over others was that the order of the words corresponds exactly to the order in which the ideas present themselves to the mind.

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[22] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ch. 1.

[23] Luke 9:26.

[24]*He gar dynamis en astheneia teleitai* (II Corinthians 12: 9).

[25] I Corinthians 13: 12.

[26] M. de Gaynesford, 'Contempt and Integrity', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 31-57.

An interesting feature of de Gaynesford's discussion is his warning against 'over-moralizing' contempt. Certainly it is important, as Bernard Williams has so powerfully argued, that what we now call 'moral' appraisal is only one dimension of the commendation or discommendation which human beings bestow on each other; what is more, we do not have to go too far back in the Western philosophical tradition before finding an ethical world in which the sense of something called a 'morality system', as having a special kind of overriding normativity, is simply absent.[27] It may be very important for readers to keep this in mind, if they are not to miss the 'extra-moral' overtones involved in, for example, Lady Macbeth's contempt for her husband's unmanliness (to take but one vivid example de Gaynesford deploys). But I would want to add that understanding an evaluative practice correctly is one thing, and approving of it is another. The culture of Shakespeare's epoch was one in which contempt and scorn were often displayed in ways that manifested a cruel insistence on 'rubbing in' deficiencies, or supposed deficiencies, that properly viewed were really not appropriate subjects for anyone's taunts. 'Why *bastard*, wherefore *base*?' asks Edmund in *King Lear*,

> When my dimensions are as well compact,
> My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
> As honest madam's issue?[28]

Edmund's complaint is of course perfectly just. But one would want to go further and question the presuppositions behind the way he defends himself. Even if (like the hunchback Richard III) his dimensions had *not* been so 'well compact', would that have been deserving of contempt? I can remember from my schooldays that expressions like 'you moron!' (not to mention even more offensive slurs alluding to genetic disabilities) were routinely used; disturbingly so, in retrospect, not because all insults ought somehow to be banished from the schoolroom (where they have been part of the growing-up process since time immemorial), but because these particular kinds of insults, applied jokingly to one's ordinary classmates, unthinkingly presupposed that actual inherited abnormality would indeed have been something to despise.

It is for this kind of reason that I am not entirely happy with de Gaynesford's rejection of Kant's move, when he (Kant) condemns contempt outright, as a failure to respect someone's humanity. De Gaynesford makes the technically correct point that the negative appraisals we bestow on each other could not even get off the ground without presupposing that their object was genuinely human (as opposed to a robot or a puppet), and hence worthy of Kantian 'respect'. Nevertheless, contempt seems to me to have its natural home in cultures where whole swathes of humanity were looked down on or in some way despised – as 'low-born', as racially inferior, as mentally or physically defective, or even simply as members of the 'fair sex' (patronizingly regarded as delightful enough, but nevertheless weaker, both in mind and body, than their male counterparts):

> I lament that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when in fact they are insultingly

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[27] See B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), *passim*, and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1985), Ch. 10.
[28] W. Shakespeare, *King Lear* [*c.*1606], Act I, scene 2.

> supporting their own superiority. It is not condescension to bow to an inferior.[29] So ludicrous, in fact, do these ceremonies appear to me that I scarcely am able to govern my muscles when I see a man start with eager and serious solicitude to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the *lady* could have done it herself, had she only moved a pace or two.[30]

Underlying Kant's strictures is, I think, the perfectly valid question of whether any of us should feel entitled to look down on any fellow human being. I don't think it is too fanciful to see as a subconscious influence on Kant's thinking the striking reversal which Christian ethics demands concerning the scope of those key verbs *respicere* (to respect or look up to) and *despicere* (to despise or look down on). In the *Magnificat*, perhaps the most resonant expression in all literature of that reversal, God is said to 'respect' the lowly, and 'put down' the proud – those who in their own self-conceit look down on others.[31] In allowing ourselves to be contemptuous of others, the message seems to be, we ourselves deserve to be sent to the bottom of the pile.

But despising people for low birth or poverty is one thing, despising them for manifest and genuine moral faults surely another. And it is here that de Gaynesford's concluding suggestion comes into play with particular force, namely that 'it is only by marshalling contempt for much of what it is to be human … that moral theories are able to … make their hold on us seem appropriate at all.' This brings us back to the concept of integrity; for if de Gaynesford is right, it may be that the very pursuit of integrity 'requires us to regard or to treat others with contempt'. De Gaynesford presents this as a 'difficult issue' rather than a settled conclusion; but in so far as he is arguing for the moral legitimacy of contempt, I think his argument needs to be resisted. Part of my reason for saying this is phenomenological: there are of course plenty of moral monsters around, but when one introspects the feelings such people inspire, contempt seems to give the wrong flavour. People like Hitler are frightening, dangerous, to be resisted, but 'contemptible' sounds like a rhetorical piece of bravado. And for lesser villains, the motley army of philanderers and tax-evaders and malicious slanderers and self-aggrandizers, and so on, right down the grubby list of human failings, the appropriate response before working up contempt seems to be to remember the moat and the beam, and cast a critical eye back on oneself.[32] One is reminded of a favourite dictum of the late broadcaster and parish priest Dr Cormac Rigby: 'there is only one person about whom I ought to worry about whether they are in danger of going to Hell, and that is the person who is speaking these words.'[33]

At this point, my position may appear to have self-destructed; for does not my argument against the moral legitimacy of contempt presuppose its moral legitimacy in at least one case, namely the proper scorn and distaste a good person ought to have towards their *own* failings? As one whose recent writings have dwelt on the role in the moral life of various strategies for achieving self-improvement through increased self-awareness, including the 'spiritual exercises' so prominent in the religious tradition, must I not be

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[29] The word 'condescension' has shifted its connotations from positive to negative since Wollstonecraft's day. To be condescending, in the eighteenth century, was the aristocratic virtue of displaying a gracious lack of hauteur towards the lower ranks of society.

[30] M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* [1792], Ch. 4.

[31] Luke 1: 46-55.

[32] 'How canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye.' (Luke 6: 42; cf. Matthew 7:5).

[33] See Cormac Rigby, *The Lord Be With You* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2003), p. 81.

disposed to accept that moral progress requires that 'distancing' of which de Gaynesford speaks – in other words a disdainful withdrawal from one's flawed self, as something unworthy and contemptible?

It would require a whole paper to deal with this complex issue in the detail it deserves. Modern moral philosophy is, on the whole, not very good at coming to terms with what is involved in concepts like acknowledgement of sin, repentance, and *metanoia*, or change of heart. But while such ideas certainly involve a firm resolve to put one's failings behind one, I am not convinced that the kind of despising and aversion signalled by the term 'contempt' is either necessary or appropriate here. One of the great contributions of psychoanalytic theory to the moral life is the idea that splitting off one part of oneself for contempt and disapproval by another part, although it may *sound* very morally impressive ('That was disgraceful! How *could I have done it*!') may actually be a ritualistic strategy of evasion, much easier to perform than the long and painful task of coming to understand what truly motivated such lapses. The point is powerfully made by Carl Jung:

> The psychoanalytic aim is to observe the shadowy presentations — whether in the form of images or of feelings — that are spontaneously evolved in the psyche and appear, without his bidding, to the man who looks within. In this way we find once more what we have repressed or forgotten. Painful though it may be, this is itself a gain — for what is inferior or even worthless belongs to me as my shadow, and gives me substance and mass. How can I be substantial if I fail to cast a shadow? I must have a dark side if I am to be whole; and inasmuch as I become conscious of my own shadow, I also remember that I am a human being like any other.[34]

There is all the difference in the world between dramatic expressions of self-contempt and the contrite acknowledgement of failing that comes from serious self-examination.[35] Contempt is here nowhere to be seen; but integrity, or the struggle to achieve it, is the guiding light of the whole project.[36]

Partiality, Saints and Samaritans

The path towards an integrated moral life has many pitfalls, and one of them, which may have become visible towards the end of the previous section, is the fearful gap between what we are and what we aspire to be. Grovelling and self-abasement, though they may be mistaken for proper contrition, are not the solution; what is required, in the necessary

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[34] C. J. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul,* Essays from the 1920s and 1930s, translated C. F. Baynes (London: Routledge, l933), p. 40. I explore this theme at length in J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4, §6.

[35] Particularly illuminating here is what Michael Lacewing says about the notion of 'acceptance' (in a psychoanalytic context) – a process which, as he rightly insists, is not at all to be identified with moral approval or moral complacency. ('What Reason Can't Do', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life*, Ch. 6).

[36] This, I take it, is part of the meaning behind the haunting words of Psalm 51 (or 50 in the Vulgate numbering): *cor contritum Deus non despicies* ('a contrite heart O Lord wilt thou not despise'). Contempt is made redundant by the hard work of contrition. The psychoanalytic addition (by no means incompatible with many traditional Christian approaches) would be that a good therapist neither starts from a position of contempt, nor requires the client to start from there (and so, mutatis mutandis, for confessor and penitent).

declaration *mea maxima culpa*,[37] is a clear-eyed awareness of what has gone wrong, and a resolute refusal to shift the blame. A vivid portrait of what goes awry when lack of integrity leads to evasion of responsibility is provided in one of the novels of C. S. Lewis, in the character of 'Mark Studdock', an intelligent but morally weak young sociologist whose ambition leads him into agonies of indecision about whether to resign from 'NICE' (the 'National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments'), a sinister but powerful and well-funded research organization that he knows in his heart to be corrupt:

> Mark had said he wanted to think: in reality he wanted alcohol and tobacco. He wanted never to see the Deputy Director again, and he wanted to creep back and patch things up with him somehow. He wanted to be admired for manly honesty among the opponents of NICE, and also for realism and knowingness at NICE. Damn the whole thing! Why had he such rotten heredity? Why had his education been so ineffective? Why was the system so irrational? Why was his luck so bad?[38]

Those who talk in uncompromising terms about repentance and personal responsibility, particularly when they use traditional terminology of the kind found in some of the medieval philosophers and theologians, may put people off by seeming to adopt a 'holier than thou' attitude. But distaste for moral preachiness may lead to the very real danger that some of the most profound ethical insights of the Western ethical tradition, to be found in a long line of religious thinkers from Augustine and Aquinas onwards, may nowadays not receive the attention they deserve. Many, of course, are in any case put off by the metaphysical framework within which such religious writers operate, which they find unacceptable. But leaving that aside, a further reason why Aquinas tends to figure far less prominently than, say, Aristotle in university ethics courses, or (to come down to early-modern moral philosophy) why the secularist ideas of Bentham have tended to eclipse the more religiously-oriented theories of Samuel Clarke or Joseph Butler, may be that theistic conceptions of morality are seen as incorporating an ideal of holiness altogether too exalted for ordinary human use. Of course the currently much debated 'problem of demandingness' is actually one that arises as much for secular consequentialism as it does for theistic ethics. But it is the latter approach that nonetheless tends to be regarded as the more unpalatable, with what is often seen as its implied division of humanity into the saved and the damned, the saints and the sinners. And certainly for a philosopher to say 'I follow the goal of utility maximization' is less likely to appear to be putting oneself on a pedestal than saying 'I subscribe to the Christian command to love one's neighbour as oneself'.

It may have been worries of this kind that led me, in some of my earlier writings on partiality, to distance myself from what I then took to be the unrealistic and impracticable Christian injunction to love one's neighbour, and to support John Mackie's dismissing of it as 'the ethics of fantasy'.[39] In the typically intelligent and erudite paper which he has contributed to this volume, David Oderberg aptly takes me to task for

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[37] 'Through my own most grievous fault' (the phrase, from the *Confiteor* – the confession at the start of the Mass) is a liturgical analogue of the full acknowledgement of responsibility that many secular accounts would insist on as a necessary part of the process of dealing with wrongdoing; compare A. Duff, *Trials and Punishments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
[38] C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* [1945] (London: Pan Books, 1955), p. 134.
[39] J. Cottingham, 'Ethics and Impartiality', p. 87. Cf. J. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 129-34.

misinterpreting the thrust of the Christian tradition,[40] and I must sincerely thank him for getting me to revisit these issues.

Oderberg's general stance is to defend and support my views about the moral legitimacy of self-preference or self-love, but to take issue with the philosophical framework within which I presented my views, and to argue that the metaphysical structures of Christianity (and natural law theory) are much more hospitable to those views than I then (at the time of writing the articles he discusses) supposed. I think he is quite correct in many of his arguments; and also that in bringing out the crucial relationship between normative moralizing and its metaphysical foundations he has drawn attention to something that is all too easily overlooked in the way contemporary moral philosophy is practised. This connects with my recurring theme of integrity. In developing, quite some years ago now, my views on partiality and impartiality, it would be accurate to say, not so much that I operated from a suspect metaphysical base, as that I did not really see that any metaphysical grounding was needed for ethics at all. The methodology I followed, in common, I think, with many contemporary writers on ethics, was to consult various assorted moral intuitions I happened to have, to try to develop principles or positions consistent with those intuitions (or at least a significant number of them), and to attempt to expose inconsistencies or paradoxes in the rival positions of others. And if asked to list any further objectives, I would have had to reply, in the immortal words of the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, 'Err …. that's it!' There was no overarching 'worldview' (looking back, I can now see that my early philosophical education was designed to make me suspicious of such things); and if from time to time I drew on elements to be found in the systems of Plato, or Aristotle, or Descartes, or Mill, or Hume, or Nietzsche, this was really more or less on a 'cafeteria' basis, with the aim of making the views already arrived at as philosophically attractive and articulate as possible.

This is something of a caricature, but I think it is one that many observers of the contemporary scene in moral philosophy may recognize as not diverging too far from the way things are often done in our subject. It is rather (I now think) as if we were to roam around the countryside, finding secure places to pitch our tents, utilizing the materials that happen to be to hand in constructing the encampments, securing them against possible attack, and mounting sorties to snipe at rival encampments – but all without any map of the territory, or any real idea of what the point of the journey is or what our final destination may be. *Et par forez longues et lees…* Not that an overarching metaphysical schema is a panacea. It may lead to dogmatism, to forcing one's views into the straitjacket of received doctrine, or to myopia towards valuable insights from other traditions. But without at least the attempt to fit one's results into a systematic and properly-grounded theory of the good life, there will always be the risk that a view arrived at in a given area may conflict with results reached elsewhere. Integrity is not an optional extra, since ethical truth, like all truth, is in the end indivisible (no truth can conflict with any other truth).

To come to (some of) Oderberg's specific arguments, in his approach to self-love he not only agrees with my view of its ineliminability in any sound ethics, but actually outdoes me in zeal for defending it, to the extent of identifying it as central even to the life of the saint: 'the path from sinner to saint never deviates from the path of self-preference.' The ideal of the sainthood, however, presents particular problems for moral philosophers, and Oderberg neatly identifies a tension in my attitude to it in the partiality articles. On the one hand I wanted to dismiss it (along the lines hinted at a moment ago) as unrealistic, too exalted to be incorporated in a viable ethic for most human beings; but on the other hand I

[40] D. S. Oderberg, 'Self-Love, Love of Neighbour, and Impartiality', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 58-86.

admitted to its being an admirable ideal. Yet, asks Oderberg 'how can morality consist of a set of norms for the mass of mankind yet be overlaid by an ideal that is completely *at odds* with what those norms require?' For Oderberg, there must be a *continuity* between the norms governing the mass of humankind, given our nature, and those governing the saint: 'the norms are in fact *the same*, though the saint follows them par excellence'.

Oderberg's position is one I have considerable sympathy for (and which deserves much more discussion than I can give it here), but cannot, I think, be quite right as phrased. He asks, rhetorically, whether we ought not all to aspire to sainthood. Well, if by a saint is meant what is typically meant, one who gives up all for God, or one who (as in the monastic ideal) unflinchingly follows the path of poverty and celibacy and obedience devoting every day to long hours of prayer and meditation and *lectio divina*, and ministering devotedly and without favouritism or preference to those in need, then the answer surely has to be 'no'. The standard Christian view is that the religious (in the technical sense) life is a vocation which the majority cannot and should not aspire to. For everyone to attempt it would quickly produce disaster, both spiritual and material. Celibacy, to take but one element in such a life, is certainly not an 'extension' of ordinary sexual life, having a continuity with the passionate and inward-turning life of sexual partners; rather, it is a withdrawal from, or renunciation of, that life, in order better to devote oneself to the (wholly non-sexual) love of God. By its very nature it cannot be an ideal all should aspire to. St Paul said he could wish all to be celibate like him,[41] but he cannot (or should not) have meant this seriously unless he wanted the human race rapidly to come to an end. The life of the 'holy' man or woman (which is what a 'saint' means) is by its very nature a life possible only for a minority. In a way such forms of life depend for their existence on the existence of ordinary society – ordinary families to provide their recruits, ordinary farmers and merchants to provide the infrastructure they need for their continued existence (as an itinerant mendicant friar needs others to grow the food he eats). There need, incidentally, be nothing ethically dubious about this: even an organism that is technically 'parasitic' can be perfectly benign, and sainthood can be as spiritually valuable to society as the yeast is to the bread.

None of this means there cannot be a kind of sacramentality or sanctity in the everyday lives of ordinary people who are not 'holy'; but there is nothing, I think, to be gained by denying that the norms and ideals for such mundane lives, and the self-referential commitments and ties that govern them at the most fundamental level, will be very different from anything appropriate for the life of one who is 'set apart' from the world.

In respect of the command to love our neighbours, however, Oderberg seems to me on much stronger ground. The essence of his criticism is that I mistakenly identified the Christian ethic with the impartialist ethic of (some types of) consequentialism. That is an identification in which I was encouraged by utilitarian propagandists such as Godwin and Mill,[42] but Oderberg's arguments have convinced me that it is wholly mistaken. The account of Christian beneficence he proceeds to offer is an intensely personalist one (having some affinities, indeed, with my own critique, above, of Vice's advocacy of an impersonalist 'good'): loving others in the Christian sense is a matter of responding to them *one at a time*, in ways that are rooted in particular circumstances and contingencies

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[41] 1 Corinthians 7:7.

[42] For Godwin (and his latter-day disciple Peter Singer) see Oderberg, 'Self-love', note 36. John Stuart Mill's propaganda is equally marked: 'In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.' *Utilitarianism* [1861], ch. 2.

of commitment or involvement. Against this background, we have the basis for interpreting the parable of the Good Samaritan in a way which does not construe the obligation of beneficence in an unreasonably globalist or impersonalist way. As Oderberg puts it (making a useful distinction between the *manner* and the *measure* in which one is supposed to love our neighbour as oneself): 'our general inclination to do good to ourselves and others in equal *manner* is also an inclination to do good in unequal *measure*, depending on which relations of proximity I am in with respect to other people [and also on] the severity of the need of those who are my proximates'.

All this is valuable, even if the notion of 'proximates' does not quite succeed in allaying worries about the demandingness of the maxim of neighbour-love. For since Oderberg allows that being relevantly 'near' to someone may be a pure accident (as it was on the Samaritan's journey down from Jerusalem to Jericho), but may also be self-imposed (as in the aid worker who chooses to go out to the wilds of Borneo), and since in an era of global communications we can all see the plight of those in need across the planet just as vividly as the Samaritan saw the plight of the traveller he came across who had been mugged and left for dead, it remains unclear exactly how much sacrifice the command of Christ requires of us. The Thomist point made by Oderberg, that it cannot require us to sin in order to assist others, is of course right, but does not really address the precise challenge to affluent Western philosophers, who are not being asked to imperil their souls, but only to give up their ipods. These are of course fearfully tricky issues, and (to revert to a point I made in the earlier articles, and to which I still strongly adhere) the demands of integrity require us not to run any flags up the mast which we are not prepared to sail under, in the actual choices we make every day of our lives. Nevertheless, I am happy to agree that the general metaphysical framework which Oderberg outlines, and to much of which I now subscribe, offers much better prospects for a resolution than the assorted alternatives which I explored in my earlier writings.[43]

Reason and the Good Life

I can now perhaps accelerate the pace a little by taking together the three absorbing contributions, by Nafsika Athanassoulis, Seiriol Morgan and Michael Lacewing, which form the middle section of this volume. Although widely divergent in approach and in content, they all explore, in different but very perspicuous ways, the role of reason in determining and maintaining a worthwhile life, and they all focus on a certain scepticism about 'ratiocentric ethics' which I articulated in *Philosophy and the Good Life.* Philosophers, in a way, make their living through confidence in the power of reason, and

[43] Although I must ruefully accept the justice of Oderberg's rebuke for my earlier flirtation with the Nietzschean conception of value as generated by a subjective act of will (in 'The Ethical Credentials of Partiality' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 98 (1997-8), pp. 1-21), it should in fairness be made clear that this is a conception I have since wholly and emphatically repudiated – both in *On the Meaning of Life*, Ch. 1, and in *The Spiritual Dimension* Ch. 3. See also my 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical"', forthcoming in D. Callcut (ed.) *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008). As for my espousal of a 'neo-Pagan' approach (in 'The Ethics of Self-Concern'), I would only note that my very schematic 'bell curve' representation of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean was certainly not meant to suggest lateral symmetry (I am of course well aware that the mean of any given virtue will be closer to the vice of excess in some cases, and closer to the vice of deficiency in others). And as for the Christian conception of virtue being 'linear' (it would be better to say 'rectilinear'), when Oderberg repudiates my interpretation of, e.g., Christian charity as insisting that the more we give the better, he does not seem to me to give sufficient attention to just how hard a saying is the injunction Christ gave to the rich young man: 'sell *all you have* and give to the poor' (Matthew 19: 21).

in that book I explored what I took to be a serious challenge to that confidence. Confidence begins at home, and if, as Sigmund Freud famously argued, the rational ego can no longer be regarded as 'master in its own house',[44] then the traditional project of moral philosophy, to formulate the conditions for the good life, and implement their realisation, looks seriously threatened.

The three contributors mentioned are among a sizeable number of moral philosophers who have taken this challenge seriously; and I certainly cannot complain about the general critical reaction to *Philosophy and the Good Life* since it was published, which has been extremely encouraging. But it is perhaps worth adding that there are also a considerable number of philosophers who, politely enough but nevertheless firmly, decline to see what the problem about the 'challenge to reason' is supposed to be. Part of the reason for this is no doubt that any mention of the word 'psychoanalytic' or 'Freud' still causes a certain instant 'switch-off' effect in certain quarters of the analytic academy – rather as does mention of God or religion. Indeed, I have very occasionally worried that some unconscious rebelliousness or contrariness in my psyche has caused me to devote so much of my work in moral philosophy to defending its integral links with two domains of thought that are anathema to so many of my philosophical colleagues. The essays of Athanassoulis, Morgan and Lacewing are welcomingly reassuring on this point, since, though they are far from agreeing with everything I say, their eloquence and expertise in the techniques of analytic philosophy has clearly been no bar to their complete appreciation of what the issues are, and why they are important for moral philosophy.

(a) The hegemony of reason

Nafsika Athanassoulis's illuminating essay takes up my targeting of Aristotle as a 'rational hegemonist' – one who, while acknowledging that rationality is by no means the only powerful element in the psyche of a virtuous and flourishing individual, nevertheless assigns it a leading role in the control and management of the good life. She rightly takes the phenomenon of *akrasia* to be the key issue here. For *akrasia*, the knowing and genuinely regretted selection of an alternative known to be the worse option, is nothing else than the derailing of reason's control over the good life; and the ability of a moral philosophy to account for it, and take steps to remedy it, is a litmus test for evaluating its resources. Athanassoulis takes us carefully though the resources offered by Aristotle, and acutely identifies why *akrasia* presents such a puzzle: it is 'implausible' to suggest that 'morality exerts an attraction, but … only a rather weak one'; for 'how could recognition of the noble and the good be attractive but only mildly so?' On the other hand, the picture of human nature as enabling us to perceive the good, but being utterly 'ravaged by contrary extreme desires,' leaves it unclear how we are so often able to desire the good and unproblematically act upon it. In expounding Aristotle, Athanassoulis goes on to question my interpretation of Aristotle as putting reason in charge and so leaving himself unable to account properly for *akrasia.* Moral choice, she argues, may on his account be thought of as either *orektikos nous*, or as *orexis dianoêtikê*; that is to say it is a unified synergy of reason and emotion. Ethical understanding for Aristotle is not just a matter of reason's laying down the law, but a complex process of maturity, built on the right early

[44] 'But man's craving for grandiosity is now suffering the . . . most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavouring to prove to the "ego" of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind.' Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Ch. 18.

training, whereby we come to 'perceive, appreciate, affirm and be motivated by' the good.[45]

This analysis of Aristotle's resources strikes me as very sound. But I am not convinced that it refutes or 'defies' the interpretation of Aristotle as a 'ratiocentric' moral philosopher. Athanassoulis offers a persuasive picture of Aristotle as holding that 'the emotions shape reason as much as reason shapes emotions;' and an understanding of this subtle interactive process is certainly a valuable corrective to certain types of Platonic and Stoic model which see reason as set 'over against' the emotions, either automatically succeeding or inexplicably failing to control them. Nevertheless, it seems to me that since it lacks a developed concept of unconscious mentation, the Aristotelian account presents us with a picture of moral formation as operating in an essentially transparent domain. And hence, once the relevant sensitivities are appropriately shaped, through training and maturation, it is a complete mystery why they should suddenly break down. Aristotle (and as I noted in *Philosophy and the Good Life* this is to his credit)[46] recognises that what must be involved when the palpably lesser good is selected must be *some* kind of loss of transparency or cognitive clouding: although the akratic man has got the knowledge (or in Athanassoulis's terms, the relevant perceptive, appreciative, affirmatory and motivational understanding) his mind somehow fails to activate it fully. His understanding, even if he rehearses it to himself, becomes mere verbalizing, like the famous drunken man 'babbling' the verses of Empedocles.[47] But *why* this occlusion of ethical understanding? Only with something like the psychoanalytic picture of *projections*, of which the subject is consciously unaware, but under whose influence the lesser good gains its mysterious allure for the akratic subject, can we begin to see how ethical understanding, with all its associated perceptual and emotional sensitivities, becomes strangely distorted. There is nothing wrong with Aristotle's account; it is just that it needs supplementing – supplementing by the kind of systematic insight psychoanalytic theory can provide into how reason, even when allied to and integrated with non-intellectual sensitivities and perceptive powers, nonetheless fails to rule the roost.

(b) The temptations of reason

The psychoanalytic account of *akrasia* just alluded to was one I endeavoured to develop in more detail in my account of the imaginary case of 'Cecil',[48] which is discussed with great subtlety in Seiriol Morgan's essay. Cecil had his life blown off course by a disastrous affaire, and the fantasy of starting a 'new life' with what turned out be a wholly unsuitable partner. Yet his inexplicable opting for the lesser good in place of the solid relationship he already enjoyed was not just a piece of 'weakness' in the face of appetite, but the effect of

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[45] Athanassoulis, 'Getting it Wrong: Reason and the Emotions', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 87-110.

[46] Compare *Philosophy and the Good Life*, Ch. 4, §7.

[47] 'Within "having knowledge but not using it" we can see a difference in the having, so that there is such a thing as having knowledge in a way and yet not having it, as with someone who is asleep or mad or drunk. Now this is exactly the condition of a man under the influence of passions; for outburst of anger and sexual desires and other such passions do actually alter our bodily condition, and sometimes even produce fits of madness. Clearly, then, akratic people are like people who are asleep or mad or drunk . . . That a man says knowledgeable things is no proof that he knows them. Men under the influence of these passions may utter scientific proofs or recite the poems of Empedocles, but they do not understand what they are saying.' *Nicomachean Ethics* [c. 325 B.C.], Bk VII, ch. 3, 1147a11; translated in J. Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, l981). pp. 146-7.

[48] *Philosophy and the Good Life,* Ch. 4, §6.

an allure, projected from the depths of his unconscious, whose nature was, at the time, opaque to him. As Morgan nicely puts it, what was involved was 'the turning against him of his evaluative sensitivity itself'. Using quite different materials from the ones I deployed, Morgan then provides an independent argument (one I am happy to take on board) for the conclusion that 'the Aristotelian model of the virtuous person as able to have full confidence in her own motivation response to the world is an unattainable illusion, and a dangerous one at that.'[49]

The bulk of Morgan's paper offers an interesting defence of Immanuel Kant against the charge made by quite a few, including myself, that his account of the ethical life is suspect, because (to use my terms) it is unacceptably 'ratiocentric'. In so far as I had Kant in my sights in *Philosophy and the Good Life*, it was in quite a schematic way, as but one example of the ratiocentric approach, and on the basis of his most famous text, the *Grundlegung*. Morgan, by contrast, offers a very illuminating exposition of some of the ideas in the later and less studied text, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*,[50] which exhibit a distinct 'scepticism about the powers of practical reason'. The point which strikes me as central here is that Kant, if Morgan is correct, came to see that any moral theory worth its salt must be able to offer an account of 'how immoral inclination gets its motivational grip on the will'. It needs to tackle the question of what precisely is it that leads the will to take the satisfaction of some desire as a reason for action, in the face of a clear rational perception of the demands of the categorical imperative.

Once again we are face to face with a variant of the problem of *akrasia*; and I think it is fair to say that the approaches taken by both Morgan and myself converge on the central psychoanalytic insight that solving the problem is primarily a matter of developing a sufficiently rich moral psychology, along broadly Freudian lines. (One might add that the continuing debates on weakness of will in the philosophy of action seem very unlikely to make much progress on this by using the tools of logic and conceptual analysis alone.) As far as Kant's own solution (as interpreted by Morgan) goes, it rests on the idea that reason is entirely vulnerable to 'being crippled by the darker elements of the psyche' – an account, of course, to which my support for the psychoanalytic framework makes me in principle likely to find illuminating. But despite the 'remarkable congruities' which Morgan uncovers between Kant and Freud, there are (as I am sure he would accept) very significant discontinuities.

One in particular that troubles me concerns the Kantian label of 'radical evil' to describe the aetiology of akratic lapse; as Morgan puts it 'any one of us might at any time find our inner attraction to evil welling up despite ourselves, and casting some dark and self-centred course of action in a seductive light'. There seems to me an uneasy amalgam here of the grim Calvinist idea of an innate predisposition to evil, and the more mainstream Platonic and Christian idea that evil tends to appear *sub specie boni*, under the guise of the good. My disquiet, I should add, does not stem from any antipathy to the concept of original sin (which may be the unacknowledged source of the Kantian talk of 'radical evil') – far from it: one of the great fallacies of the secularist optimism found in some of the more disastrous ideologies of the twentieth century was precisely the failure to recognize inherent flaws in the human species, and the naïve assumption that ameliorating economic conditions and removing existing structures of exploitation would be all that was necessary to usher in the golden age. But as the story of the Fall suggests, such

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[49] S. Morgan, 'The Inner Life of the Dear Self', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 111-138.

[50] I. Kant, *Die Religion innherhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* [1793], tr. A. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

inherent flaws are more perspicuously understood not as a matter of an ‘inner attraction to evil’, but rather as a turning away from a known good when some lesser good – often carrying a concealed terrible cost – is speciously presented in a way that makes it seem almost irresistible: ‘and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and that it was desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her: and he did eat.’[51]

Before moving on, I should perhaps mention one point on which I think Morgan’s otherwise very illuminating treatment of Freud goes astray. This is in the objection he raises to the Freudian framework, namely that it offers ‘a therapeutic methodology to be used *by* analysts *on* patients, in order to effect their release from pathological symptoms’ – an external, quasi-scientific or ‘third-personal’ approach which he takes to be in tension with the true first- and second-personal perspective of the moral philosopher. This, I think is unfair. Freud frequently made it clear that the required kind of psychoanalytic knowledge could not simply be imparted by the therapist from the outside, but had to be internalised by the patient through their own complex efforts (such as through the ‘dreamwork’):

> It happens in analysis that an experienced practitioner can usually surmise very easily what those feelings are which have remained unconscious in each individual patient. It should not therefore be a matter of great difficulty to cure the patient by imparting this knowledge to him . . . If only it were so! … There are various kinds of knowing, which psychologically are not by any means of equal value. *Il y a fagot et fagots*, as Molière says … When the physician conveys his knowledge to the patient by telling him what he knows … it does not have the effect of dispersing the symptoms.’[52]

Therapy is never the passive receipt of a narrative supplied by the analyst, but a demanding labour which the subject must undertake in significant measure in his or her own terms. In *Philosophy and the Good Life* I described (albeit taking Jung rather than Freud as my guide) a model of ‘transformational analysis’ which envisages an eventual release from the consulting room altogether, to allow the subject to take full control of their continuing path of moral growth towards self-understanding.[53] Morgan concludes his paper by observing that notwithstanding my strictures against ratiocentric eudaimonism, I still believe that the business of moral philosophy is to show us how to live the good life. This is indeed quite right; it is just that I believe that moral philosophers should have the humility to acknowledge that they need all the help they can get.

(c) The limits of reason

The question of the self-sufficiency of moral philosophy is taken up in Michael Lacewing’s very rich paper, where he brings a highly sensitive grasp of the psychoanalytic process to bear on developing and reinforcing the critique of ratiocentrism offered *Philosophy and the Good Life.* I have a sense that in our general approach to moral psychology we are very much on the same wavelength, so that there is much of his analysis to which I have little to add except enthusiastic agreement. The scope and power of reason, however, and the associated question of what moral philosophy can accomplish, is an area where Lacewing suggests my critique of ratiocentrism may not have gone far enough; so it is perhaps worth my saying something on this central issue.

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[51] Genesis 3: 6 (King James version).

[52] *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture XVIII.

[53] *Philosophy and the Good Life,* Ch. 4, §6.

Suppose the moral philosopher can have at his disposal, at it were, all the results of psychoanalysis – a complete understanding of the ways in which the plans of reason can be blown off course by the distorting projections generated from the unconscious parts of the mind. Could he, armed with this information, resume the traditional eudaimonist task of mapping out and implementing the conditions for the good life? This is a question which some of the things I said in *Philosophy and the Good Life* may have suggested that I was prepared to answer affirmatively; and the way I have just put the point in response to Morgan's conclusions may suggest the same. But in the light of Lacewing's arguments I think this now needs some careful qualification.

Lacewing remarks that my approach 'can sometimes emphasise the acquisition of knowledge at the expense of other elements.' This is perhaps a besetting sin of philosophers, and although I tried to guard against it in *Philosophy and the Good Life*, Lacewing's reactions have shown me that I did not do so explicitly enough; I think it is only in my most recent work (in *The Spiritual Dimension*) that I have begun to see how it needs to be addressed. The correct response, I would now argue, is not to retreat from cognitivism, but to take seriously the idea that there are types of knowledge that have what I call *accessibility conditions*.[54] The scientific models that dominate much of philosophy and psychology tend to assume that what can be known must be in principle accessible to anyone, always assuming that reason's implements, the appropriate experimental and logical techniques, are properly deployed. Yet in central areas of moral philosophy and moral psychology (and I think in religion too), there may well be truths whose significance is accessible only on condition that there is some kind of transformation in the subject. Lacewing himself puts his finger on it: 'gaining knowledge of the meanings of one's passions and choices is not knowledge one can acquire *without changing as a person*.' The Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (one of Freud's most brilliantly worked out ideas, and one which most moral philosophers, in my view, have scarcely begun to assimilate)[55] is part of the story here. Past events, often not properly understood at the time, are constantly re-interpreted and re-evaluated, both consciously and unconsciously, in the light of changes which the subject later undergoes. It is not just a matter of dormant knowledge that needs to be recovered; rather, the grinding of the lens through which the meaning can be discerned is an exercise that requires the hard work of psychological and moral change. Whether we describe the relevant process as beyond our powers as rational beings, or within the broad scope of those powers, but with caveats about how those powers cannot be exercised in splendid isolation from our other human capacities, is perhaps a matter of emphasis. What Lacewing and I would surely agree on is that the model of reason inspecting the data, and drawing its lordly conclusions about future planning of the good life is just the kind of fantasy of control that shows there is a very great deal more work to be done.

Since I am always talking about the need for a 'humane turn' in moral philosophy, I will risk ending this section by quoting a celebrated sonnet about the 'Ancient Torso of Apollo', penned by that most psychoanalytically insightful of poets, Rainer Maria Rilke.[56] Apollo stands, of course, for light and rationality, and in his decapitated torso, which

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[54] For this idea, see *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 7, §4, and 'What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief.' *Ratio* XIX (4) December 2006, pp. 401-420, reprinted in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

[55] See Lacewing, 'What Reason Can't Do', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 139-166, footnote 12, and Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life*, Ch. 4, §5, esp. pp. 130ff.

[56] I do not, of course, mean that Rilke could pass exams in Freudian theory, but that his insights have the kind of resonance that is highly suggestive for anyone sympathetic to the psychoanalytic perspective on the moral and spiritual quest for the good life.

nevertheless seems to see right into us, there is a powerful symbol of the indestructible power of the unconscious. But I will not violate the principles I have just been articulating by trying to uncover all the layers of meaning for the reader's rational inspection. Like all work that engages with those parts of ourselves that are not fully accessible to consciousness, the sonnet may need to be revisited many times, and not just by the analytic intellect, before its meaning crystallises. But since no ponderous philosophical formula seems apt for capturing the vitally important themes which, with the help of Lacewing's discussion, I have just been pondering, I cannot do better than leave the reader with Rilke's luminous poem, and the famous and resonant injunction with which it ends:

> *Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt*
> *darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber*
> *sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,*
> *in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,*
>
> *sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug*
> *der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen*
> *der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen*
> *zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.*
>
> *Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz*
> *unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz*
> *und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;*
>
> *und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern*
> *aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,*
> *die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern*
>
> We could not see his lost, unheard of head
> where the eyes' berries ripened. Yet, despite,
> his torso glows still, like a candle-light,
> his glance grown dimmer, but yet never dead:
>
> its gleam endures. Else could the subtle line
> of the white chest not blind you, nor the curve
> of those pale loins so smilingly down-swerve
> to that dark core which held the seed divine.
>
> Else would this marble not seem whole and tall
> beneath the shoulders' long, translucent fall
> nor glisten so, like a wild creature's fleece;
>
> nor every edge burst forth like the bright blade
> of a star's point: of him, no single piece
> but looks you through. Your life must be remade. [57]

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[57] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaïscher Torso Apollos* [from *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, 1908]. I claim no great literary merit for my translation, only that it preserves the exacting rhyme and metrical scheme that was so important to Rilke's art, and which many modern 'poetic' translators blithely and self-indulgently ignore.

Religion, meaning and morality

I come now to the final section of the volume, where the distinguished essays by Roger Crisp, Brad Hooker and Thad Metz have raised, with outstanding clarity, many key questions concerning the topics that have interested me in my most recent work, on the relation between the religious and moral domains, and the problem of the meaning of life. In the first of the three remaining sections of this essay, I will consider some of the reflections offered by Crisp.

Roger Crisp's beautifully argued discussion of the meaning of life is particularly challenging to me because it becomes clear by the time he reaches his conclusion that he himself does not think the notion of the significance of a life matters very much in the end. As a welfarist, he holds that the only ultimate reason I ever have to pursue any course of action is that it will benefit myself or others. And hence, as he says in his final sentence, 'the question of the meaning of life, understood independently from well-being … appears to have little practical significance'.

If I may adapt Crisp's example of 'Amy' to a rather different purpose, drawing on some of the elements of a worthwhile life (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and so on) which he distinguishes, let us imagine Amy is one of the fortunate beneficiaries of the affluence and comfort and stability which has steadily increased for typical inhabitants of the so-called 'Western' world since the second World War. 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.

Thus blessed, need Amy have any disquiet about meaning in her life? One thing that might trouble her is that the fulfilling existence enjoyed by herself and her peers is made possible, in its present form, at the cost of systematic ravaging of the planet's ecological resources and the shameless exploitation or neglect of the lives of millions of fellow human beings in other parts of the world. This, one might think, is an issue about morality, not about meaning, and indeed Crisp mounts some elegant objections to a number of arguments in which I tried to exhibit morality and meaningfulness as integrally interlinked. Let me therefore say a word about these, before proceeding to evaluate the wider question of whether our positive evaluation of Amy's fulfilled life might somehow be undermined by doubts about its meaningfulness.

Some of my arguments in *On the Meaning of Life* were about whether the viciously immoral but subjectively fulfilling life could be meaningful (e.g. the life of someone like Adolf Eichmann, the dedicated mass murderer who seems to have derived great satisfaction from his work); but the issue can usefully be broadened to encompass whether meaning can attach to morally imperfect but not revoltingly evil lives (such as that of the totally self-absorbed artist 'Gauguin'),[58] and even to lives many would not see anything much wrong with, such as Amy's flourishing and locally sensitive, but globally somewhat morally myopic life. My principal strategy in dealing with all such cases (as

[58] The inverted commas are needed for reasons Crisp concisely sets out in 'Meaning, Morality and Religion' in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life,* pp. 167-183, footnote 12.

will by now be no surprise to readers of the present essay) was and remains to invoke the importance of *integrity*. The argument is not supposed to be a logically watertight one, immune from any counter-examples an ingenious philosopher might dream up, but amounts to an empirically plausible (I think) hypothesis: that for the great bulk of humankind, the compartmentalization that in varying degrees will have to be maintained by an Eichmann or a Gauguin or an Amy will in the end create a psychic dissonance that undermines the very flourishing we are supposed to be presupposing in the first place.

Crisp responds here by denying that compartmentalizing and flourishing are in tension. He cites Wittgenstein and Russell as actual examples of morally defective people who had fulfilled and meaningful lives, and also turns the tables on me by suggesting that the very partialism that I have defended will necessarily involve some compartmentalising: 'the mind of Gauguin is no more or less unstable than that of Cottingham's ideally virtuous person, who is able significantly to privilege the interests of his friends and family over those of strangers'.

These are powerful criticisms, for which I am very grateful, since they have spurred me to reflect further on my position. To develop a proper answer would require a great deal more space than I have here, but my short response can fall into two parts. In the case of my virtuous 'partialist' (to use a convenient but somewhat awkward label), I do not accept that what is going on is compartmentalisation. Rather, the love shown to one's dear ones can (as suggested by David Oderberg in his paper in this volume)[59] embody a clear and consistent vision of general benevolence, but realised towards others taken 'one at a time', as dictated by the particular structures of involvement and commitment that necessarily shape an individual human life. In the case of 'Gauguin', Crisp offers what at first seems a reasonable enough picture of an egotistical artist who can nevertheless 'establish close personal relationships with at least certain others.' But 'close personal relationship' is a somewhat imprecise notion. Our 'Gauguin' can no doubt successfully acquire a series of wives and mistresses – indeed rampant egoists can often be rather good at amassing a string of devoted lovers (what I have elsewhere called the 'Ingmar Bergman syndrome').[60] But if one means by a 'close personal relationship' one that allows for the kind of openness and caring and vulnerability that brings out what is most truly human and truly precious in us, then I simply deny that someone who, ex hypothesi, is prepared to treat his closest intimates as discardable in the pursuit of artistic fame can do so without either a hardening that is likely to impair the very artistic sensitivity he requires, else the kind of psychic dissonance that will impact on flourishing.

To return to the broader question of whether Amy's fully flourishing life (in the welfarist sense) need be threatened by doubts about its meaningfulness, this may seem partly a matter of temperament. The twentieth-century French existentialists, to be sure, painted a vivid picture of that sense of disorientation that arises when our confidence in meaning is eroded and we are face to face with absurdity or futility. No doubt many could get through life without being explicitly troubled by the kinds of vertiginous *Angst* or nausea portrayed by Sartre and Camus. Yet the existentialists were, I believe, only giving somewhat elaborate (and possibly exaggerated) philosophical expression to something fundamental to human nature. The ineradicable 'restlessness' of which Augustine eloquently spoke,[61] that powerful desire to reach beyond the given which Pascal referred

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[59] Oderberg, 'Self-Love, Love of Neighbour, and Impartiality'.

[60] See Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical"'.

[61] 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.')

to when he declared that 'humankind transcends itself',[62] are but two expressions of a inherent aspect of human nature – its hunger for ultimate meaning and purpose. Crisp notes, in effect, that other things besides a belief in the transcendent may be able to satisfy that hunger: even without such a belief, 'many people have had the confidence to begin … journeys [to meaningfulness]'. That seems true; but I doubt whether such embarkations are in the end psychologically stable, since they will involve a kind of willed suppression of the transcendent aspirations that are, whether we like it or not, part of our psyche. To plan one's life within what is taken to be an entirely 'closed' cosmos, where one's projects have no purpose other than to further aims one sees oneself as having as a result of a purely accidental chain of biological, historical and cultural contingencies, seems an enterprise that a reflective person cannot sustain without risking a certain psychic disorientation. This of course launches us on momentous issues that are much too vast to be settled here; so I will simply close this section with a quotation from Thomas Nagel, not himself an advocate of religion, which nonetheless at the very least poses a challenge to those who, like Crisp, feel no strong pull towards the transcendent route, or who even doubt that the underlying worry about the meaningfulness of life has much practical significance:

> 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.[63]

Sybarites, professors and religious morality

Brad Hooker's thought-provoking paper, written with the conciseness, clarity and philosophical acuity that are his trademarks, raises several significant questions about my views on value and meaning, and about the transcendent structures that I take to be the essential support for both.[64] He takes, first, an ingenious example, that of the 'successful sybarite', whose overriding goal is to develop (in Peter Strawson's phrase) an 'exquisite sense of the luxurious'. And he uses this example to establish what he calls a 'subjectivist sufficient condition' for an agent's life having (at least some) meaning.

The argument is that, since benefiting others can imbue one's life with meaning, it is hard to deny that benefiting oneself can imbue one's life with (at least some) meaning. With this I would agree, provided that 'benefiting' is understood properly. I would certainly consider, for example, that someone who 'benefits himself' by devoting himself to what Pierre Hadot calls the 'care of the soul' – that is to say by systematically striving to orient himself towards the good, and to grow in knowledge and love of the good – is thereby achieving a meaningful life. Indeed, he is, I would say, fulfilling the purpose of human life. Hooker, however, understands what could qualify as 'benefiting' in a fairly relaxed way; if I understand him correctly, he would maintain that I am benefiting myself by ensuring that my life contains 'some achievement or pleasure'. Developing an exquisite

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[62] Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 131: '*L'homme passe l'homme*.'

[63] Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd", *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. LXIII, no 20 (1971), §VI. Reprinted in Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). I discuss Nagel's position, and some connected view of Bernard Williams, in Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical".'

[64] B. Hooker, 'The Meaning of Life: Subjectivism, Objectivism and Divine Support', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life*, pp. 184-200.

sense of the luxurious, he then observes, can be 'quite an achievement', given the complex knowledge and discrimination certain kinds of luxury require from their devotees. So the satisfying achievements of the successful sybarite, even if they do not have any significant effect on anyone else, are enough to give his life some meaning.

I have to say I find this view very counter-intuitive. The life of such a person strikes me as a paradigm case of a futile life – one which, if we were to look back on it after the person's death, we should have to say had been completely and utterly pointless and meaningless. To see this, let us beef up the case a bit by generously adding in some extra 'value' through the supposition that such a life ropes in a significant number of other people to the same or similar pursuits. Even with this widened scope of so-called 'benefit', I should still have to agree with Kant's stern verdict:

> [T]hat there is any intrinsic worth in the real existence of a man who merely lives for enjoyment, however busy he may be in this respect, even when in so doing he serves others – all equally with himself intent only on enjoyment – as an excellent means to that one end, and does so, moreover, because through sympathy he shares all their gratifications – this is a view to which reason will never let itself be brought round.[65]

Kant may have had a certain puritanical disapproval of 'enjoyment', which I would not share, but that does not affect my main objection to Hooker's use of the sybarite. My disquiet about Hooker's conclusion is not some disapproval of pleasure, nor any quarrel about the 'achievement' which certain kinds of luxury-oriented pursuits may technically involve, but something far more fundamental. It concerns how such a sybaritic person has chosen to make use of the precious gift of life.

At the risk of causing the 'switch-off' effect, I will venture to quote the story from Luke (12: 16-21), about the rich man who spent a lot of time organizing storage barns for his lavish surplus wealth (it was no doubt quite an achievement to supervise all this), and then said to himself 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years, take your ease, and [enjoy your luxurious pursuits]'. He received a chilling reply from God: 'You fool! This very night your life is required of you!' Let me at once say what I think is *not* the point of this story. (1) The point is *not* that you never know what is going to happen tomorrow (though that of course is true enough). To such a point Hooker could quite reasonably reply that this does not negate the value and meaning already achieved today and yesterday. (2) The point is *not* that the rich man had an immortal soul which was now destined to pay the price in the next world. Nothing is mentioned about a last judgement, and even if it had been, that would simply have been to reinforce, not to replace, the existing moral point of the story. John Henry Newman was nearer the mark when he has the guardian angel tell Gerontius '*already in thy soul* the judgment has begun!'[66] The point, rather, is the sheer idiocy of the choice this man had made, the sheer foolishness of his whole mindset, as he grubbed around to secure his exquisite comforts and neglected to ask what his life was really for.

It is a mistake, I think, to conceive of value in atomistic terms, as if it consisted, as it were, of little tokens which, if they can be credited to an account, automatically enhance it. Aristotle once observed that *eudaimonia* could only be assessed in a complete life,[67]

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[65] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790], trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), Part I, Book I, §4. Kant's case may diverge from Hooker's because of complications about what is involved in the term 'intrinsic', but this does not affect my endorsement of the general thrust of his verdict.

[66] J. H. Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius* [1865].

[67] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. 7 (1098a19).

and I think the holistic lines along which he was thinking were approximately right, but his point is not quite what I am getting at. Even a few moments of life may be enough to give it ultimate meaning and value, if what happens in those few moments is that the subject undergoes a shift of outlook and becomes, in her whole being, oriented towards truth and beauty and goodness. These may seem overblown ways of speaking, but it is hard to find other language. I do not mean that such a person becomes a saint, simply that if their soul were 'required of them' – that is, on the *supposition* (forget metaphysical and ecclesiastical doctrine for a moment) that an all-good, all-compassionate, and all-seeing judge were to look into their deepest inclinations and desires, and to assess the quality of their actions in every last detail, he would find room for mercy. 'I have smoked some exquisite cigars' does not look quite enough.

Concerning Hooker's very interesting second section, about the 'objectivist sufficient condition' – that is, the idea that if someone's life produces objectively good outcomes this imbues it with meaning even if the subject does not recognize or aim at those outcomes – I have fewer qualms. I would only add that the life of his imagined professor, who dies frustrated at what he sees as the failure of his life even though his friends (rightly) recognize it as very worthwhile, has an obviously tragic quality to it, which makes it hard to see it as qualifying as what most people would call a meaningful life. Far better, far more meaningful (as Hooker indeed concedes), if there can be a fit between the professor's aspirations and the good he achieves.

In Hooker's third section, about the support religion offers for the notion that a life can be meaningful, there is a great deal of common ground between us, since Hooker is prepared to concede that the existence of God would make life maximally meaningful; though he ends by hinting that in God's absence our fellow creatures might provide some 'confirmation' of meaning (a suggestion which it would be interesting to explore). Hooker's general stance, however, refuses to allow that the notion of religious support is even 'on the table' as a possible candidate for a provider of meaningfulness; for he thinks the traditional problem of evil makes the universe as disclosed by modern science inherently resistant to a religious interpretation of its significance. The perhaps somewhat imprecise phrase 'inherently resistant' was one I myself introduced in *On the Meaning of Life*. If we are here talking about a *logical* incompatibility (Hooker may mean this when he says the problem of evil offers a 'conclusive argument'), then I think most parties to the debate now accept that it could not possibly be demonstrated that an all-powerful all-good being could have no conceivable reason to allow the amount of evil found in the world.[68] If, however, what is meant is that the amount of evil found makes the existence of God vanishingly *improbable*, then if we lay aside evils caused by the free actions of human beings (whether there is of course a long tradition of theodicy going back to Augustine, which many have found persuasive), the issue turns on whether the constant dangers and suffering generated by the ordinary natural conditions of the planet (Hooker mentions 'tsunamis, plagues, decay and disease') undermine any reasonable belief in a divine being of the supposed supreme power to prevent it and benevolent desire to avoid it. This is an issue I addressed in *The Spiritual Dimension*,[69] where I suggested, roughly, that decay is inseparable from material existence, and so ineliminable even by an omnipotent creator of a material world. There is of course much more to it than that; and in any case (as I also argued in that book) the issue is not really one for which a 'solution' can be offered

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[68] For a useful survey of the recent debate, see D. Pereboom, 'The Problem of Evil', in W. E. Mann (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
[69] Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 2.

through intellectual debate alone.[70] The adoption or rejection of a religious worldview, together with the associated attitudes to death and suffering, are in my view things that are determined at a much deeper level (just as you do not decide whether to marry someone, or to have children, simply as a result of rational argument). This, incidentally, is where some atheist critics systematically distort things by entirely identifying religious allegiance with the adoption of a quasi-scientific explanatory scheme – the 'God-hypothesis', as Richard Dawkins has irritatingly called it.[71]

Hooker concludes his essay by noting, with complete justice, that 'many people *have* sustained moral commitment without the buttress of belief in god, and that many people have felt that life is meaningful even if there is no god.'[72] I hope I have made it sufficiently clear in my writings that my advocacy of religion carries no slightest shred of a suggestion that those lacking religious belief cannot be upright and morally committed human beings (indeed, at the risk of embarrassing him, I might add that Brad Hooker himself provides an absolutely paradigm case). I explicitly denied in *The Spiritual Dimension* that religious allegiance was universally necessary, let alone sufficient, for living a moral life.[73] What I did suggest was that given the weakness of human nature, most human beings were going to find the painful and exacting voyage towards self discovery and the struggle to achieve integrity in the moral life very difficult indeed without something like the supporting disciplines of spiritual *askesis*. It could well be that the current ethical culture of the increasingly secularised Western world is living off borrowed capital in this respect: the effects of a two thousand year-old tradition of spirituality do not dissipate overnight. What the future holds remains to be seen.

Religious metaphysics as grounding for morality

I come finally to Thaddeus Metz's polished and intricately argued paper,[74] in which, notwithstanding his radical differences with me over the acceptability of theism, he has done me the signal service of expounding my arguments, and unpacking their implications in meticulous detail, and has also offered a generous bonus by suggesting possible lines of reply to the some of the objections that might be raised against my position.

In the first part of his paper, Metz refers to four features applying to central moral truths which I take to favour a supernaturalist metaethics: *universality*, *objectivity*, *necessity* and *normativity*. First, cruelty (for example) is to be avoided, and compassion to be cultivated, by *all* rational creatures (not just by this or that group or society); second, these truths about cruelty and compassion, and so on, obtain independently of what people's attitudes towards the relevant actions may be; third, these truths apply absolutely, in all possible worlds; and fourth, it is incumbent on us to act on them – we have (as some would put it nowadays) conclusive 'reasons' to avoid cruelty and to show compassion. A God-based ethics appears to support these four features very well. Although I am no metaphysician, so feel tentative about occupying this territory, I am sympathetic to a fairly mainstream theological conception of moral truths as eternal verities, held in the mind of God, the supremely perfect being who exists in all possible worlds. And (though I have not gone into this much in my work) I would be attracted by a similar account of logical and mathematical truths, and indeed of central aesthetic truths. There are of course alternative accounts on offer of the four features identified by Metz, notably certain kinds

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[70] *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 2, §6, pp. 34-6.
[71] R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).
[72] Hooker, 'The Meaning of Life', penultimate paragraph.
[73] *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 7, §7.
[74] T. Metz, 'God, Morality and the Meaning of Life', Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life*, pp. 201-230.

of non-naturalism and of Platonism, but I would agree with Metz's comment (on my behalf) that, whatever its problems, 'the supernaturalist's suggestion of a kind of concrete substance that exists is more ontologically satisfying than the non-naturalist's suggestion of a kind of abstract property that exists independently of any substance.'[75]

In expounding my views, Metz raises the important question of why, if all these kinds of truth are grounded in the divine substance, moral norms should have a special kind of overriding normativity: should not we have 'just as much reason to follow the laws of logic and beauty as to follow the laws of morality'? I'm slightly puzzled by the thought that logic falls lower down the scale of normativity than morality: in one way, of course it is true that killing is worse than affirming the consequent; but in another sense, a rule like 'you can't have your cake and eat it' seems just about as overriding as one could imagine. Let us however take the relation between beauty and goodness, which is an interesting one for religious ethicists. Certain somewhat bleak versions of Christianity have put the beautiful and the 'fine' (what the Greeks called *to kalon*) very far down the list of values, almost as if any distraction from the stern imperatives of morality should be as far as possible eliminated. But a remarkable episode reported in the first gospel puts a different complexion on things. When a woman in the house of Simon the leper uses an 'alabaster box of precious ointment' to anoint the head of Jesus, the disciples round on her for this morally disgraceful act of waste ('could it not have been sold and given to the poor?'). But Christ tells them not to bother the woman: 'she has done a *fine* deed.' (*ergon kalon*, Matthew 26:10). There is a vital and non-negotiable place in life for the fine and the beautiful. The example, of course, concerns the overriding of what Kant called an imperfect moral duty (helping the poor), and Metz is quite correct that our intuitions would never support its overriding a perfect duty (e.g. if the woman had stolen or killed to get the perfume). So there remains a crucial priority issue here; but since Metz generously offers an ingenious solution on my behalf, which seems to me likely to work, I am happy to accept his assistance without further comment.

Traditionally, the main argument against a God-based ethic of the kind I support has been the so-called Euthyphro dilemma (that making the good dependent on God's will is either explanatorily vacuous, or else liable to generate morally counter-intuitive results);[76] but reassuringly Metz considers that the way I deal with the problem (along with several other recent writers) is satisfactory.[77] He goes on, however, to raise an even more serious charge – namely that of logical incoherence. 'On the one hand Cottingham maintains that wrongness is constituted by God, but on the other hand he is more confident that wrongness exists than he is that God exists'. This is not just an ad hominem argument against me; anyone who thinks there is a conclusive argument for a God-based ethic should, according to Metz, regard the evidence for God's existence as comparable in

[75] Some non-naturalists of course regard moral properties as not wholly 'independent' of existing substances, but as depending on, or supported by, natural features of ordinary objects. Thus natural, pain-inflicting quality of an action is said to provide a 'reason' (in some cases a 'conclusive reason') for not doing it. (See for example P. J. Stratton-Lake, *Ethical Intuitionism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 15.) However, if such reasons are taken to be objectively there, and somehow normative for the agents independently of their inclinations and motives, the worry about moral properties floating around independently of substances seems, sooner or later, to return.

[76] To summarize very crudely: explanatorily vacuous because if the reason God commands X is that X is good, we are no nearer knowing what makes it good; morally counterintuitive because if the mere fact of God's commanding X makes it right, then we would have to say that torturing for fun is right if God were to order it.

[77] See *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 3, §3.

strength to the evidence for the existence of wrongness. And that is a very hard bullet to bite.

I agree that it is, but I confess to finding the logical presuppositions of Metz's argument very implausible. I can surely maintain that apples are constituted by quarks, and yet be far more confident of the evidence that apples exist than of the evidence that quarks exist. Or I can surely maintain that the properties of the number zero are essentially constituted by complicated properties involving relations between sets of sets, yet be far more confident that the number of coins in my pocket is nil than I am about the existence of sets (I may have just read an ingenious paper refuting their existence, which I cannot see how to get round). But even leaving these analogies aside, I would not in any case want to insist on the 'conclusiveness' of the argument for a divine-based metaethic. My general position in *The Spiritual Dimension* is that the adoption of a religious worldview does not hinge on the plausibility, let alone conclusiveness, of philosophical arguments; it depends, rather, on coming to see the world in a different way, as the result of various moral and spiritual transformations that open one to certain realities previously occluded. I do however maintain that the worldview so arrived at must (on pain of sacrificing one's integrity) be at least conformable with the results of philosophical and scientific inquiry. So I would be content to align myself with the position recently taken by the theologian Brian Hebblethwaite, who resiles from any attempt to reason people towards faith by conclusive arguments, but who offers a 'buttress' for faith already arrived at, by indicating how belief in God would plausibly fit in (not as the only possible explanation, but at least in a satisfying way) with how we conceive of the kinds of moral and logical necessity under discussion:

> Theistic metaphysics offers the best explanation of all the necessary features of the contingent world, its mathematical expressibility, its conformity to the laws of logic, and the properties and abstract ideas that it instantiates – all the features discerned but not explained by pure Platonism. For theistic metaphysics, mathematics and logic reflect the consistency and rationality of God's necessary being, while abstract ideas and properties are God's creative ideas. So all the necessities in the created world, and indeed in any possible world, depend on either the nature or the will of God.[78]

Towards the end of his paper, Metz argues in support of a complex alternative to supernaturalist metaethics which he thinks accounts just as well for the properties of universality, objectivity, normativity and necessity that attach to moral truths. This is so-called 'Cornell realism' developed over the last twenty years or so – a type of naturalism which regards moral truths as synthetic a posteriori necessities (like 'water is H_2O'). Just as we learn by scientific investigation that the terms 'water' and 'H_2O' necessarily pick out the same stuff, so (we are invited to believe) ethical theorists have discovered that the class of actions picked out by the property *wrongness* cannot but coincide with the class of actions picked out by the property of, for example, producing damaging consequences, or undermining the flourishing of persons. The end of an already long paper is no place for me to launch into a discussion of the intricacies of Cornell realism, which have generated a massive literature. When I first encountered this view, I must admit that I regarded it (with its reliance on complicated Kripkean metaphysics) as too cumbersome to have much chance of general appeal; I was reminded of the verdict passed by Locke on Malebranche's occasionalism, 'tis an opinion that spreads not, and is like to die of itself,

[78] Brian Hebblethwaite, *In Defence of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 28-29.

or at least do no great harm'. But I have since come to think either this or whatever turns out to be the best articulated naturalistic account might, as far as it goes, be perfectly serviceable from a theistic perspective.[79] After all, if the universe is created by a supremely benevolent God, then it is surely to be expected that the good for his creatures will be intimately related to their nature. Nevertheless, *nature* is, as I have argued elsewhere,[80] a highly ambiguous concept: as applied to humans it can on the one hand designate simply those characteristics and inclinations we happen to find ourselves having; but can also (as in the natural law tradition) have a more strongly normative flavour, referring not just to how we are, but to the best we can become. Without a divinely based teleology, something like an ideal pattern of life or goal for human existence, I cannot see how we can distinguish among which of the 'natural' inclinations and satisfactions of our species have ultimate normative force. The systematic indulgence by a powerful tribe of their impulses towards conquest and genocide might if sufficiently successful, usher in a millennium of stability, prosperity and personal flourishing for the winners, and I can see no ultimate conclusive reason which, for the naturalist, would count against such a course of action.

Irrespective of the viability or otherwise of naturalism in its modern sophisticated forms, I take comfort from the thought that Metz and I would surely concur in thinking that that the ethical subjectivism and relativism so prevalent when I was an undergraduate are non-starters. If our central moral insights do, as he and I agree, represent truths that hold universally, are independent of our contingent inclinations, require our allegiance, and cannot be otherwise, then we have a picture of moral reality that is already strikingly consistent with what religious ethicists have held for many centuries. At all events, there is much I have learned from his paper, and much about which I shall have to think further.

Envoi

In completing this essay, I see I have broken a lifelong rule that articles or chapters should never exceed eight thousand words. But perhaps transgressing that limit to respond to nine substantial papers is not so inexcusable. I should like to end where I began, with an expression of sincere gratitude for these 'gifts now prepared for me'. Like all worthwhile gifts, they are not of transient interest, but will give me a great deal to appreciate and ponder on for a long time to come.

Festschriften are things that automatically conjure up images of retirement. Like many academics, I hope to continue working and writing when my more formal commitments in other areas taper off. But rites of passage are nevertheless important, and we should not delude ourselves about the adjustments needed as one phase of life gradually merges into another. So if this volume is, in a sense, a launch, I am grateful that it has been such an enjoyable one – one that has helped me to look back with pleasure on the terrain so far traversed, and to anticipate with relish the voyage that lies ahead. If I may be forgiven for quoting a last piece of poetry, my thoughts at this point are perhaps best summed up in some favourite lines produced by the Roman poet Horace when he asked himself what he should hope for:

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[79] There are, as Metz acknowledges, problems about whether such theories can account for normativity of moral truths, and also problems about whether the kind of 'necessity' involved might turn out, in the ethical case, to be species-relative; but he offers possible replies to both worries.

[80] J. Cottingham, ' "Our Natural Guide . . ." : Conscience, "Nature", and Moral Experience', in D. Oderberg and T. Chappell (eds), *Human Values* (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 11-31.

Frui paratis et valido mihi
Latoe, dones, et, precor integra
cum mente, nec turpem senectam
degere nec cithara carentem.

May I enjoy the gifts now prepared for me;
give strength, I pray, and grant me integrity
of mind, ageing without dishonour,
and the sweet chords of the lute to guide me. [81]

[81] Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *Odes* [*Carmina*, *c.* 23 BC], I, 31, final verse. (There are no rhyme requirements in Classical poetry, but my translation retains the Alcaic metre of the original.) The 'lute' (traditional instrument of Apollo ('Son of Leto'), to whom the verse is addressed), refers to the joys of music but also symbolizes for Horace his hopes to continue his poetry; for my purposes it may be taken to include any creative endeavour.