Objectivity
and
Cultural Divergence

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Moral Objectivity

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Morality exercises a deep and questionable influence on the way we live our lives. The influence is deep both because moral injunctions are embedded in our psyches long before we can reflect on their status and because even after we become reflective agents, the question of how we should live our lives among others is intimately bound up with the more general question of how we should live our lives: our stance toward morality and our conception of our lives as having significance are of a piece. The influence is questionable because morality pretends to a level of objectivity that it may not possess. Moral injunctions are meant to be binding on us in some way that is independent of the desires or preferences we may happen to have. When one asserts that a certain action is morally worthy or shameful one is, *prima facie*, doing more than merely expressing approval or disapproval or trying to get others to act as instruments of one’s own will. If moral assertions were shown, at bottom, to be merely such exhortations, then they would be shown to wear a disguise. Morality would be revealed as pretending to an objectivity it does not have, and such a revelation could not but have a profound impact on our lives. It is doubtful that such a revelation could be kept locked up inside our studies.¹

The debate over the objectivity or non-objectivity of ethics takes place in the shadow of Kant. He has bequeathed to us both a powerful conception of morality and the framework for discussing questions of objectivity. The appeal of Kantian ethics is that it directly links morality to a dignified conception of man as a rationally free agent. Kant severed the tie between morality and the pursuit of happiness because, he argued, morality cannot be binding on an agent in virtue of desires he just happens to have. The agent might have lacked those desires and, Kant argued, it was intolerable that an agent should be bound to morality by so contingent a thread. Morality should bind an agent solely in so far as he is rational; thus morality, for Kant, should be constituted by the formal laws of rationality alone. In regarding himself as a purely rational agent, for the purposes of making a moral judgment, a man treated himself as free of the causal sway of particular desires, passions, interests that might otherwise engage him. In morality, as Kant conceived it, man could realize his highest freedom.

Such a conception has an austere, awesome appeal. And Kant's negative critique seriously challenges its intended target; namely, those eighteenth-century moral theories which based morality on the pursuit of happiness. But as a critique of Aristotelian ethics, in which ethics is treated as a practical guide that enables a man to achieve eudaimonia, it misses the mark. Eudaimonia, which has often been translated as 'happiness' but which is perhaps better translated as something like 'human flourishing' is not based on the satisfaction of desires that an agent may or may not possess. According to Aristotle, man has an essence: there is something definite and worthwhile that it is to be a human being. Eudaimonia consists in the living of this potentially noble life to the fullest possible extent. Let us, for the sake of argument, translate 'eudaimonia' as 'happiness'. Then when Aristotle asks Why should we not call happy the man who exercises his abilities according to the highest standards of virtue and excellence in a context which affords him sufficient resources and not merely for a brief moment but throughout his life?

the answer cannot be: 'Because a man's happiness depends upon the satisfaction of his desires which may or may not bear any relation to his living a virtuous life'. The pursuit of happiness, for Aristotle, must be clearly distinguished from the pursuit of pleasure, though many mistakenly suppose that in pursuing pleasure they pursue happiness. In devoting themselves to pleasure, they act slavishly toward their desires and, in effect choose the life of an animal. Kant's critique does not undermine a morality based on eudaimonia, not because eudaimonia must be conceived of independently of all desires, nor because the desires involved in eudaimonia are non-contingently shared by all humans, but because they are non-contingently shared by those who are living a life of eudaimonia.

The most important defect of Kantian ethics, Hegel argued, is that it lacks content. From a purely formal principle of rationality one cannot derive any substantial conclusions about how to act. Yet there is one important point on which Kant and Hegel agreed: that Kantian ethics represented a significant advance in moral thinking. In conceiving himself as a purely rational agent, man could legislate the moral law to himself. For Kant, morality was at last freed from the slavish pursuit of happiness or the unreflective obedience to divine dictates. For Hegel, man at last realized his subjectivity, that the moral law must be self-legislated, and this was a necessary stage in the development of an adequate ethical consciousness. The virtuous citizen of the Athenian polis, Hegel thought, unreflectively identified with the polis and obeyed its laws. The radical subjectivity of Kantian ethics separated the moral agent from his social context—at the price, Hegel thought, of emptiness—but it paved the way for a higher reconciliation between the reflective moral agent and the objective social world.

The charge of emptiness continues to be made against Kantian ethics, and it is a charge that ought to be investigated seriously. For there remains widespread agreement that Kantian ethics describes what the objective stance in morality is: in viewing the world objectively I reflectively detach myself from my present concerns, interests and situation and conceive of myself simply as one agent among others. But, Bernard Williams has recently argued, if one actually succeeds in viewing the interests and concerns of all agents, including oneself, from a genuinely detached perspective, there seems to be no motivation left for acting in any particular way at all. The detached standpoint carries with it no positive attitude to any agent's interests and desires. Ironically, this is an analogue in the realm of practical reason to an objection Kant himself made in the realm of pure reason. In the Paralogisms Kant argued, roughly, that if one abstracts from the ego all its conditions and determinations except for the 'I think' that must be capable of accompanying all my thoughts, then one will not be able to derive any substantial conclusions about this I which thinks. Williams' point is that from the detached perspective of a mere 'I will' there are no substantial conclusions to be derived about the I.


3 Cf. Bernard Williams, op. cit.


which wills, including of course what it should will. In response
neo-Kantians have argued that the aim of the detached perspective is
not to generate motivations to act but only to endorse motivations
which already exist from a standpoint outside of these motivations.\(^9\)
But it remains enigmatic how the detached point of view is supposed
to accomplish this, and one suspects that either it will be impotent to
endorse any motivations or that it will endorse some by being covertly
guilty of heteronomy: of smuggling into the ‘detached’ perspective the
very motivations it ends up endorsing.

To gain a clearer focus let us, following Williams, distinguish
internal reasons for action from external reasons.\(^10\) There are two sorts
of interpretation which can be given to sentences like ‘A has reason to \(\phi\)
’ or ‘There is a reason for A to \(\phi\)’. As an internal reason, A has some
motive which will be served by his \(\phi\)-ing, and if this is not so, the
sentence is false. As an external reason, the sentence is not falsified by
the absence of an appropriate motive. Now it would seem that there is
no point in adopting the detached perspective if there are no external
reasons for action.

In The Possibility of Altruism, Thomas Nagel argued that ultimately
the only acceptable reasons for action are ones that can be formulated
completely impersonally—with no reference to one’s particular
motive, interests or desires.\(^11\) Even if one acts from subjective
principles and motivations, Nagel argued that one is guilty of a type of
irrationality if one cannot back up one’s actions with reasons which are
completely impersonal. ‘To regard oneself as merely a person among
others, one must be able to regard oneself in every respect
impersonally.’\(^12\) It follows, Nagel argued, that one’s principles of
practical reason must be universal, for if one operates solely with a
subjective set of principles that cannot be applied from the impersonal
standpoint, one is guilty of a type of dissociation: one has failed to see
that one is merely one person among others.\(^13\)

Nagel’s argument does not, I think, succeed for it presents what is in
fact a tautology as a substantial insight of practical reason.\(^14\) Of course,

\(^9\) Cf. Thomas Nagel’s response to William’s ‘The Presupposition of
Morality’, Thysken Conference on Transcendental Arguments, Cambridge
(September 1981).

\(^10\) See Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons’, Moral Luck
(Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Press, 1970). These are what Nagel calls ‘objective reasons’; cf. Ch. X.

\(^12\) Ibid. 162.

\(^13\) Ibid. See especially Ch. IX, §§5–7.

\(^14\) N.B. that Hegel accused Kant of trying to derive substantial moral
conclusions from formal tautologies. See note 5 above.

if one is ‘to regard oneself as merely a person among others, one must be
able to regard oneself in every respect impersonally’, but the question
arises: why regard oneself as merely one person among others? ‘Merely’ is
doing too much work, for Nagel concludes that if any of one’s
practical reasons for action cannot be justified from the impersonal
standpoint then one suffers a type of dissociation: one fails to recognize
oneself as one among others. But this does not follow; one can recognize
oneself as one person among others without thinking that one is merely
that. Indeed, it seems to involve dissociation to regard oneself as merely
that, and thus the man who seeks to justify all his reasons from a
detached viewpoint seems to be the one who is suffering from
dissociation.\(^15\)

The argument against there being any external reasons portrays itself
as neo-Humean.\(^16\) No external-reasons statement can by itself explain an
agent’s action, for the external-reasons statement can, by hypothesis, be
true of an agent totally independently of his beliefs and motivations.
Now it may be that an agent’s believing that an external-reasons
statement is true of him will help to explain his action, but of such an
agent an internal-reasons statement is also true, namely, that he is
motivated to act when he believes an external-reasons statement is true
of him. So to understand the content of an external-reasons statement
we must understand what it is for an agent to come to believe one. But
how, it is asked, can an agent who does not already believe the
external-reasons statement and who does not already have the
appropriate internal reason come to believe the external-reasons
statement? The external-reasons statement ‘A has reason to \(\phi\)’ entails
the claim that

(1) If the agent rationally deliberated then, whatever motivation he
originally had, he would come to be motivated to \(\phi\)
and it is objected, on Humean grounds, that all such claims are false.
For, by hypothesis, there is no motivation for the agent to deliberate
from to gain the new motivation.

One may object that this argument depends on a Humean anatomy of
the mind, which unacceptably separates cognitive and motivational
faculties, but such an objection does not get to the heart of the matter.
For the argument is directed ad hominem against a Kantian
external-reasons theorist, who believes that from rationality alone one
can be motivated to act. The internal-reasons theorist need only
maintain that this is not so (he may also believe that reasons and

\(^15\) For a good example of this dissociation see Nagel’s discussion of the
practical reasoning involved when someone steps on my toe, ibid. 112–113.

\(^16\) Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons’, op. cit.
motivations are indistillably mixed). One might also try to build into
the notion of rational deliberation certain ideal conditions such that
once an agent is placed in those conditions he will be motivated to φ.
Such a strategy has its attractions, but it is open to the internal-reasons
theorist and, more generally, to the moral sceptic, to deny that rational
deliberation requires any such ideal conditions.

What I think does turn out to be a problem for the internal reasons
theorist is that his argument is ad hominem. Any ad hominem argument
may legitimately adopt assumptions of the position it is trying to
undermine; but if the argument purports not merely to undermine an
opposing position but also to establish certain positive conclusions,
then one must look carefully at the shared assumptions. The internal
reasons theorist, has I think, ingeniously undermined the existing
arguments that moral imperatives can be derived from rationality
alone. However, if the argument is also taken to establish the positive
conclusion that the only reasons for action are internal reasons, then it
turns out that the internal reasons theorist is himself committed to
important Kantian assumptions about practical reason. First, he
assumes that reasons are divided exhaustively into those that are
derivable from an agent's subjective motivations (plus any additional
premises which serve to correct for false belief or add non-evaluative
information) and those that are derivable from rationality alone. There
is no basis for thinking that a subjunctive conditional like (1) follows
from the existence of an external reason unless one assumes that if there
were any reasons not based on an agent's internal motivation, they
would have to be grounded in rationality. No room is left for any other
type of reason; yet, I shall argue, there ought to be room.

Second, the internal-reasons theorist must to some extent treat an
agent as a detached consciousness removed from the full particularity
of his life. On reflection, it should not be surprising that the
internal-reasons theorist should face such a problem. For he has chosen
to undermine Kantian ethics via a neo-Humean account of practical
deliberation. But Hume himself had notorious difficulty in giving any
positive account of the self. Not only couldn't he find any self as an
object of introspection, but more importantly for our present purposes
he could give no satisfying account of a self which endures over time.
However many deep philosophical problems are raised by Hume's
account of the self, it remains that any account of practical reasons
which does not capture the fact that we are beings who endure over time
is likely to fail to portray accurately the lives we find ourselves living.

Consider, as a first example, Herman, an insurance salesman who at
this moment is sitting in his car which is parked on the railroad tracks.
Herman took various premiums which he received and invested them in
a get-rich-quick scheme. His plan was to pay in the premiums as soon as
his investment paid off; however his investment failed and in the
meantime one of his clients has died. Herman is simply unwilling to
face up to the shame, embarrassment and punishment that is about to
fall on him. In fact, were Herman forced to live through the shame, he
would at some later time come to find life worth living. Even he
recognizes this, for he knows that he is not one to dwell on the past; he is
too busy planning his next scheme. But this recognition does not weigh
with him at all, for what he finds intolerable is present or imminent
shame. There is neither an internal nor an external reason for Herman
to get off the tracks. There is no internal reason because Herman lacks
any motivation for going on living—he is not someone particularly tied
to life—and he is strongly motivated to avoid facing up to the
consequences of his actions. There is no external reason, for the
subjunctive conditional

(1') If Herman rationally deliberated then, whatever his original
motivations, he would come to be motivated to get off the tracks
is not true. Herman's problem is not that he is deceived about his
motives, nor that he is unable to deliberate rationally; his problem is
that he is motivated to avoid shame at all costs and in this case the cost
seems to be his life. Yet if we think about the life Herman would lead if,
somehow or other, he got through the period of shame and punishment,
it seems that there is some reason for Herman to get off the tracks
(whatever weight he or we assign to it).  

The internal-reasons theorist cannot do justice to Herman's life
because his life stretches over time and, until it is over, partially consists
in possibilities which may or may not be realized. However, the
internal-reasons theorist has to maintain that the only reasons that can
exist for Herman at a given time are reasons he would come to recognize
at that very time given only that he had true beliefs, accurate insight
into his motivation and could rationally deliberate. This is to treat
Herman as a spatio-temporal slice. To say that Herman has no reason to
got off the tracks is to detach him from his full life—the life he has led,
is leading and might lead—and to consider him solely in terms of his
consciousness at a given moment. Of course that moment is a special
one; it is the present, and we regularly have to make decisions based
upon current motivation. Indeed, the virtue of the internal reasons
account is that it does explain how an agent's choices are based upon his
current motivation. I do not wish to play down the importance of
current motivation for practical reason: it is precisely because Herman
lacks any motivation to go on living that, if left to his own devices, he
will remain on the tracks—whether or not he engages in rational

17 Cf. Nagel's prudential reasons which are supposed to be able to explain
prudential conduct irrespective of whether they are also internal reasons.
deliberation as he listens for the far-off whistle. I only wish to make the weaker claim that it is implausible that all reasons for Herman to be on or off the tracks should be derivable either from pure rational deliberation or from deliberation on his current motivation.

Though Herman is a dramatic case, he represents a phenomenon which is, I think, common in life: that a single human life can contain discontinuities of motivation. Variations on the rationally deliberated suicide are easily proliferated (I leave the brokenhearted lover and the cancer victim who refuses chemotherapy as exercises for the reader) and I shall confine myself to one other type of example.

Consider Eli, a drunk who has a strong desire for a drink and no conflicting desires that he refrain. Were he sober, Eli would be motivated not to have another drink but, having become drunk, he cheerfully throws himself entirely into the maintenance of his current state. The problem which Eli presents is how to analyse the subjunctive conditional

(1') If Eli rationally deliberated then, whatever motivation he originally had, he would come to be motivated not to have another drink.

If, on the one hand, we assume that Eli, while drunk, is incapable of rational deliberation, then the conditional (1') will come out true. For when sober Eli is motivated not to drink, irrespective of his motives when drunk. Thus there will be an external reason not to have another drink. The only way to avoid this conclusion, while nevertheless agreeing that drunken Eli is incapable of rational deliberation, is to posit the existence of a motivation not to drink that is hidden to him while drunk or overruled by other motivations. Were such a motivation present in him, it might be argued, his rational deliberation would not be irrespective of his original motivations. Now such a motivation may be hidden in the bosom of many drunks, but it is artificial to insist that it must be present in Eli. What makes Eli a charming drunk is, among other things, the wholehearted way in which he enjoys his drunkenness and the apparent transparency of his motives to himself and to us. Eli is simply someone whose motivations differ when he is drunk from when he is sober. So to maintain that (1') is false, one must conceive of Eli both as drunk and as somehow able to calculate rationally means to ends. He tabulates the available means to the given end of having a drink and, of course, does not acquire a motivation not to have another drink. But is this not to treat Eli as a mere rational will, an abstract consciousness? For the subjunctive conditional to come out false, it cannot be Eli, in his full particularity, who deliberates, but a mere rational consciousness that is able to calculate Eli's actual means and ends.

Finally, both the internal reasons theorist and the Kantian treat the individual as the absolute focus of practical reason. Because it is assumed that what requires explanation is an individual's actions we are forced to concentrate on the individual's will; from this vantage point it looks incredible that there might be anything else to appeal to. This is not the only available vantage point, however; another can be extracted from Aristotle's political and ethical writings. Aristotle took it as evident that man is a political animal: he can fully realize his nature only within a political society that promotes human flourishing. Indeed, human flourishing consists, in part, in an active life within political society. It is characteristic of man that he has a sense of justice, a moral sense; he is the only animal with speech and this enables him to develop a more general social capacity. Political society is the developed form in which these capacities can be fully exercised. Society, for Aristotle, is much more than an arena in which individuals can obtain certain goods.

Aristotle compared the man living outside of political society to 'an isolated piece at draughts'. This is a remarkable comparison, for an isolated piece at draughts is not, strictly speaking, a piece at draughts at all. A draughts piece gains its very identity, and thus in a sense its existence, by its relation to the game of which it is part. No draughts piece can, so to speak, live outside the game of draughts. Aristotle is clearly willing to accept that analogous relations exist between men and political society. He sees society as a functioning organism and argues on general principles that it is metaphysically prior to, more substantial than, the individual. Just as the parts of a functioning organism gain their identity and role in relation to the whole functioning organism—being a severed hand or the hand of a dead man is not a way of being a hand, it is a way of not being a hand—so a man's function is defined by his relation to society. This is made evident, Aristotle thought, by the fact that an individual separated from society could not be self-sufficient (autarkes). Modern critics like to make fun of Aristotle's high esteem for self-sufficiency—as though if only an
individual could shed the regrettable necessity of depending on others he would be truly happy—so it is worth noting that he conceived it as a political virtue.\textsuperscript{21} Self-sufficiency is expressed in one’s relations with one’s family, friends and fellow citizens. It is taken to be ‘that which makes life desirable and lacking in nothing’ and it is thus identified with \textit{eudaimonia}.\textsuperscript{22} The self-sufficient life, the flourishing life, can only be lived within political society, and it should be contrasted with the solitary life which, Aristotle thought, could not flourish.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus an individual who thinks of himself as the complete locus of practical reason has, on Aristotle’s account, a misleading picture of reality. It is as though one’s hand could ask why it should bother lifting food to a mouth. Political science enables man to get a clearer understanding of his relation to society and its aim is to help men form societies in which they can flourish.\textsuperscript{27} Having seen that there is room for a type of reason which need not be either internal nor external, one can, with this conception of political science, make sense of the notion of an \textit{objective} reason for action. An agent has an \textit{objective} reason to φ if either φ directly promotes human flourishing or φ contributes to the society’s ability to promote human flourishing. These reasons need not be derivable from rationality alone. In ideal conditions objective and internal reasons will either coincide or be harmonious. For, of course, an objective reason may also be an internal reason and it is an important fact that this will often be so: men naturally tend to desire to flourish and thus be motivated to act in certain ways if they come to believe that so acting will promote it. It is upon the widespread presence of such motivation that human flourishing, ethical life within a society, and thus the existence of man as the political animal Aristotle understood him to be, depend. But it will certainly not always be the case that internal and objective reasons coincide: a person may be motivated by a mistaken conception of flourishing—for example, the unremitting acquisition of material goods—or, more radically, he may simply not be interested in flourishing. People get depressed, they become drunk, they become suicidal. Yet it is precisely by understanding that they lack internal reasons, though there are objective reasons, that we gain insight into what their position is. If the drunk or depressive lacks an internal reason to flourish, then reasoned discourse with him will not, as reasoned discourse, motivate him to flourish (it may motivate him as an expression of our caring for him). Thus he will also lack an external reason to flourish, but recognizing that he does have objective reasons we can do justice to the fact that his motivations are not merely one set among others, all being equally good or bad, but are genuinely deficient.

This gap between internal and objective reasons provides at least one way of justifying a paternalistic attitude toward such a person. While it is not clear how we should interpret the subjunctive conditional (1*), it is clear that Eli is incapable, in his drunken state, of rational deliberation. If we are to help him then we must treat him as something other than as a rational agent. Now of course the question of our behaving paternalistically towards him will not even arise if we do not have internal reasons to help him. But our subjective motivation will not in itself justify paternalistic action. If on reflection we found that there was no justification for our motivation, that realization might be instrumental in deciding to refrain from interfering in another person’s life. Whilst there may be other ways to justify behaving paternalistically toward someone, one way is by showing that we are acting on reasons which he has. It is precisely because we can see that there is objective reason to help the drunk that our internal reasons for helping him survive reflective testing. This argument can of course be misused and horrible things have been done to people in the name of their own good. That in itself does not impugn the argument, it means that one should take a paternalistic stance only with extreme caution and circumspection.

There is a cluster of challenges to this Aristotelian approach which might loosely be grouped under the heading ‘the problem of other cultures’. The general refrain is, perhaps, too familiar: other cultures embody or have embodied different conceptions of human flourishing, different moral outlooks, different conceptions of the good. Does this not impugn the objectivity of morality? From what vantage point can one criticize the moral values of another culture? Are not moral values relative to the culture one lives in? Underlying these questions are two significant trains of thought. The first, \textit{the Wittgensteinian challenge}, concerns the relative autonomy and immunity from external criticism of a society’s practices and beliefs.\textsuperscript{28} The second, \textit{the problem of...}

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} I.7, 1097b7–22; cf. V.6, 1134a27.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 1097b15.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. I.8, 1099b3–6.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. I.2, 1094a18–28, b7–9; I.4, 1095a16; I.7, 1097a22–34.
ideology, presents the possibility that we are (self-) deceived about some specific moral and social beliefs. Anthropology has made us aware of the functional role moral beliefs play in maintaining the stability and viability of a culture; philosophy, psychology and sociology have made us aware of the phenomenon of false consciousness. Perhaps Aristotle was a victim of false consciousness in his defence of the natural inferiority of slaves; perhaps we are similarly deceived about some contemporary moral cliché? The Wittgensteinian challenge is, roughly, an amalgam of two theses which have dominated much theorizing about social explanation. The first is that to understand the beliefs and practices of any society one must, to some extent, go native. The heart of a society is revealed in the various practices, customs and rituals that constitute a ‘form of life’. These practices can be thought of as rule-governed behaviour, but there is no way of understanding the rules except from inside the rule-governed practices themselves. One is trying to understand the actions of a group of agents and to succeed in this one must absorb oneself in the native beliefs and practices: one must come, at least to some extent, to see the world as they do. Otherwise one will merely be imposing a set of alien categories on a culture one has failed to understand. But once one is ‘inside’ the culture one will see that the beliefs and practices have their own ‘rationality’.

The second thesis is that all patterns of justification come to an end, and in the end they are grounded in the practices of a group. An explanation or a justification is supposed to reveal why the agents acted in one way rather than another. But, as Wittgenstein repeatedly pointed out, any such chain of explanations or justifications must come to an end somewhere; so, ultimately, all one can say is that they are the sort of group who tend to act for these reasons. This is not intended as an explanation of their actions—i.e., as an account of why they acted one way rather than another—for all explanations have already been given. It is meant to provide non-explanatory insight into how they go on. The upshot of this line of reasoning is the autonomy of a culture’s beliefs and practices. From outside the culture there is no legitimate vantage point from which to criticize them. From inside the culture the beliefs and practices will ‘make sense’.

Ironically, such a line of thought tends to undermine our own beliefs and practices rather than reinforce them. Our moral beliefs do not initially present themselves merely as the way we happen to go on here in Western civilization at the end of the twentieth century. If we are led to believe that they are, at bottom, one way which one tribe happens to go on, then a single question becomes unavoidable and unanswerable: why not go on some other way? Philosophy, Wittgenstein emphasized, should be non-revisionary; it should leave our beliefs and practices as they are.30 Wittgensteinian philosophers of social science have applied this in terms of respecting the rationality and autonomy of each culture, but such an application is inherently unstable. For if we have to respect the rationality and autonomy of every culture it turns out that there is one culture whose rationality and autonomy we cannot respect: our own. Our moral beliefs present themselves as basic truths about how humans beings should act, but we are now supposed to respect incompatible moral beliefs just so long as they are actually embodied in a culture. By the standards of rationality available in our tribe these two stances are incompatible: being forced to accept that alternative incompatible moral outlooks are equally justifiable (or equally unjustifiable) cannot help but undermine the confidence of reflective moral agents.

Why should anyone believe that philosophical reflection ought to leave our beliefs and practices intact? How, in particular, can the insight that there are certain things we think and do for which there is no explanation or justification be expected not to impel us towards revisions? The answer, in Wittgenstein’s case, is that there are no coherent alternatives. Let us say that a person is minded in a certain way if he has the perceptions of salience, routes of interest, feelings of naturalness in following a rule, that constitute being part of a form of life.31 Then Wittgenstein tries to awaken us to the insight that even a basic arithmetical truth like ‘2+2=4’ is not totally independent of our being minded as we are: there is no Platonic fact which guarantees its truth. And our being so minded itself has no explanation or justification. Explanations and justifications take place within the context of our form of life: it is, for Wittgenstein, only because we are so minded that we find certain accounts explanatory or justificatory. Yet this insight does not enable us to contemplate an alternative arithmetic—say one in which 2+2=3—for in this breadth of context there is no coherent possibility of being other minded. The possibility of our being minded in any way at all is the possibility of our being minded as we are. We explore what it is to be minded as we are by moving around our mindedness self-consciously and determining what

makes more and less sense; when we try to move, so to speak, outside of our mindedness we lapse into nonsense.

It is only because Wittgenstein is working within such a broad context that he is able to maintain both that philosophy provides insight into the unjustifiability of our thoughts and actions and that it should be non-revisionary. The insight into 'how we go on' is not meant to apply only to one tribe among others, but to encompass all rational creatures. One might thus be tempted to claim that Wittgenstein's use of 'we' is dispensable, that he is in fact investigating the conditions of rationality. Though such a claim has a germ of truth, it is misleading. According to the later Wittgenstein, rationality is not, as Kant thought, a fixed structure revealed by transcendental argument, nor does it Platonically exist totally independently of us: it is somehow constituted by our thoughts, actions, feelings of naturalness, perceptions of salience, etc. One might similarly be tempted to remove the 'I' from the Kantian 'I think' and claim that Kant is just investigating the conditions of thought. But this flattens the Kantian insight that thought is thought by a thinker: there must be a subject who is having the thoughts. In this sense, the Wittgensteinian 'we' is a pluralization of the Kantian 'I' except that it is not merely a case of 'we think' but 'we think, feel, see, react...'.

By taking the Wittgensteinian 'we' to pick out one tribe among others, philosophers of social science have developed an implausible account of social explanation. For if one draws a 'form of life' narrowly to pick out a single culture, then the rationale for thinking philosophy to be non-revisionary disappears. One might consider here how a philosopher like Socrates differs from Wittgenstein. Socrates was in his dialogues continually trying to get his interlocutor to see that he was engaged in social practices, had beliefs about customs, for which ultimately he had no explanation or justification. But this reflective exercise was not meant to leave everything as it was. The reflective awareness that certain social mores lacked justification was an agent for social change. The Athenian polis, Hegel argued, correctly perceived that Socrates threatened its stability by inducing this reflective awareness. Wittgenstein's dialogues, by contrast, encourage a very different type of reflective awareness. We are not simply 'sunk in a form of life' unreflectively inferring Q from P and if P, Q: we are seemingly able to gain some reflective awareness of how we go on. Yet while this reflection seems to reveal, superficially at least, an ultimate contingency in the things we do, it also reveals that there is no alternative. It seems to me no accident that Socrates went to jail, and Wittgenstein went to the movies.

If there are genuine alternatives to the things we think and do, and if some of these beliefs and practices lack explanation or justification, then reflecting on this can be an impulse to social change. By ignoring this, post-Wittgensteinian social science represents a retreat from insights that emerged in Hegel's social and political philosophy. Both Hegel and Wittgenstein emphasized that the beliefs of a group are concretely embedded in their practices, and that it is only in terms of the practices that the beliefs can be fully understood. But Hegel allows, in a way that Wittgensteinians do not, for agents in society to become reflectively aware of how their beliefs are embedded in practices and to subject them to criticism. It is beside the point to insist on the 'rationality' of the beliefs and practices of a tribe. Given a tribe engaged in a primitive form of capitalist production, it may be 'rational' for the bourgeois members to believe that they are responsible moral agents acting for the good of the whole tribe. However, if other members of the tribe should come to realize that this moral claim is being used to sanction domination, then this realization may well have an undermining effect. The 'rationality' of a tribe's beliefs and practices is taken by Wittgensteinians to be sacrosanct in part because they ignore the possibility that the tribe may contain natives who are engaged in a reflective examination of their own beliefs and practices.

The Wittgensteinian challenge does not undermine our sense of moral objectivity because it does not rob us of the right to criticize the moral practices of another culture. Consider, for example, the infamous Ik, a group of mobile savages who have lived for a prolonged period in conditions of extreme deprivation. They have, according to Colin Turnbull, developed a mode of social life that, except for a few atavistic traces, is devoid of a moral sense. They regularly lie and cheat, they treat their neighbours, even their own families, terribly and regard acts of benevolence as absurd and ridiculous. According to Wittgensteinian social science, there is no legitimate place from which to criticize the Ik: from outside of their practices we will just be imposing an alien set of categories, from inside we will be too busy scavenging, robbing and cheating, to reflect on the moral worth of our actions. The fallacy lies in the assumption that the imposition of an alien set of categories must be illegitimate. If Ik society has no room for reflective moral awareness, then any set of concepts used self-consciously to evaluate moral worth will be alien. This does not imply that Ik behaviour is completely outside the bounds of moral evaluation as, say, the behaviour of a community of ants might be. We can take on the role of reflective moral agents which Ik society lacks. Such a stance of course

\[32\] See e.g. Plato, Euthyphro.

\[33\] Hegel, History of Philosophy, I, op. cit. 425–488.

requires a sensitivity to their culture, to the 'rationality' of their modes of social behaviour and a sympathetic understanding of the lives they (may have) to lead. Taking such a stance is fraught with the dangers of misinterpretation, projection, self-deception and cultural imperialism, but it is not theoretically impossible as it would be, for example, to take on the role of the reflective moral consciousness of a community of red ants. Had external conditions been more benevolent, a reflective moral awareness might have grown up within Ik society. Indeed, there is evidence that in the past the Ik had a richer moral life than they do now, since the few bonds that hold that society together appear to be atavisms. In any case, we take on this role for our sake, not the Ik's. Trying to absorb and develop the moral consciousness of another culture—or of our culture at a different historical period—is one way of becoming reflectively more aware and critical of our own moral consciousness.

Of course, any such critical endeavour is threatened by the problem of false consciousness. We may for various reasons have to do with social organization, class or role be deceived about what human flourishing is or about the part we play in promoting it. This, of course, is the problem of ideology. Much of the work of Jurgen Habermas and other critical theorists of the Frankfurt school has been devoted to the problem of how one discovers that a form of consciousness is false. Critical theory is, however, vitiated by a deep intellectual ambivalence, revealed in the disparate interpretations which have been placed on its cardinal principle: that the agents themselves must in principle be able to come to realize that they are suffering false consciousness. On the one hand, this principle insists that what human flourishing is cannot be completely unavailable to human consciousness. On the other hand, the principle makes the notion of flourishing remarkably unavailable. For, according to critical theory, the agents of each society ought to be the arbiters of their real interests and of what it is for them to flourish. But this leaves open the possibility that two societies could emerge with deeply incompatible outlooks, each of which was validated by what each group took to be acceptable critical methods. Though critical theory has developed from Hegelian and Marxist social theory, there is a crucial feature of Hegelian and Marxist thought which critical theorists have tried to abandon: a definite conception of flourishing against which a form of consciousness can be measured. What human flourishing is, Habermas has argued, is what the agents of a community agree it to be in conditions that are free of distortion and coercion. There is no notion of flourishing that exists independently of a community's consensus.

I do not think that the theoretical underpinning of the consensus theory is very firm. I shall argue, first, that critical theory presupposes a substantial conception of human flourishing; second, that in its explicit attempt to avoid any such presupposition it is forced to adopt various unattractive Kantian features of practical reason. The consensus is a socialized descendant of the Kantian demand that moral agents be self-legislating. But, like Kantian morality, the consensus theory does not take seriously who the agents are who are doing the legislating.

If social value is to emerge from a consensus of the agents in a society, one must begin with the individual agent, with his particular needs, desires and interests, who must non-coercively be brought into the consensus if there is to be one. Thus there is a powerful presupposition of the priority of the individual in the construction of the good society. In particular, one ought never to have to appeal to society's interest to explain an individual's interests. Society's interest can be nothing more than the consensus that would emerge under certain conditions. Since the individual would, under those conditions, presumably be part of the consensus, appeal to the society's interest should be both otiose and metaphysically misleading.

So an individual's real interests must be generated from within the individual himself: on this point the critical theorist and the internal-reasons theorist agree. Consider again our drunk who has a strong desire for a drink and no desire to refrain. Can the critical theorist make any case that it is in the drunk's real interest to refrain from drinking? It would be relatively easy if the drunk shared our conception of the good life or had some false belief, say, that drinking was the key to immortality—though not as easy as critical theorists assume. They tend to identify an agent's real interests with that which contributes to his realizing his own conception of flourishing. Then if any of his immediate interests, say having a drink, conflicts with his real interests they are said to be merely apparent or phenomenal interests. It


36 This is Habermas's so-called consensus theory of truth. See 'Wahrheitstheorien', op. cit.

is certainly possible that an agent's long- and short-term interests may conflict, but why should we assign importance to an agent's avoiding conflict? And from what perspective does one give precedence to the long-term interests by calling them 'real' and slight the short-term interests with the pejorative 'phenomenal'? One cannot legitimately appeal to the fact that an inconsistent set leads to frustration and unhappiness, and that frustration and unhappiness violate the agent's own conception of the good life. For this is simply to repeat that there may be conflicts and to give precedence to the long-term interests. The agent may be willing to put up with a certain amount of stress and frustration in order to realize as far as possible incompatible desires. One cannot appeal to the fact that the agent will thereby lead a disharmonious life; first, he may not be interested in harmony and, second, even if he is it may be only one of his interests, others of which conflict with it. The danger of course is that we are imposing value on leading a harmonious life or on satisfying long-term goals—which, from a proper critical perspective, is taboo. So if a critical theorist is legitimately to attach importance to an agent's long-term goals, calling them his 'real' interests, it must be in virtue of choices the agent himself would make. If informing an agent that his continued drinking frustrated his larger goals were to motivate him to cease, then the critical theorist would have grounds for claiming that it was in the agent's real interest to cease. From the meagre ingredients of an agent's conflicting desires, false beliefs and hypothetical choices, a watery theory of real interests can be made.

But our drunk does not fit easily into this picture. His conception of the good life does not extend far—perhaps to being able to drink ad libitum—and his desire, if it is based at all, is based on the true belief that it brings him pleasure. Either the critical theorist must admit that the drunk has no real interest in refraining or he must argue that under theoretically acceptable conditions the drunk would decide that it was in his interest to refrain. The first option is, I think, an admission of failure. One has only to remember the examples of human degradation one has seen to be intuitively convinced that any theory which asserts that such degraded humans have no real interest in improving their lot is simply not a theory of real interests.

So if he is to generate real interests for our drunk, the critical theorist must concentrate on choices the drunk would make under certain theoretically acceptable conditions. But what conditions are theoretically acceptable? One suggestion is that we consider the choices an agent would make if he had 'perfect knowledge':

(2) An action \( \phi \) is in an agent's real interest if and only if he would choose to perform \( \phi \) if he had perfect knowledge.

There are two reasons for thinking that this condition will not generate any substantial conclusions. First, the perfect knowledge with which we hypothetically endow the agent cannot consist of any theory—say, Aristotelian ethics, Marxism or psychoanalysis—which contains a substantial notion of human flourishing. What human flourishing is is supposed to emerge in the consensus, and it would be begging the question artificially to inseminate the agents with a conception of flourishing which they would then, rather unmiraculously, agree to. The 'knowledge' must be pretty sterile—the Krebs cycle, molecular structure of DNA—and thus will be unhelpful in making any decisions other than in the straightforward and boring cases where the drunk is acting on a clearly false belief: e.g. that drinking is an aid to longevity and mental acuity. So this condition, inasmuch as we can make sense of it, seems empty.

Second, the condition (2) is, I think, ultimately incoherent. Giving the truth conditions of subjunctive conditionals is a tricky business. One takes a subjunctive like

If Harry had known that the horse had been drugged he would not have bet on it,

to be true if given a situation very much like the one that actually obtains, differing in that Harry knows that the horse has been drugged and whatever minimal changes are necessary for Harry to have that knowledge, Harry does not bet.\(^{38}\) It does not affect the truth of the conditional to consider the case in which Harry, having learned that the horse is drugged, is immediately hypnotized by a Martian and commanded zombie-like to place the bet anyway. The truth of the subjunctive is not affected by such far-out possibilities, for we are concerned with what Harry might do in slightly different circumstances. Now the problem with a conditional like (2) is that we want to know what an agent would do under a given set of conditions, but these conditions are themselves so dramatically unlike anything that actually obtains that the most likely situation in which they obtain is too unlikely to give us any enlightenment. We want to know what an agent would do in a situation very much like the actual one, differing only in that the agent has perfect knowledge. We have no way to handle such a conditional: for there is no situation which is very much like the actual one, differing only in that the agent has perfect knowledge. The conditional asks us both to consider what the agent would choose and to abandon any sense that it is the agent who is doing the choosing. 'Endowing him with perfect knowledge' is not something we can do to an agent without destroying his integrity as an agent. It turns 'him' into

a mere Kantian rational consciousness. Our understanding of subjunctive conditionals is too finely tuned to withstand such a violent procedure.

A second suggestion is that we generate real interests by considering what the agent would do under 'optimal conditions':

(3) An action \( \phi \) is in an agent's real interest if and only if, under optimal conditions, the agent would choose to \( \phi \).

The problem with this condition is that the notion of optimal conditions presupposes a substantial conception of human flourishing. What human flourishing is is not being constituted by a consensus, it is being presupposed in the optimal conditions that make a consensus possible. If the drunk were to undergo a cure, he would in this sober and educated state choose to refrain from excessive drinking. If we were to sink into his state of torpor, however, we would choose to have another drink. What makes one set of conditions rather than the other optimal? They cannot be discriminated by the choices the agents would make in those conditions, for they are symmetrical in that respect. One might try to avoid presupposing a substantial conception of flourishing by allowing the agent to decide for himself what he takes to be optimal conditions. But the drunk would choose unlimited availability of alcohol, and under such conditions he would choose to have another drink. Is that in his real interest? The optimal-conditions approach faces the following dilemma. If the raison d'être for invoking optimal conditions is that it is believed that an agent's current choices are distorted by the condition in which he lives, then presumably his current choice of optimal conditions may also be distorted. If, on the other hand, one specify the optimal conditions—subject perhaps to the proviso that the agent endorse these conditions as optimal once he has realized them then we have presupposed what constitutes flourishing.

This dilemma becomes acute when we consider alternative value-systems that have developed in other societies. The Ik seem to value lying and cheating, they admire nasty tricks and are genuinely amused by displays of altruistic behaviour. There is no doubt that their value-system has emerged in response to the depraved conditions in which they have had to live, and by focusing on optimal conditions we try to compensate for that. Yet two questions need to be asked. First, are the 'optimal conditions' meant to be conditions the Ik might actually realize in their lives, given a few fortunate turns of circumstance, or are the optimal conditions well beyond anything they might actually experience? Second, who specifies the optimal conditions, us or them? Suppose we allow them to specify the optimal conditions and by 'optimal conditions' we mean circumstances they might actually realize. (For example, they could specify repeated good harvests, successful breeding of livestock and beneficial trading with neighbours; they could not choose a penthouse suite at the Nairobi Hilton.) The virtue of this reading of optimal conditions is that we can make sense of the subjunctive conditionals. But the available empirical evidence suggests that under these 'optimal conditions', they would choose a life of improved cheating and stealing. Their value-system may have emerged in deprived conditions, but the anthropologist who studied them says that it has stabilized and remains intact through periods of good fortune. So if we restrict ourselves to choices they would make in circumstances which they might, just possibly, realize, the evidence suggests that they would make rather nasty choices.

If, however, we try to stretch the notion of 'optimal conditions' we rapidly lose the sense that it is the Ik who would be doing the choosing or that the choices will be in the Ik's real interest. Consider, for example, the following claims:

We have reason to believe that the Ik realize that their situation is dismal and that they would prefer not to live as they do. That their circumstances are horrible is not just a judgment we as outsiders make. If the Ik would prefer not to live in their present state of extreme malnutrition, presumably they would also prefer not to have to form their desires and interests in such circumstances. Now if the Ik are assumed to have perfect knowledge part of what they will know is what the 'optimal conditions' for forming desires and interests are. These condition are conditions of non-deprivation, non-coercion and minimally correct information. With perfect knowledge the Ik would know what interests they would form if they were to live in 'optimal conditions', and we may safely assume that they would prefer to live in optimal conditions.

... if the Ik recognize—as we assume they do—that there is another set of interests they would prefer to have, namely the ones they realize they would acquire in the circumstances in which they prefer to live, then those are their real interests (and not the sophisticated but bestial ones we see them actually pursue).

There is no evidence for the presumption that the Ik would rather form their desires and interests in other circumstances. The evidence only

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39 Geuss, op. cit. 52. It should be noted that Geuss confines himself pretty strictly to expositing critical theory, so the criticisms in this essay should be thought of as directed against certain ideas in critical theory, not against Geuss' position.

40 Ibid. 53. N.B. that the argument contained in these quotations is crucial to the subsequent identification of the perfect knowledge and optimal conditions approaches (p. 53). So if the argument here fails, so does the identification.
suggests that they would prefer to exercise their desires and interests in other circumstances—circumstances in which they would be more readily realized. Further, if we assume that the I{k}, with perfect knowledge, would know what the ‘optimal conditions’ for forming desires and interests are, then we are building into the initial conditions a substantial conception of human flourishing. We should not, therefore, think that what constitutes flourishing is merely what emerges from the consensus. Finally, there is no evidence either that the I{k} would prefer to live in these ‘optimal conditions’ or that they would prefer to have the desires they would acquire in these circumstances. If the ‘optimal conditions’ differed more than minimally from the I{k}’s actual conditions, there is no reason to think that the I{k}, from their current perspective, would find them preferable or even attractive. Again, a fragile subjunctive conditional:

The I{k}’s real interests are revealed by the choices they would make under optimal conditions

cannot withstand the pressure of these so-called ‘optimal conditions’. This is because the I{k} cannot sustain the change to ‘optimal conditions’ they are too far removed from anything the I{k} might be likely to encounter in their lives. 41 By including perfect knowledge among the optimal conditions, one transforms the I{k} into a mere set of rational consciousnesses and one thereby loses the sense that it would be the I{k} who were making the choices. For this reason, the optimal conditions approach appears to generate a deeply unreal set of interests for the I{k}. It is not plausible to assume that the choices a set of informed rational consciousnesses would make under certain conditions reveal the real interests of a group who could never expect to live in even remotely similar circumstances. The cardinal tenet of critical theory, that it should be available to the agents themselves, seems to be destroyed by the optimal-conditions approach.

Perhaps problems such as these prompted Habermas to argue that the very possibility of a speech community requires that all its members ‘anticipate the ideal speech situation’. 42 The ideal speech situation is one in which absolutely free and equal agents engage in uncoerced and unlimited discussion. It would be up to the people in the ideal speech situation to recognize that they were in it and then to determine, precisely, what it is. The choices made in the ideal speech situation world reveal real interests, beliefs agreed to would be ipso facto true beliefs. The ideal speech situation may be unlike anything the I{k} (or we) could ever expect to live in but, if Habermas’s argument were successful, it would bind the I{k} (and us) to the optimal conditions in which their real interests are revealed. For though the optimal conditions may be far removed from the I{k}’s lives, they would not be totally removed. According to the argument, every I{k} action and in particular every I{k} speech act ‘anticipates’ those optimal conditions; that is, by their acts they commit themselves to acceptability in the ideal speech situation as a criterion of truth and moral worthiness. It has been objected that Habermas’s transcendental argument is unconvincing, that he has not shown that all speakers always and everywhere anticipate the ideal speech situation. 43 Certainly the general failure since Kant to devise valid transcendental arguments for interesting conclusions ought to make one dubious of Habermas’s Kantian strategy. But I think that even more damming criticisms can be made which are analogues of criticisms Hegel directed against Kantian ethics.

First, the ‘freedom’ invoked in the ideal speech situation is blank and empty. It conjures up no particular set of circumstances we might actually realize in our lives. Second, by placing the ideal speech situation outside our lives as that which is anticipated by our acts, critical theory reveals itself as another form of unhappy consciousness. Critical theory, like Kantian ethics, must postulate a reconciliation outside of the world—in the ideal speech situation, the critical theorist’s heaven—because the actual agents who exist in this world are portrayed as so far removed from their real interests. 44

Significant problems with the theory are thus shunted off to another, dimly perceived world where, we are assured, they will be resolved. If, however, we lose faith in the other-worldly ideal speech situation, then the problems come back to haunt critical theory. What is it about the

41 In this regard, note Adelaide’s lament about Nathan Detroit: ‘For fourteen years I’ve tried to change Nathan. I’ve always thought how wonderful he would be if only he was different’ (Guys and Dolls, book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows, music and lyrics by Frank Loesser).


43 Cf. Geuss, op. cit. 64–67.
44 Consider, e.g.: ‘We can’t be fully free without having perfect knowledge, nor acquire perfect knowledge unless we live in conditions of complete freedom. Our “real interests” are those we would form in such conditions of perfect knowledge and freedom. Although we can be in a position fully to recognize our “real interests” only if our society satisfies the utopian condition of perfect freedom, still, although we do not live in that utopia, we may be free enough to recognize how we might act to abolish some of the coercion from which we suffer and move closer to “optimal conditions” of freedom and knowledge. The task of a critical theory is to show us which way to move’ (Geuss, op. cit. 54). But why assume that there is some utopian state that we are moving towards? Is this not merely an empty, removed condition which makes it possible, by comparison, to characterize our current state as deficient?
ideal speech situation that makes it ideal? How do we know that agents in the ideal speech situation would not decide that complete freedom for all costs too much—in resources, social organization, etc.—to make it worthwhile? Maybe the ideal speech situation is inherently unstable? Critical theory assumes a universal motivation for freedom because it assigns no negative value to the state of greater freedom. (Is this an Enlightenment heritage?) Yet it cannot seriously consider what negative value greater freedom might have, because freedom is left as a completely blank conception: it is simply a cipher assumed to be absolutely valuable in whatever quantities it is available. Once one sees that there is no substantial contention of freedom and no argument that more for all is always better than less, then one must ask why, say, Machiavelli’s The Prince should not be regarded as a critical theory. \[45\]

*The Prince*, after all, tries to awaken a few people, princes, to what their real interests are and this consists, in part, in the domination of others. It is not legitimate simply to answer that a social organization envisioned in *The Prince* would never be agreed on in conditions of absolute freedom for, first, we have no idea what would be agreed on in such conditions and, second, we lack any argument that engaging in completely uncoerced dialogue would be in the Prince’s real interest. We do, by contrast, have a powerful argument offered by Machiavelli that it would be foolish for the Prince to enter such a debate or let any of his subjects do so.

Beliefs are said by critical theorists to be reflectively unacceptable if they could only be acquired in conditions of coercion. \[46\] Thus beliefs are reflectively acceptable if, however they actually were acquired, they could be endorsed in conditions of freedom. Since freedom is such a blank condition, however, we are cut off from knowing which beliefs are reflectively acceptable. Reflection was supposed to be an act we could engage in. We were to step back from some of our beliefs, inspect them from some sort of a ‘detached’ perspective, and see how well they fit with other beliefs. If they fitted well, if we could endorse the beliefs from this ‘detached’ perspective, then they were taken to be reflectively acceptable. But if reflective acceptability is identified with acceptability under conditions of freedom it becomes unclear what contribution, positive or negative, the activity we have taken to be reflection makes. Maybe the very activity we have taken to be reflection would not be endorsed under conditions of freedom. The central contradiction, in the Hegelian sense, of critical theory is that it makes possible the very scepticism about ideological distortion that it is trying to overcome. In general, scepticism about one’s accurate perception of one’s own situation requires the possibility of a removed perspective from which reality can be properly appreciated. \[47\] For me to entertain the possibility that I am now asleep, dreaming, I need to imagine the possibility of waking up later and discovering that I had been dreaming. To entertain the possibility that I might never wake up, I need to entertain at least the possibility of an evil physiologist, demon or God, who could see me in my true state. Without even the possibility of a true perspective on the world, I lose grip on the notion that the world might really be other than as it appears to me. Thus by making freedom otherworldly, critical theorists make possible scepticism concerning our current beliefs about freedom and flourishing. For they postulate the removed standard necessary for scepticism to get started.

One response to this has been to retreat into a pessimistic historicism: to maintain that all there is to ‘human flourishing’ is a specific society’s conception of it at a particular historical period. It is hopeless to try to transcend the social context or historical period in which one lives, to try to say what human flourishing is *per se*. One is better off giving up the ‘transcendental baggage’ and resigning oneself to the fact that all one’s speculation about flourishing will in the end, be a cultural artefact, fossilized in a partial historical and social stratum. \[48\]

Pessimism is not the only possible response. Pessimism makes sense against a background of there being something desirable which we realize, in all honesty, we cannot obtain. Since we cannot establish *a priori* the transcendental conditions of human flourishing and freedom, we must resign ourselves to our fragile historical product, recognizing that that is all it is. The pessimist’s consolation is his self-image of honesty and his belief that he has the truth at last. One way to dissolve pessimism is to show that the allegedly desirable state, which the pessimist argues we cannot obtain, is not so desirable after all. The pessimist is then left with nothing to be pessimistic about. I would like to suggest that post-Kantian social theory has conflated two distinct concerns that Kant himself did not clearly keep separate: transcendental arguments and transcendental conditions for a certain form of empirical experience. \[49\] Optimists try to embrace both, pessimists

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45 Here I am indebted to the students at UCLA who attended my seminar on transcendental idealism in the winter term, 1982; especially to Andrew Hsu.

46 Geuss, op. cit. 62–64.


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the world morally. Anti-Kantians are correct to stress that no substantial moral conclusions can be derived from such a detached perspective. This is only to be expected if morality is located within the world, rather than outside it. To see oneself as one person among others is not a matter of seeing oneself from a detached perspective, it is a matter of seeing oneself as one is. One is a person among others and failure to perceive this reveals insensitivity and lack of self-awareness. Self-awareness requires not a detached perspective, but a clear appreciation of an undetached perspective.

If we do abandon the detached perspective and focus our concern on the conditions of human flourishing, it is not obvious that we will emerge with a recognizably moral outlook. Indulging in the so-called co-operative virtues, such as justice, was, according to Callicles, an uninhibited hindrance to flourishing. And one cannot reject out of hand the possibility that man, when flourishing, is a rather unco-operative fellow. Callicles might accept that man is a political animal—that he can only flourish within the context of a society that promotes his flourishing—but would deny that human flourishing in any way consists in contributing to the well-being of society.

There is no a priori proof that Callicles’ conception of flourishing is mistaken. However, that need not imply that one cannot answer the Calliclean challenge: whether or not one can depends on what one takes the role and function of scepticism to be. Sceptical challenges, in broad outline, seek to undermine the reflective justifications one gives for a set of beliefs or practices. If one takes the reflective justification for a practice, say acting justly, to be a proof which eliminates all alternative possibilities for acting in one’s interest other than acting justly, then the mere construction of an alternative possibility will be sufficient to undermine the reflective justification. The sceptic has to do relatively little to undermine the moralist, precisely because the moralist has set himself such a huge task. Such Platonic proofs fail because they are overly ambitious. The key to a moral outlook that is resilient to Calliclean scepticism is to sacrifice ambition. If one abandons the search for such a strong proof, then one will not necessarily be reflectively undermined by the mere construction of an alternative possibility. If one can formulate a reflective justification for certain social and moral practices that is at once weaker than the Platonic proof but nevertheless satisfying one will simultaneously have forced the sceptic to do more if he is to be undermining.

The appropriate strategy is, therefore, to prove a posteriori that a significant form of human flourishing consists, in part, in promoting flourishing generally. One does this by pointing to actual cases of human flourishing, where the flourishers are actively engaged in promoting the flourishing of others or the society of which they are
Men often do desire to promote human well-being, they find significance and fulfilment in acting so as to better man’s lot, and they often feel frustration when they live in a society or historical period in which they are prevented from so acting. That there are forms of flourishing that partially consist in promoting flourishing is the truth that underlies the common belief that moral behaviour is in one’s enlightened self-interest. People also believe that there must be more to moral motivation than enlightened self-interest. The truth that underlies this belief is that in flourishing, one is motivated to promote flourishing generally not because it promotes one’s own flourishing but simply because it promotes flourishing generally. It is not something done in order to flourish; it is, in part, what one’s flourishing is. It is from this perspective that such dicta as ‘Moralities provide its own motivation’ make sense. It is not that morality ought to be expected to generate motivation out of something motivationally inert substance, for example from rationality as conceived by Hume: how could it? Rather it is that although promoting human flourishing generally may be in one’s enlightened self-interest that will not be one’s (primary) motivation for promoting flourishing generally when one is oneself actually flourishing. Enlightened self-interest could provide a motivation to promote flourishing generally, but this will be primarily active in humans who are not (yet) flourishing themselves.

An a posteriori proof that there are actual cases of human flourishing which partially consists in promoting flourishing generally has certain distinctive features. It does not establish more than an actuality, so it does not eliminate the possibility of there being other less socially co-operative forms of flourishing. Thus the proof will not necessarily be reflectively undermining to those who genuinely believe that they should live their lives in some alternative way. (Of course, it may be undermining: people who are living frustrating lives, divided in part by their pursuit of inappropriate goals are susceptible to influence by people who are simply exemplifying a flourishing life. Flourishers can thus function as unaged movers.) But that is not the point of the proof. The proof is intended reflectively to reinforce those who are tempted to live this form of flourishing life—to render them less vulnerable to sceptical undermining. It does so in two ways. First, since the proof is inwardly directed—aimed at those who are living, almost living, or interested in living this form of flourishing life—it helps to make the agents reflectively aware that this is a form of flourishing, and one which it is possible for them to live. Second, the strategy of the proof makes it difficult to pose a sceptical challenge and even more difficult to

live a life that could be described as a sceptic living his scepticism. One reason that Callicles is such an interesting figure is that for thousands of years he has been mocking anyone who tries to prove that there is no possibility of acting in one’s interest other than by acting justly. He stands for the durable exuberant possibility that neither Socrates nor anyone since has been able to eliminate. But a self-consciousness of what constitutes flourishing that is induced by actual example—that does not seek to eliminate every alternative possibility—will not be undermined by the mere construction of a possible alternative. Since qua possibility, he is no longer a threat to reflective stability, Callicles is transformed from an (interesting) sceptic into a (boring) dogmatist. Considered solely as someone who is commending a life of swaggering, injustice and ‘looking after number one’, Callicles is a less than compelling figure. (In this regard, it is worth comparing the devastating nature of Nietzsche’s negative critique of Christian morality, with the pathetic positive conception of flourishing, the superman, which he commends.)

To be a sceptic one must threaten reflective stability. One will thus have to be different from Callicles; not even an actual alternative example of flourishing need be undermining. We may, for example, recognize that certain forms of artistic life do pose actual examples of alternative, une-co-operative, forms of flourishing. Yet that recognition need not be undermining to those whose flourishing partially consists in promoting flourishing generally—to those not harbouring a desire to set sail for a South Sea isle. To pose a sceptical challenge, one will have to live one’s scepticism: embody a genuinely alternative form of flourishing that by its very existence induces self-doubt among those who have, until now, taken flourishing partially to consist in socially beneficial behaviour. By his very existence he would not merely establish an alternative actuality, he would impugn our purported a posteriori proof, by casting doubt on whether we had in fact succeeded in picking out an actual case of flourishing. I cannot rule out the possibility of such a sceptic, but I am sceptical of his actuality.

It is a commonplace that Aristotle’s eudaimonia rests on a metaphysical biology that assumes that man has a definite nature, the fullest exercise of which would consist in worthwhile and noble activity. Since Darwin it has frequently been questioned whether, in fact, man has a nature, and since Freud it has been relatively easy to wonder whether the full exercise of whatever nature man might happen to possess would reveal him to be a conflicted, neurotic, miserable sort of being. Another virtue of an a posteriori proof is that it shows that the tie between a moral outlook based on human flourishing and a definite

50 For a discussion of a posteriori proofs, see my Aristotle and Logical Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), Ch. five.

51 See Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Luck’, in Moral Luck, op. cit.
metaphysical biology is looser than might have been expected. For if we are convinced of a concrete case that this is a form of human flourishing, then prima facie we will expect an adequate metaphysical biology to explain how this flourishing is possible. Again, one cannot rule out the possibility of one’s beliefs about flourishing being overruled by discoveries in developmental biology or psychology, but in the face of convincing a posteriori demonstration, there is, I think, a strong intellectual requirement that the scientific image of man explain and underwrite, rather than undermine, this manifest image.52

This a posteriori, eudaimonistic approach to morality poses a grave and unanswered question: how far should our moral concern extend? Any morality which takes the detached perspective as constitutive of the moral standpoint will have an easy answer. Since from a detached perspective one makes no distinctions among human beings, but views them all impartially, it would be irrational to extend our moral concern to only a section of the community. Any such division of the community would, from a detached perspective, look arbitrary. Conversely, if one abandons the detached perspective as important to morality, it becomes unclear why all humans should be equally worthy of our moral concern. I have suggested that the moral standpoint requires seeing oneself as one person among others, but how many others? which others? I have also argued that one has an objective reason to promote human flourishing generally, but how generally? We tend to think that the demands and concern of morality extend universally, but with the abandonment of the detached perspective this belief needs an argument to support it. It is not obviously true. People in fact have a difficult time spreading their moral concern to cover all humanity. Even reflective moral agents are, by and large, most highly motivated to work within their own society. When questioned they tend to admit this and accept it as a personal failing that their moral concern does not extend as far as it should. It would at least be grimly humorous if it turned out that there was no reason for people to spread their moral concern further than they are in fact inclined to do.

I have, of course, no a priori or transcendent argument that our moral concerns should extend universally to encompass all humanity, but I would like to argue, if only programmatically, that it is at least theoretically and historically possible that our concern ought to be so extended.55 First, theoretical links can be forged between promoting flourishing within a particular society and promoting human flourishing generally. If we are promoting human flourishing, the good life of man, then even if this is done within the confines of a particular society, with its own peculiar avenues of human realization, then what we are promoting cannot be radically unlike the human flourishing that is promoted in other societies. Cultures differ, and ways of flourishing within them will differ because flourishing is in part a social activity, and the societies offer different routes and contexts for men to express themselves. There is no core activity, flourishing, which can be understood independently of the way men flourish in particular cultures. And yet, as Wittgenstein would say, there must at least be a family resemblance among the various activities that are taken to constitute flourishing within the various cultures. Otherwise the idea that these are diverse ways of flourishing loses content.

Also, Wittgenstein’s encompassing form of life depends on more than rationality or pure thought alone. It depends on sharing routes of interest, feelings of naturalness, ways of reacting.56 This suggests that there is not merely a rational but also an affective link between individuals participating in the societies of which they are part and the larger world of humanity in which those societies are situated. The moral outlook demands that one see oneself as one person among others: the common participation of all humanity in this larger ‘whirl of organism’ makes it at least possible that one’s moral vision encompasses all humanity. One need not view people from a detached perspective, as so many rational consciousnesses, in order to treat them all as objects of moral concern. One can see them in the particular details of their distinct lives and nevertheless count them as part of the others among whom one sees oneself.

Historically speaking, we live in a period in which the societies that inhabit the world are being drawn together by various technological, economic and political developments. The societies of the world are being pushed, as it were, to participate in a larger world-community of societies. They may resist this push—pace Marx there is nothing historically inevitable in the development—but it becomes increasingly clear that the cost of such resistance may be the end of human life. If man is a political animal, who can only flourish within a flourishing society, it is conceivable that we have reached a historical period in which the smallest political unit which can guarantee an environment for human flourishing is the world-community of societies. If this is so, then it may have become true that one’s moral concern should extend to all humanity. It is easy to assume that if there are any moral truths, they must be timeless true, perhaps because morality tends to present itself

55 In this essay I shall ignore the important question of whether our moral concern should be even further extended to include other animals.
as universalizable. I am suggesting that such presentation may have been until recently misleading—at best an aspiration—but that it has become or is becoming true in the present historical period.\textsuperscript{55} Though the idea that various beliefs about the world may become true with changes in the attitudes and intentions of the agents and the conditions in which the agent must act goes back to Aristotle,\textsuperscript{56} it is Hegel who did so much to promote the idea that a society's morality will depend on the historical period in which it is situated. However, Hegel explicitly opposed the idea that a world-community of societies or any morality based on it was a historical possibility.\textsuperscript{57} He argued rather lamely instead for the ultimate irreconcilability of nation-states, the limited ability of wills to achieve unity and the necessity of war. It is a shame that he was thus distracted from the idea of a world-community of societies, for it avoids all his really significant criticisms of absolute freedom. What is envisioned is not a single society in which all individuals are treated completely on a par—a blank condition indeed—but a second-level society: a society of societies. The individual societies retain their various personalities—and thus disparate avenues of flourishing are preserved—though, of course, these personalities are to some extent transformed as they are drawn into a larger community. There is, to use Hegelian terms, a unity in difference.

Hegel himself did not see the possibility of this unity in difference. No man, according to Hegel, can see beyond his historical period.\textsuperscript{58} and if this is so, then Hegel could not see beyond his. Perhaps Hegel lived at a time when he could not seriously envisage this higher unity, though it is amazing, intellectually speaking, that he did not think through to this possibility. For in the dialectical development of Geist the part always takes itself to be more than it is: it claims a wholeness which it does not possess. Why then did Hegel, when he thought he had identified the whole, not seriously wonder whether he might not merely be articulating the part's point of view? This raises a deep question, which I shall only pose: why did Hegel not have a theory of error? For if one takes the idea of historical dialectic seriously, one ought to take seriously the possibility that one's view of reality—even if it includes the belief and plausible arguments to the effect that one is living at the end of this dialectical process—is severely blinkered by the time in which one lives. One would not, on Hegelian principles, be able to step outside one's time and gain a detailed understanding of life at a future

historical period, but one should be able to sketch out areas of one's own thought that might be wrong. For instance, Hegelian principles of dialectic alone ought to suggest to a Hegelian that Hegel's defence of the nation-state is one more limited vision.\textsuperscript{59} If, however, one does not take dialectic seriously, one abandons the idea that anything is being necessarily manifested in history. One can then view a world-community of societies as a possibility that may or may not be realized due to various factors, including the self-conscious motivation and activity of agents who wish to bring such a society about. Such, I think, should be the position of a neo-Aristotelian: one who wishes to draw from Aristotle's ethical and political writing, but who recognizes that we cannot return to life in the polis. Hegel may have been wrong that any adequate ethical system must incorporate Kantian subjectivity, but he was surely correct in claiming that the historical changes in social, political and economic organization as well as related changes in men's consciousness made it impossible simply to return to an ancient ethical theory. If Aristotle's ethics is to be of more than historical interest, it must be adapted to social life as it has developed since the polis.

Let us consider how this neo-Aristotelianism might be applied to the special case of the Ikk. The Ikk seem to have no internal reasons to participate in any activities which could remotely be thought of as flourishing. One cannot generate a real interest in flourishing from their internal reasons, nor can one do so by turning them into empty abstract consciousness. Nor is there external reason for them to flourish: motivation for their flourishing cannot be derived from rational deliberation alone. However, it is arguable that there is objective reason for the Ikk to flourish: for the Ikk may be seen as participating in a larger community of societies that (in better moments) promotes human

\textsuperscript{55} It is beyond the scope of this paper to probe Hegel's specific arguments in detail, so I will simply note that while I find them extremely variable in quality, none are persuasive. The best argument is to the effect that the self-consciousness of a nation-state requires other autonomous states against which to define itself (cf. Philosophy of Right, §§321–324). This argument is clearly based on deep metaphysical principles regarding self-consciousness (cf. Phenomenology of Spirit, §§178–196), but it is clear that it is arguable that whatever truth there is in this thesis can be coloured by the diversity that would continue to exist within a world-community of societies. For there would not be one single homogeneous society, there would be a community of disparate societies. At worst, Hegel gives an appalling defence of war (cf. the Addition to §324 of the Philosophy of Right) where he illegitimately identifies peace and stagnation. The opposite of stagnation is not war but organic life, and while this may require diversity, there is no argument to show that this diversity must be expressed in war.

\textsuperscript{56} See Aristotle, De Interpretatione 9.

\textsuperscript{57} See e.g. The Philosophy of Right, op. cit. §§321–324, 329–340.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. preface.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. preface.
flourishing. The Ik need food, they need education, they probably need a bit of coercion. They need at the societal level the analogue of the drunk’s cure for alcoholism. But such a cure is a process they could undergo. One need not treat them as bloodless abstract consciousnesses in the hope of satisfying the antecedent of some unlikely subjunctive conditional. One needs rather to feed and educate them: to behave paternalistically towards them.

A radical critic may wonder whether there is any justification for behaving paternalistically toward the Ik. He may agree that if they were fed and educated, they would become motivated to flourish, but wonder why they should be so encouraged. He may agree that man is a political animal but wonder why they should be prodded into becoming men: after all, they have at present no motivation to become such. There are, I think, two answers which can be given. First, if a world-community of societies is a genuine historical possibility, then even the Ik cannot live totally removed from it. Already their lives are affected by social, economic and political relations with the Dodos, the Turkana and even with the Ugandan government. And if a world-community is a possibility, then these social relations must be seen as possessing deeper significance than their surface manifestation: they must be seen as part of the social fabric that makes the possibility of a world-community a possibility. The Ik play at the level of this world-community of societies the exactly analogous role that the drunk plays within our society: that of an individual who has no internal reasons to act in any way that promotes human flourishing. In each case, the internal reasons of the society as a whole concerning human flourishing are only objective reasons for the individual. But in each case the individual members of each society will, for the most part, have internal (as well as objective) reasons to promote the flourishing of all members of the society. The motivation may stem from enlightened self-interest—the individuals tend to flourish in a society that is itself flourishing—or from taking the flourishing of society to be worthwhile in itself. At the level of the world-community of societies, the individual members are societies and the internal reasons of a given society will of course either flow from or be reflected in the motivations of its members. So the first answer to the question of why we should behave paternalistically toward the Ik is that we are motivated to do so, and we find that our motivation withstands reflective testing and moral scrutiny.

Second, though our *a posteriori* approach to flourishing allows a looser fit between ethics and biology than Aristotle himself endorsed, it is nevertheless clear that man is capable of flourishing in a way that is forever closed to a chimpanzee or a rabbit. So in acting paternalistically towards the Ik we are not merely altering their behaviour patterns from one neutrally described state to another, we are helping them to realize themselves.

This approach to moral objectivity is of course open to abuse. One shudders at the thought of Edsels and Coca Cola being imposed on the Ik to promote ‘human flourishing’. Abuse in the name of paternalism is a serious problem, and there is no foolproof method for avoiding it. There are, however, tests for abuse. First our behaviour toward the Ik and our general conception of flourishing ought to be reflectively acceptable to the Ik, once they have reached a stage where they are capable of reflective moral agency. This reflective acceptance does not constitute human flourishing, as some critical theorists have hoped; it is merely a symptom of flourishing, as we understand it, that humans who are flourishing will find their state reflectively acceptable. Marcuse warned that it is possible so to stultify people with technology—to drown them in Coca Cola and Edsels—that they will find their ‘one-dimensional lives’ acceptable.60 This thesis is, I think, false. It may be possible to stultify people with technology, but the evidence suggests that, even while stultified, they will not find their condition acceptable. Witness the fact that Marcuse wrote within the ‘one-dimensional society’ he set out to criticize and that it had a favourable reception there. His work can be seen not as a correct diagnosis of a society’s malaise, but as one (inaccurate) expression of a discontent widespread in the society. There is, in any case, a second test for abuse which technological drowning fails. Our behaviour towards the Ik ought to be reflectively acceptable to ourselves and to the larger community of societies of which we are a part.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the moral outlook I have been advocating is to explain how it is possible to avoid a deeply complacent conservatism. The short answer is: don’t be complacent. If a more comprehensive answer is to be given, it will not, I think, be in an essay or a book but in a life. Aristotle stressed that it was hopeless to try to write down a code or set of rules which would specify how one should act in a particular situation.61 Moral acts tend to take place in particular and complex circumstances, and no set of rules will be an adequate guide to behaviour. In a similar vein, I do not think that there is much to say about avoiding uncritical conservatism, though there is much to do. By studying other cultures, other moral outlooks, various psychological and sociological theories, by reflectively testing one’s own beliefs against each other to see how well they fit, and by becoming aware of the dangers of uncritical conservatism one begins to take on a

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61 See *Nicomachean Ethics* II–III.6.
self-critical stance. Perhaps too one should recognize that failure is not inevitable, that there are remarkable examples of active, critical moral consciousnesses to be studied and emulated. And, perhaps most importantly, we should recognize that the consciousness of a reflective moral agent points beyond itself. Aristotle defended slavery, Hegel the supremacy of the nation-state: yet in retrospect it is evident that their thought transcends the limitations that they themselves did not recognize. 62

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62 I have had the great pleasure of discussing the issues raised in this essay with John Dunn, Cynthia Farrar, Raymond Geuss, Norman Lear, Charles Parkin, Quentin Skinner, Timothy Smiley and Bernard Williams and I have learned from them all. This essay has been much improved by their criticisms of a previous draft. I am especially grateful to Bernard Williams, both for his personal generosity to me and because in contemporary work in this field, he has set the questions and the standards.

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Morality, Survival and Nuclear War

SUSAN KHIIN ZAW

This paper proceeds from a sense of dissatisfaction with much of current moral argument about defence policy, in particular the role of nuclear weapons. Discussions of the moral issues tend to divide into two distinct kinds of writing: on the one hand, impassioned calls to action based on and allied with equally impassioned moral exhortations; and on the other hand, usually in academic contexts, meticulous analyses and comparisons of aspects of nuclear policy with paradigm cases of acknowledged moral categories or requirements, with the object of showing by analogy with these that the particular aspect of policy under discussion is or is not morally wrong. My unease is caused by the fact that, while it is difficult not to respond to the impassioned style of argument, as one recognizes in it a practical and moral urgency which our situation seems to demand, nevertheless it plainly appeals only to those already convinced of its conclusions. The unconverted tend to regard it with suspicion or disdain, for in contrast to the analytical style, which manifestly seeks to compel the intellect, the impassioned style seems to make its effect by stirring the emotions as much as if not instead of by compelling the intellect. On the other hand the analytical style can seem curiously irrelevant, even trivial, in relation to the issue. For instance, it has been argued that since: nuclear war is a moral disaster; deterrence is threatening or intending to wage nuclear war; it is wrong to threaten or intend to do something wrong; therefore: deterrence is wrong, and should be abandoned. It is hard to believe that defenders of deterrence as the cornerstone of defence policy are going to be persuaded by such an argument to abandon their advocacy of it, if only because the argument totally ignores the object of deterrence. Yet surely the point of engaging in discussion of the morality of defence policy is to have some effect on what is done or recommended to be done. Thus the analytical style of argument equally fails to convert the unconverted: a common response of the unconverted to arguments such as the one quoted is to concede the theoretical conclusion but sever the link with action by representing morality as an impossible luxury in this sphere. In this way even if the intellect is compelled, it is compelled to no avail, practically speaking. So one longs for a discussion which will capture and display the moral issues involved in a manner sufficiently compelling both to satisfy the intellect and to connect with action. It seems to me that if people are