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**DYING TO THE SELF**

**SELF-RENUNCIATION IN**  
**WITTGENSTEINIAN ETHICS AND**  
**PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION**

Thomas Haddan Hamilton

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PhD Thesis

University of Durham

Department of Theology

2004



- 6 DEC 2004

**Thomas Haddan Hamilton**

**Dying to the Self: Self-Renunciation in Wittgensteinian Ethics and Philosophy of Religion**

**PhD Thesis, University of Durham, Department of Theology, 2004**

**Abstract**

The concept of self-renunciation is central to D.Z. Phillips' Wittgensteinian account of the proper content of morality and religion. This thesis defends this feature of Phillips' account against criticisms made in the context of debates in the philosophy of religion about the philosophical legitimacy of the Wittgensteinian approach, but argues that some serious moral criticisms arise if Phillips' account is an accurate assessment of the true nature of Christian faith.

The thesis is organised in three parts. Part I situates Wittgensteinian ethics in the context of twentieth-century British moral philosophy and outlines its key features, in particular its focus on the centrality of culture and language in shaping moral responses and its insistence that self-interest has no place in moral reflection; it goes on to consider feminist criticisms of similar approaches in both ethics and theology. Part II shows the centrality of self-renunciation to Phillips' account of religion, and uses historical sources to argue that the emphasis Phillips places on 'dying to the self' is more justifiable than many philosophers of religion are willing to recognise. However, a consideration of the way in which self-renunciation, sexuality and theology interact in the lives and writings of many Christian mystics, and of one of Phillips' key sources, Simone Weil, suggests that privileging Christian self-renunciation is morally problematic in ways which Phillips does not address. Part III traces the methodological roots of this lack of concern, and discusses some ways in which Phillips' implicit endorsement of a saintly striving for moral perfection might be challenged without abandoning the insights of the Wittgensteinian approach.

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## Introduction

The concept of 'superstition' is important throughout the philosophy of religion of D.Z. Phillips as a limiting category which can be used to describe ostensibly religious beliefs and practices which are in fact, on his analysis, no such thing. We can assess whether a practice is superstitious by looking at the role it plays in the wider context of its practitioner's life; as Phillips says in *The Concept of Prayer*, 'A prayer which involves an overt action, such as lighting a candle, might be a genuine act of devotion, or it might be superstitious in so far as one thinks that something would go wrong if one did not light it'.<sup>1</sup> R.J. Ray provides a summary which brings out the way the religion/superstition distinction works in Phillips' thought:

Religious belief accords with what we already know about our larger surroundings, is absolutely unshakeable, plays a role of spiritual relationship, holds the believer, is the criterion for assessing one's life, and is an end in itself. Superstition is fantastic, contingent, tenuous, demarcated from other areas of one's life, puts faith in the practice itself, is one option among many, and is a means to an end. Superstition is, as such, a way of getting things done.<sup>2</sup>

Phillips' use of this concept has provoked a great deal of discussion in philosophical journals over the last decade or so.<sup>3</sup> One of the most important accusations made about this aspect of Phillips' work is Brian Clack's claim that he 'is best seen as making propaganda for what he sees as "true religion", and employing the religion/superstition distinction to do so'.<sup>4</sup> This accusation, which Phillips vehemently denies,<sup>5</sup> arises because, for Phillips, the concept of superstition helps him to demarcate a boundary between those manifestations of ostensibly religious belief and practice which effectively make claims about the way the world works and are therefore open to scientific and philosophical criticism (such as, for example, lighting a candle in order to cause God to look more favourably upon us and to act on our behalf in the world) and those which are

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<sup>1</sup> D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> R.J. Ray, 'Crossed Fingers and Praying Hands: Remarks on Religious Belief and Superstition', *Religious Studies* 26 (1990), p. 476.

<sup>3</sup> See Ray, 'Crossed Fingers and Praying Hands', pp. 471-482; Lance Ashdown, 'D.Z. Phillips and his Audiences', *Sophia* 32/3 (1993), pp. 1-31; Brian R. Clack, 'D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion', *Religious Studies* 31 (1995), pp. 111-120, and Phillips, 'On Giving Practice its Due – A Reply', *Religious Studies* 31 (1995), pp. 121-127; Terrence W. Tilley, 'The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion: D.Z. Phillips on Religion and Superstition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (2000), pp. 345-356, Phillips, 'Practices, Practice and Superstition: A Response to Terrence W. Tilley', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (2000), pp. 357-362, and Tilley, "'Superstition" as a Philosopher's Gloss on Practice: A Rejoinder to D.Z. Phillips', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (2000), pp. 363-365; Brian Clack, 'Wittgenstein and Magic', in Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 12-28, Phillips, 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism, and Magic: a Philosophical Tragedy?', *Religious Studies* 39 (2003), pp. 185-201, and Brian Clack, 'Response to Phillips', *Religious Studies* 39 (2003), pp. 203-209.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Clack, 'D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion', p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> See Phillips, 'On Giving Practice its Due', p. 123.

not (such as, for example, lighting a candle in order to express our devotion to and dependence on God). It is the latter manifestations which interest Phillips, much of whose work is concerned with describing what he sees as the meaning of religious belief and practice for religious believers, and with accusing mainstream philosophers of religion, whether they see themselves as theists, atheists or agnostics, of being engaged in an enterprise which has no connection with the real concerns of real religious believers. This might be seen as a point of departure for this thesis, which investigates Phillips' understanding of the 'religion' side of the 'religion/superstition' boundary. Although it touches on the debate over the legitimacy of the categories 'religion' and 'superstition', and on various other debates between Phillips and his many philosophical opponents, its focus is on the implications of taking seriously Phillips' account of what (in Brian Clack's terms) 'true religion' consists of. If religious believers really do believe what Phillips thinks they believe, what implications should this have for our assessment of religious belief? In particular, I am interested in Phillips' understanding of self-renunciation as being at the heart of what authentic religion, and indeed morality, consist of.<sup>6</sup> I consider evidence which might support his view against his critics, and call into question Phillips' apparent lack of interest in, and indeed his methodological forswearing of the possibility of, offering any kind of critique of the effects a self-renouncing religious faith might have on religious believers.

Phillips is perhaps the most prominent of a group of philosophers, active in particular in English-speaking philosophy of religion over the last thirty years, who have been influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and are sometimes referred to as Wittgensteinians. Other Wittgensteinians have been Phillips' teachers, colleagues and associates, notably Peter Winch, Rush Rhees, R.W. Beardsmore, H.O. Mounce, Norman Malcolm and Ilham Dilman. Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is widely characterised as making what R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman describe as the claim that

religion, like science and all other central human activities, is a *form of life* which establishes its own internal criteria of meaning and rationality. In this view, the task of the philosopher is not to engage in the profoundly misguided endeavor of seeking 'evidence' or 'justification' for the rationality of belief in God; it is, rather, to describe and make explicit the various practices which make up the religious form of life and which gives this form of life its particular meaning.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For another study of the Wittgensteinian use of the concept of self-renunciation, whose aims are very different from mine here but which also identifies self-renunciation as being at the centre of the Wittgensteinian account of religious belief, see Emyr Vaughan Thomas, *Wittgensteinian Values: Philosophy, religious belief and descriptivist methodology* (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2001).

<sup>7</sup> R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, 'Introduction', in Geivett and Sweetman (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 8-9.

The Wittgensteinians do place a greater emphasis than many philosophers of religion on the role religious beliefs and practices play in the wider context of social and individual life, and tend to distance themselves from conventional theistic and atheistic positions in various debates which are widely seen by non-Wittgensteinians as central to the philosophy of religion, such as the existence of God, the effectiveness of petitionary prayer, the possibility of miracle, life after death and the problem of evil. The focus on internal criteria also leads (my main interest in this thesis) to a characterisation of the proper nature of religious belief as involving the acknowledgement of the believer's complete dependence on God and therefore the renunciation of self-concern. Despite their rejection of much of what is more commonly understood as the stock-in-trade of philosophy of religion, Wittgensteinians such as Phillips do occasionally get drawn into discussions of such questions, in which they and their opponents accuse each other of misrepresenting the character of religious belief;<sup>8</sup> for any philosopher of religion committed to a more explicitly realist account of religious language, the idea that religious believers do not believe in the literal truth of the existence of God as a real independent being, in the possibility of eternal reward or punishment after death, or in the possibility that God will grant them what they ask for in prayer, is plainly false, and would seem to undermine the very way in which philosophy of religion has traditionally been construed and conducted. Phillips tends to remain at a disdainful distance from such debates, maintaining it even when purportedly participating in them.

The most sustained critical engagement with the Wittgensteinians in philosophy of religion has focused on a number of disputed issues. Perhaps the most influential, so far as its influence on the philosophical reception of the Wittgensteinians is concerned, is the 'fideism' debate, concerned with charges most famously articulated by Kai Nielsen, who identified a 'cluster of dark sayings'<sup>9</sup> which he claimed that 'Wittgensteinian Fideists' accepted, and which he claimed meant that they could argue that religion 'can only be understood or criticised, and then only in a piecemeal way, from within this mode by someone who has a participant's understanding of this mode of discourse'.<sup>10</sup> This would mean that 'Philosophy cannot criticise religion; it can only display for us the workings,

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<sup>8</sup> See for example the discussion of the problem of evil between Richard Swinburne, Phillips and John Hick in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 81-139.

<sup>9</sup> Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy* 42 (1967), p. 192. Nielsen does not include Phillips in his list of 'Wittgensteinian Fideists' here (p. 191), but he does in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 65, chapter 4 of which is effectively a revised version of his 1967 article.

<sup>10</sup> Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', p. 193.

the style of functioning, of religious discourse'.<sup>11</sup> Phillips himself devotes the first chapter of his 1986 book *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* to a detailed rebuttal of what he described as 'five theses' attributed to philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein. I do not intend here to present a detailed discussion of Phillips' rebuttal, which does not bear directly on my central concerns in this thesis; suffice it to say that Phillips explicitly rejects the suggestion that his position entails any commitment to the theses that '*Religious beliefs are logically cut off from all other aspects of human life*', that '*Religious beliefs can only be understood by religious believers*', that '*Whatever is called religious language determines what is and what is not meaningful in religion*', that '*Religious beliefs cannot be criticised*', and that '*Religious beliefs cannot be affected by personal, social or cultural events*';<sup>12</sup> indeed, he has 'argued against the very theses attributed to myself and others who have been influenced by Wittgenstein in the philosophy of religion'.<sup>13</sup> Phillips would presumably agree with the claim made by Beverley Clack and Brian Clack that 'Many of the criticisms of the Wittgensteinian position are really criticisms of a parody of that position'.<sup>14</sup> Yet he describes the 'fideism' label as 'a term which, unfortunately, seems here to stay',<sup>15</sup> and indeed Nielsen's characterisation of the Wittgensteinians has been highly influential, to the extent that the Wittgensteinians are still routinely characterised by many philosophers of religion as 'Wittgensteinian fideists', apparently without any recognition that this label is rejected by the Wittgensteinians themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the 'fideism' charge, the fact that it has tended to focus critical attention on epistemological questions about the justification of religious belief has perhaps deflected attention from the extensive work of Phillips and the Wittgensteinians in ethics, work which is closely linked to their philosophy of religion. Indeed, with a few exceptions, it is fair to say that much of what little discussion there has been of their work in ethics has been by philosophers of religion rather than by ethicists. The title of Phillips' 1992 collection of essays, *Interventions in Ethics*, is perhaps a testament to the way in which the Wittgensteinians' contribution to contemporary ethics

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<sup>11</sup> Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 5-15.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Beverley Clack and Brian R. Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Geivett and Sweetman (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, which includes a section on 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' (part II, pp. 79-130) incorporating sympathetic articles by Phillips, Malcolm and Paul Holmer, and a critical article by Nielsen, without noting that the term 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' is Nielsen's, and not one which Phillips, Malcolm or Holmer apply to their own position. See also Mark Addis, 'D.Z. Phillips' fideism in Wittgenstein's mirror', in Arrington and Addis (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 85-100, in which Addis writes, 'For the purposes of this discussion, fideism will be deemed to be exemplified by the writings of D.Z. Phillips' (p. 85), and adds in a footnote, 'The discussion of whether Phillips' critics have been fair to him will not be covered here' (p. 98, n. 5).

has tended to involve making comments from outside the mainstream of ethical discussion; the book itself contains criticisms of such major figures in the field as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. Phillips warns them against ‘our deep-rooted tendency to theorise in ethics’,<sup>17</sup> arguing that it is impossible ‘to give a general, theoretical account of something called Morality’<sup>18</sup> – a claim which goes against the grain of much contemporary ethics. Yet detailed discussions of ethics are among the Wittgensteinians’ earliest published philosophical works and, as I argue, the concerns they show in their moral philosophy are important not only in their own right but because they overlap significantly with their concerns in their better-known philosophy of religion. I therefore devote part I of this thesis to a detailed exposition of Wittgensteinian ethics, as displayed in particular in Beardsmore’s *Moral Reasoning*, in Phillips’ and Mounce’s jointly-written book *Moral Practices*, and in Winch’s *Ethics and Action*.<sup>19</sup> In chapter 1 I set it in the context of twentieth-century British moral philosophy, and in particular in relation to those ethicists with whom the Wittgensteinians choose to engage in detail, namely R.M. Hare and Philippa Foot. Some of the charges which have more frequently arisen in discussions of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, notably those of conservatism and relativism, are discussed here in a consideration of Onora O’Neill’s criticisms of Wittgensteinian ethics. The feature of both Wittgensteinian ethics and Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion on which this thesis focuses in detail is the their rejection of self-interest, and chapter 2 discusses this, contrasting the Wittgensteinian position with various influential ethical theories in which self-interest is considered an important factor in assessing properly moral behaviour. The thoroughgoing rejection by the Wittgensteinians of prudential considerations, together with their acceptance of the limits culture and language set around what can count as possible moral responses, raises the concern, familiar from feminist criticism, that culture and language may be structured in such a way as to legitimise the subordination of particular groups within a culture. I discuss this possibility in relation to MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, and in chapter 3 go into more detail on the way in which a feminist critique of Wittgensteinian ethics might take shape, citing evidence from Phillips’ work of a lack of awareness of the way his conception of the nature of morality can work against the interests of subordinated groups. There are parallels here with

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<sup>17</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. viii.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. viii.

<sup>19</sup> R.W. Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); Phillips and H.O. Mounce, *Moral Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

theological discussions of what some feminists have identified as problematic elements within the conventional Christian understanding of sin and love, and a consideration of these discussions lead me into a more detailed examination of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion in part II.

Most critical discussion of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion has focused on the legitimacy of perceived Wittgensteinian claims about the role religious beliefs and practices play in the life of the religious believer, and their relation to other beliefs and practices. While these are important questions, many of which are discussed in the course of this thesis, my focus is on what the Wittgensteinians, and Phillips in particular, understand to be characteristic of authentic religious beliefs and practices, and part II of the thesis takes the argument of part I, stressing the importance of the avoidance of self-interest in Wittgensteinian ethics, and applies it to Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. I argue in chapter 4 that Phillips' position on this is that the internal logic of Christianity commits Christians to a thoroughly self-renunciatory faith. Those critics who have challenged this aspect of Phillips' account have tended to argue against it on the basis that it simply fails to do justice to the nature of what Christians and other religious believers actually believe. I consider these criticisms in chapter 5, along with Phillips' response, which effectively denies the importance of what religious believers say that they believe, in contrast with what their faith logically commits them to, whether they are aware of this or not. The terms in which this debate is conducted suggest a surprising lack of interest from both sides in justifying their account of the content of religious belief, with Phillips' critics appealing to relatively little evidence in support of their claim that self-renunciation has not been central to the lives of most Christians, and Phillips himself explicitly eschewing any appeal to evidence at all. I examine some of the evidence from the history of Christianity, arguing that there are good historical reasons to see religiously-motivated self-renunciation as central to much Christian belief and practice, even if Phillips himself does not recognise this fact. The shift from a philosophical to a historical discussion does, however, raise questions which Phillips' method (combined with his critics' scepticism) allows him to avoid, and chapter 6 discusses some of these. Again, the insights of feminist criticism are crucial, with an examination of the way in which many Christians, particularly female mystics, have described the dynamics of a self-renunciatory relationship with God, and the links in their writings between theology and some problematic manifestations of sexuality. While Phillips and the Wittgensteinians show little interest in these Christians, some of the

same issues arise in the life and writings of Simone Weil, on whom Phillips in particular relies heavily in his account of the nature and implications of authentic religious belief. I consider some critical responses to Weil's work by feminist writers, for whom she exemplifies the potential results of some of the worst aspects of the Christian tradition, and argue that Phillips' lack of concern for these issues is a serious weakness in his philosophy of religion and, given the connections in his work between philosophy of religion and ethics, in his ethics as well.

Part III of the thesis considers in more detail the ways in which Phillips' approach enables him to show little concern for the issues I have raised. I argue that my focus on Christian saints in the previous two chapters is justified by the way Phillips understands the demands of morality and religion as absolute and thoroughgoing, and discuss some approaches which might help to demonstrate moral problems at the heart of his account: Susan Wolf's questioning of the assumption that it is good to be saintly; utilitarian concerns about the negative impact self-denying behaviour might have on those surrounding the self-denying agent as well as on the agent herself; Friedrich Nietzsche's attack on 'slave morality' in his critique of Christianity, which I argue has some parallels with Phillips' account of properly moral and religious behaviour. I suggest that the other-directedness implicit in the 'postmodern ethics' of Zygmunt Bauman presents a potential philosophical alternative to Phillips' assumption that self-renunciation is the necessary response to the rejection of self-interest as an acceptable moral and religious motive. Bauman's ethics might be described as intuitionist, and the same might be said for the ethics of Iris Murdoch, with whom the Wittgensteinians have some significant similarities, both in their rejection of 'false consolation' and in their attitude to the relationship between academic philosophy and the real lives of ordinary people. Given these similarities, attention to the culturally and linguistically-based sources of our moral and religious intuitions is an important part of our assessment of those intuitions. In the light of this focus on intuitionism, it makes sense to begin my account of the emergence of Wittgensteinian ethics with a discussion of an earlier manifestation of intuitionism: that of G.E. Moore.

I

ETHICS

# 1

## The Wittgensteinians and Moral Philosophy

### Intuitionism

At the beginning of the last century G.E. Moore wrote *Principia Ethica*, a book whose consciously portentous title was entirely in keeping with its purpose, namely ‘to discover what are the fundamental principles of ethical reasoning’.<sup>1</sup> Moore argued that the knowledge of what is right and good comes before any explanation of *why* it is right and good. Indeed, he denied that such an explanation is either useful or possible, claiming, ‘if I am asked “What is good?” my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked “How is good to be defined?” my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it’.<sup>2</sup> This is because “good” is a simple notion, just as “yellow” is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is’.<sup>3</sup> But in any case, we do not need to explain what good is:

Whenever [anyone] thinks of ‘intrinsic value,’ or ‘intrinsic worth,’ or says that a thing ‘ought to exist,’ he has before his mind the unique object – the unique property of things – which I mean by ‘good.’ Everybody is constantly aware of this notion, although he may never become aware at all that it is different from other notions of which he is also aware.<sup>4</sup>

Moore introduced the concept of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, the error of defining ‘good’ in terms of the properties belonging to good things, and then of thinking that these properties are ‘absolutely and entirely the same with goodness’.<sup>5</sup> The desire of ethicists to make it clear what it is that they are talking about is what leads to confusion. Moore sought to distance himself from intuitionism, on the grounds that while he saw the fundamental principles of ethics as ‘Intuitions’, incapable of proof or disproof, the question of whether certain actions were ‘right’ or ‘a duty’ could be settled by examining their results,<sup>6</sup> but he has nevertheless been seen as the most influential member of an ‘intuitionist’ school of moral philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. x.

<sup>7</sup> See for example G.J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 4.

Moore's intuitionist successors did not follow his distinction between 'good' on the one hand and 'right' and 'duty' on the other. In his article 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' H.A. Prichard argued that previous philosophers had answered the question of why we ought to act in certain ways by saying either that the action advocated will in some way be to our advantage, for example by bringing our happiness, or else that something involved in the action itself is good.<sup>8</sup> So far as Prichard was concerned, neither of these explanations is adequate. The first breaks down because it does not correspond to what we really think morality is about:

Suppose we ask ourselves whether our sense that we ought to pay our debts or to tell the truth arises from our recognition that in doing so we should be originating something good, e.g. material comfort in A or true belief in B, i.e., suppose we ask ourselves if it is this aspect of the action which leads to our recognition that we ought to do it. We, at once, and without hesitation answer 'No'.<sup>9</sup>

Although moral action may sometimes lead to our advantage, this is not why we think it is morally good. Indeed, some moral actions may disadvantage us and yet still be recognised as the right thing to do. In fact, said Prichard, there is no need for such complicated and convoluted explanations of why certain actions are right. He argued that, 'The sense of obligation to do, or of the rightness of, an action of a particular kind is absolutely underivative or immediate'.<sup>10</sup> Other leading intuitionists agreed that knowledge of what is right or good comes before any explanation of why it is right or good, and even deny that such explanations are useful or possible. As W.D. Ross put it, we can only have moral principles because we already know that certain acts are right: the 'rightness [of certain acts] was not deduced from any general principle; rather the general principle was later recognized by intuitive induction as being implied in the judgements already passed on particular acts'.<sup>11</sup> We can immediately apprehend what we ought to do (albeit in some cases only after we have examined in some detail what the action involves) in the same way that we can (once we know the relevant facts) immediately apprehend mathematical truths, such as that a three-sided figure must have three angles.<sup>12</sup> The plausibility of the view that moral obligations are not self-evident is a result of the fact that moral acts are frequently incompletely stated – in which case the question 'Why should I do that?' is a perfectly sensible one, but not one which should trick us into thinking that it is the nature of obligation which needs explaining. This means 'that we

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<sup>8</sup> H.A. Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', *Mind* 21 (1912), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> W.D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 28.

do not come to appreciate an obligation by an *argument*, *i.e.* by a process of non-moral thinking' and 'that our sense of the rightness of an act is not a conclusion from our appreciation of the goodness either of it or of anything else'.<sup>13</sup> Prichard responded to the possible objection that, since some people regard as obligations actions which are not so regarded by others, obligations cannot be self-evident, by saying that 'the appreciation of an obligation is, of course, only possible for a developed moral being, and that different degrees of development are possible'.<sup>14</sup> To the possible objection that we cannot solve the problem of how to act in the presence of conflicting, self-evident, obligations, he replied that in such cases 'the decision of what we ought to do turns ... on the question "Which is the greater obligation?"'<sup>15</sup> – something, presumably, which is itself self-evident. Moral philosophy, then, is trying to satisfy an illegitimate demand, namely 'to have it *proved* to us that we ought to do [certain things], *i.e.*, to be convinced of this by a process which, as an argument, is different in kind from our original and unreflective appreciation of it'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, moral philosophy, far from helping us work out what we ought and ought not to do, actually confuses the issue, undermining the clear appreciation of our obligations which 'arises in our unreflective consciousness' with an attitude 'of unquestioning confidence'.<sup>17</sup>

## Emotivism

Intuitionism has been criticised convincingly and at great length for, amongst other failings, situating moral goodness in a free-floating realm independent of any other facts, offering no account of how moral facts are to be established, showing no relationship between moral judgements and conduct, mistaking intuition for knowledge and being unable to evaluate between competing intuitions.<sup>18</sup> Some of the earliest critics of intuitionism used their critique as the starting-point for a new approach to ethics, often called emotivism. A.J. Ayer criticised intuitionism in *Language, Truth and Logic* on the grounds that 'it makes statements of value unverifiable'.<sup>19</sup> The assertion that I 'know by intuition' that a particular action is right 'is of purely psychological interest, and has

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<sup>13</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 30n.

<sup>15</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 30n.

<sup>16</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, pp. 4-17; W.D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy, Second Edition* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 65-105; Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 249-256.

<sup>19</sup> A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936), p. 140.

not the slightest tendency to prove the validity of any moral judgement'.<sup>20</sup> Ayer's point is that statements cannot be said to be true or false – significant – unless they can be proved:

that in so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary 'scientific' statements; and that in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true or false.<sup>21</sup>

This strict delineation between, on the one hand, the analytic truths of logic and mathematics and the factual – in the sense that they are in principle empirically verifiable – truths of science, and on the other hand the unverifiable claims made by ethics, aesthetics and theology, is the basis of the emotivist theory of ethics. This claims that, since it is impossible to prove whether something is good, the proposition 'X is good' is not a factual proposition, even if the person who makes it thinks that it is. But the fact that the person who uses the word 'good' intends to mean something by it implies that the word is not simply extraneous. It *is* doing something, but it is not necessarily doing what the speaker thinks it is doing (at least, not if the speaker is, say, an intuitionist).

Ayer explained what he thinks ethical words are *actually* doing:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks.<sup>22</sup>

Passages like this one may appear rather disparaging about the use of any moral language at all, but this has more to do with Ayer's tone than with emotivism in general. Emotivism does not suggest that moral terms should not be used (this would, of course, be a moral claim in itself), but that they are, we might say, tactically deployed. C.L. Stevenson discussed the 'dynamic' use of moral terms – their ability to influence their hearers or readers to act in a particular way. He agreed with Ayer that 'Roughly ... the sentence "X is good" means *We like X*',<sup>23</sup> but his focus is on the subtly coercive power that is contained in the word 'we', a power noted by Nicholas Lash in his comment, 'whenever the word "we" is ... being waved around, three questions are in order: whom do those waving it have in mind? Whom do they suppose themselves to have in mind?

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<sup>20</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> C.L. Stevenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms' in A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 274.

Whom should they have in mind? (This triple test is worth applying to the opening phrases of the American Declaration of Independence).<sup>24</sup> The listener is, in effect, confronted with the choice of agreeing that X is good, or being excluded from the 'we', the community which believes that X is good. This means that 'Ethical statements are social instruments'<sup>25</sup> which enable us to influence others. 'X is good', although in one sense it means 'Do X', is more likely than the simple 'Do X' actually to persuade someone to do X, because 'an ethical sentence differs from an imperative in that it enables one to make changes in a much more subtle, less fully conscious way'.<sup>26</sup>

Both intuitionism and emotivism tried to account for the fact that people find it difficult to argue for any moral judgement without examining the particular facts of the case in question. Where Prichard took this as evidence that morality itself does not need to be argued for, that the right thing to do in any given situation will be obvious once we know exactly what the situation is, assuming that we are at a sufficiently advanced level of moral development, the emotivists used it to support the view that 'argument fails us when we come to deal with pure questions of value, as distinct from questions of fact'.<sup>27</sup>

In many cases:

disagreement in interest may be rooted in disagreement in belief. That is to say, people who disagree in interest would often cease to do so if they knew the precise nature and consequences of the object of their interest.<sup>28</sup>

This is not because morality is self-evident; on the contrary, 'the "self-evident" deliverances of reason, which so many philosophers have claimed, seem, on examination, to be deliverances of their respective reasons only (if of anyone's) and not of mine.'<sup>29</sup> Agreement in moral judgements – or in 'interest' – comes about because 'the people with whom we argue have generally received the same moral education as ourselves, and live in the same social order'.<sup>30</sup> But where this is not the case, there is nowhere else for the argument to go. We are left with irresolvable disagreement, perhaps accompanied by abuse.<sup>31</sup> And even this abuse would be intended to produce a change in the moral attitude of the one being abused.

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> Stevenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', p. 281.

<sup>26</sup> Stevenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', p. 276.

<sup>27</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 147.

<sup>28</sup> Stevenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', p. 278.

<sup>29</sup> Stevenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 147.

## Universal Prescriptivism

There is little to argue with in emotivism's claim that part of the purpose of moral discourse is to persuade others. But it is one thing to claim, with Stephenson, that 'if we define emotively laden terms in a way that neglects their emotive meaning, we are likely to be confusing. *We lead people to think that the terms defined are used dynamically less often than they are*'.<sup>32</sup> It is quite another to suggest that, when we use moral terms, the attempt to persuade others is the *only* thing going on. This is where R.M. Hare began his critique of emotivism, which he too used as the starting-point for a new approach, described as 'prescriptivism' or sometimes 'universal prescriptivism'. Emotivism, Hare claimed, restricts the nature and scope of moral discourse to nothing more than expressions of approval and disapproval, and to attempts to persuade people by the use of coercive language and by the exposition of (entirely non-moral) facts. The emotivists based these conclusions on the mistaken idea that 'the only questions one can reason about are factual ones'.<sup>33</sup> Hare argued that in fact moral reasoning is possible; indeed, that it is something we do all the time. He drew an analogy between moral reasoning and scientific reasoning, as understood by Karl Popper:<sup>34</sup> a moral principle is like a scientific hypothesis, and is tested by being used in real or hypothetical cases. Just as the results of an experiment can falsify a scientific hypothesis, so a particular case can force us to modify or abandon a moral principle. 'What we are doing in moral reasoning is to look for moral judgements and moral principles which, when we have considered their logical consequences and the facts of the case, we can still accept'.<sup>35</sup> For Hare, moral principles have to be universalisable: it does not make sense (in other words, it is logically inconsistent) for me to make one judgement about one situation and another judgement about another situation which is relevantly similar. This may mean that some of our moral principles are highly complex – 'universality must not be confused with generality'<sup>36</sup> – and that certain moral principles which many have sought to defend at the cost of their plausibility may instead be modified, sacrificing simplicity but preserving those elements which are worth upholding:

To use an example which gave trouble to Kant: my moral principles do not have to be as general as 'Never tell lies'; they can be more specific, like 'Never tell lies except when it is necessary in order to save an innocent life, and except when... and except when...'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Stephenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', p. 274.

<sup>33</sup> R.M. Hare, 'Universal Prescriptivism' in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 455.

<sup>34</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 87-88.

<sup>35</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Hare, 'Universal Prescriptivism', p. 457.

<sup>37</sup> Hare, 'Universal Prescriptivism', p. 457.

The fact that morality is something we can reason about, and that we reason about it by testing hypothetical principles against particular situations, means that we are independent moral agents. We decide what our principles are, and we modify them in the light of experience; we do not keep our principles the same throughout our lives and act against them when they tell us to do things we think are wrong. Hare cited ‘this conviction, which every adult has, that he is free to form his own opinions about moral questions’<sup>38</sup> and describes it as ‘one of the most important constituents of our freedom, as moral agents’.<sup>39</sup> The fact that, on Hare’s understanding, we have the ability to form principles which can cover every eventuality, appears to imply that really serious, insoluble moral problems do not arise. In his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism* Jean-Paul Sartre described the case of a student in Nazi-occupied France faced with the dilemma of whether to stay at home and look after his mother, who would be deeply unhappy if he left her, or to attempt, with no guarantee of success, to go to England to join the Free French Forces and fight for his country.<sup>40</sup> After considering the situation and the failure of various moral codes to resolve it, Sartre says that ‘nothing remains but to trust in our instincts’.<sup>41</sup> Part of the force of Sartre’s example is that whatever the student decides to do, he is likely to feel guilty about either abandoning his mother or failing to join the struggle to liberate his country. Yet according to Hare:

[Sartre’s] student did not have to find for himself any very simple, general principle. Perhaps he was the only person who had ever been in that particular complex situation. But he ought to have been able to form for himself a principle (a highly specific one) which he could accept for situations *just* like his.<sup>42</sup>

This principle would presumably be along the lines of ‘Care for your mother except where this will prevent you from fighting for your country’, or vice-versa. It might not be agreed to by anyone else, and the situation it covers may never be faced by anyone else, but this does not prevent it being useful for this particular agent now, and it does not prevent it being universalisable in principle.

## The Wittgensteinian Approach

Just as the emotivists began by criticising the intuitionists, and as Hare began by criticising the emotivists, so the emerging Wittgensteinian school in ethics identifies itself

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<sup>38</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, tr. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 35-37.

<sup>41</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Hare, ‘Universal Prescriptivism’, p. 457.

and makes itself distinctive by drawing attention to its differences from the dominant figure in 1960s British moral philosophy, namely Hare.<sup>43</sup> That we are free to choose our own moral principles and to make our own moral decisions is as central to Hare's account of morality as the title of his book *Freedom and Reason* would suggest. That we are actually *not* free to take certain physically and logically possible courses of action – that our language, upbringing and culture set limits on our moral options – is equally central to the approach taken to moral philosophy by the Wittgensteinians. The Wittgensteinians take issue with Hare's construal of moral deliberation on the model of a syllogism in which 'The major premiss is a principle of conduct; the minor premiss is a statement, more or less full, of what we should in fact be doing if we did one or other of the alternatives open to us'.<sup>44</sup> R.W. Beardsmore points out that on this account *anything*, however irrelevant to moral conduct it might seem, can be regarded as a moral reason; for example:

the argument, 'All people with certain physical characteristics ought to be ill-treated; this man has those characteristics; therefore, this man ought to be ill-treated', is valid.<sup>45</sup>

While Hare's account is therefore not committed to any particular moral standpoint, it seems to contain nothing to stop us choosing the major premises that suit us, or simply choosing them at random, nor to stop us counting anything at all as a moral reason.<sup>46</sup> And this does not appear to be how most people act – or at any rate, people who do act in this way are not usually regarded as morally exemplary. To be fair, Hare did not suggest that people simply cynically choose the moral principles which will best serve their interests in a given situation. But he did think that they choose them. As Beardsmore says, 'we are given the impression that just as it is I who decide the content of the statements that I make, so I might also decide the content of the standards which I accept'.<sup>47</sup> This just does not seem to be the case:

while it makes perfectly good sense to talk of someone having decided to watch television or go to the pub, or of his having been forced to decide between doing his duty or taking the easy way out, I think we should be less willing to talk of someone having decided that murder is an evil, for example, or of his having adopted this as his standard. We should not know what to make of someone who talked as if the content of moral laws were dependent on the individual will in this sort of way.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Two of the most important early works in Wittgensteinian ethics open with extended critiques of Hare. See chapter 1 of Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, pp. 3-10, and chapters 1 and 2 of Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, pp. 3-18.

<sup>44</sup> Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 56.

<sup>45</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 31.

In fact, the individual does not decide upon general principles at all. The fact that some things are right and wrong is independent of any decision made by any member of a given society or moral practice. D.Z. Phillips and H.O. Mounce begin their book *Moral Practices* with an extended discussion of lying in which they challenge Hare's assumption that we have to *explain* why certain things are wrong. They point out that in normal conversation the description of someone as a liar carries with it moral import: we do not say that someone has lied, claim that lying is wrong, justify that claim, and condemn the liar on that basis; saying that someone has lied acts as a condemnation in itself. We simply assume that lying is wrong. 'People do not normally assert that lying is bad; they assert that a particular act is bad because it involves lying'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, 'Lying is the kind of thing we apply the word "wrong" to. This remark about the word "wrong" is a *grammatical* remark, it marks out the limits of the word's use'.<sup>50</sup> So 'Lying is wrong' tells us more about the meaning of the word 'wrong' than about the meaning of the word 'lying'. But 'Lying is wrong', like 'Honesty is good' and 'Generosity is right' is the kind of phrase which is 'rarely found in actual discourse';<sup>51</sup> the only people who regularly utter such phrases are philosophers. Nobody else feels they have to say such things; they simply take them as given, and get on with the day-to-day business of condemning liars or, more to the point, not lying. Lying, at least in our society, is not a matter of moral disagreement – unlike, say, capital punishment or pacifism, it is not something about which we have to advance arguments in support of our position<sup>52</sup> – and therefore it is not something we can 'come out against'.<sup>53</sup> Moral philosophers who think that explaining why lying is bad is as much a part of their job as explaining why capital punishment is bad (or good) therefore go wrong at an early stage of their discussion:

The result of running the two cases [lying and capital punishment] together is to give the impression that there is nothing in morality to which we can appeal for justification, that everything is open to choice and decision. But this position is absurd, for choice is meaningless where there are no considerations upon which it can be based.<sup>54</sup>

Moral choices are based on assumptions which are not themselves questioned or justified; that lying is wrong is one of these assumptions. So far as we are concerned, it is a fact that lying is wrong, that honesty is good, that generosity is right. These, and others like them, are facts which are of direct relevance in any moral evaluation of behaviour.

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<sup>49</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 9.

This points to a similarity between the Wittgensteinian approach and the emotivists' description of moral discourse as having a 'dynamic', persuasive function. While the Wittgensteinians would agree with Ayer that 'if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not saying anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money"',<sup>55</sup> they would argue that nothing more *needs* to be said. 'You stole that money' is sufficient to condemn the thief. It is part of our understanding of what stealing involves that it is wrong. The emotivists' mistake is in concentrating on the meaning of words like 'bad', 'good', 'wrong', 'right' and so on, rather than on the actions and qualities to which they are routinely applied. For Phillips and Mounce, this exposes a major flaw in most discussions of the relationship between fact and value:

Part of the reason, at least, why we find it difficult to understand the transition from fact to value, is that we tacitly define a fact as something that does not possess moral import. Given this assumption, it follows by definition that from such facts we cannot infer any value conclusions. If it be remembered, however, that we understand something as a fact only in terms of the concepts we have learnt, and that these are sometimes value concepts, the transition from fact to value may no longer baffle us.<sup>56</sup>

Some words, then, convey an implicit moral evaluation. 'Murder' and 'lying' are two of the most obvious, and usually least problematic, of these, but the implicit moral content of some ostensibly neutral terms can prejudice moral discussion of them. A good example of this can be found in medical ethics, in arguments about euthanasia and assisted suicide where, as Stanley Hauerwas argues:

the reason we have difficulty deciding the meaning of suicide is that the term has an emotive meaning of disapproval that we prefer not to apply to certain kinds of ambiguous cases. The very logic of the term therefore tends to prejudice any pending moral analysis of the rightness or wrongness of suicide.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to note two things which stem from this. The first is that this disapproval is culturally based. While a Catholic, for example, might well condemn someone for committing suicide, a Japanese Samurai might see suicide, or *hara-kiri*, as evidence of honour and virtue.<sup>58</sup> The second is that although 'suicide' is a factual term which means 'deliberately killing oneself', its factual meaning cannot be disentangled from its moral import. 'X committed suicide' is not a purely factual statement which entails no moral conclusion until we accept the further statement – in Hare's terms, it would be the major

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<sup>55</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, 'Rational Suicide and Reasons for Living' in Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (eds.), *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Second Edition) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 673.

<sup>58</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 137.

premiss of a syllogism – ‘Suicide is wrong’. Beardsmore discusses Graham Greene’s novel *The Heart of the Matter*, in which the character Scobie, a Catholic, commits suicide:

When Father Rank, the Catholic priest, admits that Scobie has taken his own life, he is not just describing Scobie’s action. He is passing judgement upon it. It would be quite superfluous for him to add that this action is wrong. Suicide *is* one of the ways in which a Catholic can do wrong ... We can, if we wish, call ‘Scobie committed suicide’ a moral judgement, so long as we realise that there can be no moral disagreement over its application, or we can say that it is a factual statement, if we recognise that within the context of a Catholic morality it carries moral import. What we cannot do is draw a rigid distinction between the two.<sup>59</sup>

Phillips and Mounce describe the complex interrelationships between ways of life and the moral values they entail as ‘moral practices’ – hence the title of their book. They do not go so far as to give a definition of what a ‘moral practice’ actually is, but the disapproval of lying shared by most societies, the Catholic condemnation of suicide and even (at least as a useful illustration of a context-dependent rule) the offside law in association football,<sup>60</sup> are all examples. The last of these is of course not a moral rule, but it provides a good, uncontroversial, example of a rule which it does not make sense to question in the context of the activity of which it is a part, but which has its sense only in the context of that activity. The Catholic does not decide whether suicide is wrong; the footballer does not decide whether it is right to stay onside; a commitment to disapprove of suicide or to avoid being offside are basic conditions of participation in Catholicism or football. In fact, the individual does not decide upon general principles at all. The fact that some things are right and wrong is independent of any decision made by any member of a given society or moral practice.

### Philippa Foot

At this point it is worth considering another influential voice in postwar British moral philosophy from whom the Wittgensteinians make much of distancing themselves, Philippa Foot. Like the Wittgensteinians, Foot disagreed with Hare’s view that we can choose our moral principles, which she claimed rests on two assumptions:

Assumption (1) is that some individual may, without logical error, base his beliefs about matters of value entirely on premises which no one else would recognise as giving evidence at all. Assumption (2) is that, given the kind of statement which other people regard as evidence for an evaluative conclusion, he may refuse to draw the conclusion because *this* does not count as evidence for *him*.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 111

Foot argued that assumption (1) is flawed because we cannot base moral beliefs on just anything; ‘such things as pride, fear, dismay, and the thought that something is dangerous have an internal relation to their object’.<sup>62</sup> Assumption (2) fails too, because there are some things which it does not make sense to reject as evidence for an evaluative conclusion. For example, we can say that injury is something to be avoided, because ‘the proper use of his limbs is something a man has reason to want if he wants anything’.<sup>63</sup> Foot said, ‘I do not know just what someone who denies this proposition could have in mind’.<sup>64</sup> If injury is a relatively uncontroversial, and non-moral, example of something it makes sense to seek to avoid – and, importantly for Foot, an example of fact and value being closely related – Foot believed that her analysis could be equally well applied to the cardinal virtues. We will be better off if we are temperate, prudent, courageous and just. Of these, the most controversial, or at least the one most often discussed, is justice, which has often, notably by Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic*, been argued to be less profitable than injustice. Yet Foot argued that:

Those who think that he can get on perfectly well without being just should be asked to say exactly how such a man is supposed to live. We know that he is to practise injustice whenever the unjust act would bring him advantage; but what is he to say? Does he admit that he does not recognise the rights of other people, or does he pretend? In the first case even those who combine with him will know that on a change of fortune, or a shift of affection, he may turn to plunder them, and he must be as wary of their treachery as they are of his. Presumably the happy unjust man is supposed, as in Book II of the *Republic*, to be a very cunning liar and actor, combining complete injustice with the appearance of justice ... If a man only needed other men as he needs household objects, and if men could be manipulated like household objects, or beaten into submission like donkeys, the case would be different. As things are, the supposition that injustice is more profitable than justice is very dubious, although like cowardice and intemperance it might turn out incidentally to be profitable.<sup>65</sup>

So Foot claimed that moral principles could be justified on the grounds that it pays to observe them. It is important to note that Foot’s position is distinct from utilitarianism: rather than examining the results of certain kinds of behaviour to find out which ones are morally justified, Foot tried to show that certain kinds of behaviour, *ex hypothesi* widely recognised as moral, have advantageous results. Morality is not *determined* by good results; morality (defined independently of results) *produces* good results. Yet if there is one set of moral facts which can and ought to be adopted by every moral agent, then the problem arises of how every moral agent can be shown what the moral facts are. Phillips

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<sup>62</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 118.

<sup>63</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 122.

<sup>64</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 122.

<sup>65</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 128-129.

and Mounce point out that although it may *sometimes* be profitable to behave justly, it will often pay to be unjust – at least if profitability is measured in terms of wealth, ease, comfort, gratification of desires. Morality does not make such calculations; indeed, it scorns them. The very possibility of asking ‘whether it profits a man to gain the whole world by committing despicable deeds’<sup>66</sup> implies that ‘a judgement is being passed on these profits which calls them unprofitable. This judgement is a moral judgement. Its possibility shows conclusively that the relevance of morality does not depend on whether it pays or not’.<sup>67</sup> In other words, just as we do not draw conclusions about someone’s moral goodness from their worldly success (or where we do, they may well not be positive conclusions), so we do not draw conclusions about the justice of a particular course of action by looking at the benefit it will bring us (although we may of course draw conclusions from this about whether we *want* to take a particular course of action). Phillips and Mounce argue that Foot’s account cannot make sense of the actions of someone who dies for the sake of justice, because ‘profit is always understood in terms of results in relation to the individual’.<sup>68</sup> Morality can only be shown to be advantageous to the individual if advantage is defined in terms of the direct results of moral behaviour – integrity, honesty, self-sacrifice, martyrdom – results which are often not advantageous in the usual sense of the word, but which are nevertheless admired. Phillips and Mounce describe with approval Socrates’ view that ‘the facts are assessed in terms of the measure of goodness ... denying that one can give an account of morality in non-moral terms’.<sup>69</sup> They claim that someone who appears to behave morally for the reasons Foot gave for behaving morally is in fact not behaving morally at all. While moral behaviour is sometimes to the advantage of the individual agent, it cannot always be, because ‘it must always be possible to specify what would constitute a clash between one’s moral beliefs and one’s desires’;<sup>70</sup> if not, then there can be no distinction ‘between moral beliefs and the expedient use of moral beliefs’.<sup>71</sup> The problem with justifying morality on the grounds that it is the best way of getting the results one wants is that the link between morality and advantage seems to be contingent, not necessary, so that ‘If injustice were profitable, [one] would have to advocate pursuing it’.<sup>72</sup> The reason justice can be said to be profitable is that the profit derived from it is not measured in worldly success, but

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<sup>66</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 27.

<sup>69</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 31.

<sup>70</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 35.

<sup>71</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 35.

<sup>72</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 36.

simply in the fact of being and remaining just – ‘the payment is internally related to the exercise of goodness’.<sup>73</sup> If this were not the case, then all we could say about a man who acted unjustly throughout his life and profited from his behaviour is that his success has come against the odds<sup>74</sup> – we might even admire him for gambling successfully. Quite apart from the fact that the odds do not seem to be so bad, because injustice does seem to lead to profit for a lot of people, many would still want to condemn such a man. Phillips and Mounce argue that ‘the attempt to justify or advocate moral action in non-moral terms distort[s] the kind of importance moral considerations often have, and blur[s] the distinction between morality and prudence’.<sup>75</sup>

### Fact and Value

The fact that I do not decide for myself what is right and what is wrong does not entail that the same things are right and wrong everywhere, for everyone. In different moral practices, the same facts may entail different conclusions. Phillips and Mounce describe two imaginary societies, one in which promise keeping is considered to be paramount, and another in which people are admired for deceiving others. Here, ‘The facts which have a moral significance for the members of the first society will clearly not have the same significance for members of the second’,<sup>76</sup> so that members of the second society will literally be *unable to understand* why having made a promise to do something is a reason why he ought to do it:

Since the concept of a promise does not have the place within the second society that it has within the first, one would expect a member of the second society to consider it an arbitrary matter that the breaking of a promise is condemned. It will appear arbitrary to him because *his* moral judgements do not depend for their sense upon the use of this concept, but upon other apparently unrelated concepts. Thus, while he may understand what in a factual sense is involved in making a promise, the evaluative element in it will appear to him irrelevant, or, at best, a fact about the mental life, the attitudes, of those who employ the concept.<sup>77</sup>

The fact that we hold that certain things are right and others wrong may mean that we find it impossible to make sense of the moral beliefs of others, but this does not mean that they are unjustified or arbitrary. Someone who cannot understand why we hold that, say, a liar ought to be condemned is not immoral, but evidently does not ‘share our moral

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<sup>73</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 44.

<sup>76</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, pp. 16-17.

practice'.<sup>78</sup> So, *contra* Hare, there is a connection between fact and value because 'there is a necessary relation for any moral agent between some set of facts and certain things being right or wrong',<sup>79</sup> and yet, *contra* Foot, there is not *one* set of moral facts which can and ought to be adopted by every moral agent because 'the question of which set of facts is related to certain things being right or wrong will be settled for the agent by the moral practices to which he belongs'.<sup>80</sup>

The reason that both fact and value are inextricably interlinked in many words – 'lying', 'suicide', 'greed', 'murder' and so on – is that we do not 'learn what suicide, murder or lying are, without learning the moral significance which these concepts have in our society'.<sup>81</sup> They are not taught to us as morally neutral, purely descriptive factual words, because those who teach them to us 'themselves possess certain values'.<sup>82</sup> Beardsmore gives an example of how this happens:

Within our society greed, particularly in the somewhat limited sense in which it is equated with gluttony, is fairly uniformly condemned. We punish greedy children, express disapproval of those in whom this trait has persisted into adult life, and so on. Consequently, when a child learns to use this term, though he learns it as a descriptive term, he also learns that his parents and teachers will react to greed in certain ways. And he learns to react in these ways himself.<sup>83</sup>

This helps to show a problem with Hare's account of moral decision-making. If we decide to avoid greed, for example, by applying principles like 'Greed is wrong', we must of course already know what greed is. But the wrongness of greed is, because of the way we learned the word, not something we decide about it after we understand its factual meaning. It is an integral part of our understanding of the word 'greed' that greed is wrong. Beardsmore points out that 'On Hare's account ... the ability to make moral judgements presupposes the ability to make purely factual judgements'.<sup>84</sup> But this is an artificial distinction; there are many questions on which we cannot make a factual judgement without making a moral judgement. In other words, we might say, the Wittgensteinians see the acquisition of morality as both analogous to and concurrent with the acquisition of language. Within any language there are rules, ways in which it is or is not possible to proceed, but these rules are not usually explicit or considered in day-to-day language use. These rules can be codified, but native speakers do not learn the language by learning the rules, and may well be unable to say what the rules are despite

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<sup>78</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 18.

<sup>80</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 95.

<sup>82</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 95.

<sup>83</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 95.

<sup>84</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 96.

being fluent users of the language. The Wittgensteinian critique of Hare's claim that we can choose our moral principles becomes easier to understand using this morality/language analogy. Just as we cannot simply choose grammatical rules and the definitions of words arbitrarily – if we tried to do so, we would become unintelligible to those around us and be unable to participate in any community activity which required the use of a shared language – so we cannot simply choose our moral principles: our moral options are circumscribed by our language and by the moral practices of the community we inhabit and in which we were brought up. The analogy is also instructive when it comes to the consideration of moral practices different from our own. When I listen to somebody who speaks a different language from my own she may be unintelligible to me, but this does not mean that I think she is talking nonsense. I recognise that she is using words and rules which my language does not share; her language makes sense to those who speak it, but not to me. In the same way, someone who belongs to a different moral practice may behave in ways which seem immoral to me, but this does not mean that her behaviour has no moral justification. Its moral justification makes sense to her, but not to me. This means that if her behaviour looks immoral to me, I will be unable to use the criteria by which *I* judge the rightness and wrongness of actions to convince her that she is wrong; and she will be unable to persuade me that she is right by appealing to the standards employed in her moral practice.

This points to some important similarities between the Wittgensteinian position and intuitionism, in that both believe that moral decisions and opinions are reached unreflectively. From a Wittgensteinian point of view, although the intuitionists are profoundly wrong, they are wrong because of their understanding of the nature of moral intuitions, not because, as most of the intuitionists' critics would have it, the very idea that we can base our behaviour on unexamined intuitions is fundamentally mistaken. Most of the time we do indeed act, unreflectively, on intuitions about what we ought to do: where the intuitionists go wrong is in their assumption that our moral intuitions correspond to some 'real', objective good, and that observable differences in moral intuitions can be put down to the fact that some moral beings are more developed than others.<sup>85</sup> Rather, moral goods and obligations are self-evident to us because they follow naturally from other beliefs and practices which we hold, with which we have been brought up, and which it does not make sense for us to question. The same moral goods

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<sup>85</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 30n.

and obligations may not be recognised as such by others, particularly by others from different cultural backgrounds, because they do not follow from or fit in with the other beliefs and practices in which they participate – not because others are at a lower level of moral development. One might, indeed, characterise Wittgensteinian ethics as a species of intuitionism which claims not that our moral intuitions are *true* but that they are *authoritative*. This is very different from the intuitionism of Moore, Prichard and Ross: it attempts to give an account of *why* we come to have the moral intuitions we do, and is prepared to allow for and account for cultural and other differences. This means that it cannot show that the moral beliefs and practices of those who do not share our cultural background are wrong, or right, except by reference to the standards which justify such beliefs and practices within the cultures in which they exist. So goodness is not the same for all people, at all times and in all places.

### Moral Relativism

But if there is no single set of universally applicable moral principles, and if people may act morally in ways which appear immoral to us – and if *our* moral actions appear immoral to *them* – then how can we possibly distinguish between moral, immoral and non-moral principles, let alone evaluate competing moral principles? The answer Phillips and Mounce give is that moral principles have a background of concepts, such as sincerity, honesty, courage, loyalty and respect, which give them sense.<sup>86</sup> These concepts are not themselves justified – they do not have to be, because they are not questioned. They provide the justification for moral rules, and enable us to understand what is going on when allegedly moral rules are advocated and kept. Where there is no such background, we cannot understand how an allegedly moral rule can be so described: it simply looks arbitrary and pointless. Certain moral rules look arbitrary and pointless in certain contexts, but can be given sense in others:

Given the background of a religious community, one can begin to see how the rule, ‘Never walk on the lines of a pavement’, could have moral significance. Think of, ‘Take off thy shoes for thou art on holy ground’, and its connections with the notions of reverence and disrespect.<sup>87</sup>

Since the sense of ‘Never walk on the lines of a pavement’ depends on the background it is set against, it would be misleading either to see it as a universally applicable moral rule or as an inescapably arbitrary one. This leaves open ‘the possibility of permanent radical

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<sup>86</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 47.

<sup>87</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 47.

moral disagreement’,<sup>88</sup> because the background concepts on which moral rules depend are neither justified nor shared. And people who approach morality from different backgrounds may not necessarily agree about why they should behave in certain ways:

Moral concepts are not functional. One can see what is to count as a good knife by asking what a knife is *for*, but can one see the point of generosity in the same way? To ask what generosity is *for* is simply to vulgarise the concept; it is like thinking that ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ is some kind of policy.<sup>89</sup>

If the meaning of ‘good’ is not something which everybody can agree upon – one might say that everyone agrees that they should be good, because that is part of what the word ‘good’ means, but that ‘goodness’ is not itself a background concept, but depends for its sense upon background concepts which are not themselves, as we have seen, universally shared – then moral disagreements are likely to end in deadlock. They cannot be settled ‘in terms of some supposed common evidence called human good and harm, since what they differ over is precisely the question of what constitutes human good and harm’.<sup>90</sup> But moral deadlock does not enable us to say whatever we like, because ‘arguments are rooted in different moral traditions within which there are rules for what can and what cannot be said’.<sup>91</sup> People argue from within their own moral traditions and have different moral goals, so that ‘The view that there are ways of demonstrating goodness by appeal to evidence which operates *independently* of the various moral opinions people hold is radically mistaken’.<sup>92</sup> This, Phillips and Mounce stress, is not relativism, or at least, not relativism as it is usually understood. Rather than saying, with Protagoras, that ‘whether a particular statement is true is determined by whether the majority say it is true’,<sup>93</sup> they follow Wittgenstein in saying that ‘we judge the truth of a statement by the criteria for verifying that statement’.<sup>94</sup> We can be confident that our judgements will agree with those of others because:

no one makes a judgement in the void but in the course of a social life where judgements are already being made by people with whose ways of thinking one is familiar. Because of this, one can know, without consulting them, what people are likely to think, just as a husband may know, without consulting his wife, what she is likely to think about a particular issue, even though precisely this issue has never arisen before. This is the kind of agreement Wittgenstein is referring to when he speaks of the agreement which is necessary for there to be communication.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 51.

<sup>89</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 59.

<sup>91</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 59.

<sup>92</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 60.

<sup>93</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 63.

<sup>94</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 63.

<sup>95</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 64.

That our moral judgements have to be in agreement with *widely* applied criteria is one claim; that they have to be in agreement with *universally* applied criteria would be another. And while there appear to be no universally applied criteria in morality, this does not mean that our moral judgements do not conform with, and gain their sense from, criteria which are widely shared. But the fact that criteria are widely shared does not imply that they are *chosen* or *questioned* by those who share them – they may not even be discussed:

The error of relativism, as it is traditionally conceived, may be stated in general terms by saying that relativists treat moral judgements as if they were statements about certain of the conditions on which they depend for their sense. Protagoras ... assumes that to call something morally right is merely to say that this is what the majority agree to call right, whereas, in fact, an agreement in judgement, though a necessary condition for making a particular moral judgement, is not what the particular judgement itself refers to.<sup>96</sup>

One might say that Phillips and Mounce put forward a form of relativism which avoids what the opponents of relativism most fear, namely the conclusion that there is no way of evaluating competing moral judgements, and that therefore we can do whatever we like and justify it by reference to whatever set of criteria we choose. However, the anti-relativists are unlikely to be entirely satisfied: I can evaluate competing moral judgements to my own satisfaction by comparing them to my own background beliefs, which I did not choose myself; I can persuade others who share my background beliefs that certain moral judgements are preferable to others; what I cannot do is persuade people who do not share my background beliefs that my evaluation is correct, and nor can I persuade them to drop their background beliefs, because they are not themselves held as a result of reasoned arguments. So particular moral judgements can apply only *within* a moral practice. To say that this moral practice cannot and does not command those outside it to share these judgements, however, is to make an empirical, not a moral claim. It is not that those within the moral practice in question do not think that their judgements should apply to and be shared by everybody – they do. It is simply that those who are outside that particular moral practice do not themselves feel bound by them; if they did, then they would not be outside that moral practice in any case.

### **Conversion and Rebellion**

This means that the Wittgensteinian approach to moral philosophy finds it difficult to account for the possibility of moral conversion – it could perhaps say that it is possible, but only as part of a wholesale integration into a different way of living – but it

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<sup>96</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, pp. 70-71.

has more to say about another question which might be seen as problematic, namely rebellion or revolution *within* a particular moral tradition. Beardsmore notes that his analysis might appear to entail:

(a) that the views of a rebel like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx, Tolstoi, or Christ are literally unintelligible, despite our strong feelings that what they say is new and important, or (b) that, although intelligible, their views belong to some sphere other than morality.<sup>97</sup>

He maintains, however, that although such rebels may reject many or even all of the moral beliefs of the traditions from which they emerge, they ‘cannot be understood in complete independence of *all* accepted moral beliefs’.<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche may appear, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, to reject traditional morality, but ‘it is possible for him to criticise many of the traditional moral values as he does, only because there are others which he does not question’.<sup>99</sup> The ‘slave morality’ which Nietzsche criticises is a ‘perversion of morality ... pseudo-moral beliefs’<sup>100</sup> – it is neither something which has no connection with morality at all, nor the only possible morality, which must be exposed as revolting and replaced with something completely new. Insofar as he is attacking the hypocrisy he perceives in traditional morality, ‘Nietzsche’s criticisms of slave-morality can be understood as moral criticisms because of the appeal to considerations like ‘sincerity’ and ‘integrity’ which they involve’.<sup>101</sup> We can only understand him because he appeals to linguistic common ground; he supports his arguments with ‘reasons which have some sort of connection with accepted moral considerations’.<sup>102</sup> Revolution and rebellion stem from a perception that the tradition being rebelled against is not being true to what it claims are its own values, that its values actually justify the behaviour advocated by the rebel. Another ‘rebel’ cited by Beardsmore, Jesus Christ, challenges many of the practices of the contemporary religious establishment, but does so largely by appeal to its own sacred texts – not by inventing an entirely new set of beliefs and practices. This means that many moral disagreements can be resolved, or at least that many moral rebels can be understood as intelligible by their opponents, by reference to texts, traditions and principles which are shared by all participants in the argument.

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<sup>97</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 54.

<sup>98</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>99</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 57.

<sup>101</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 60.

<sup>102</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 62.

## Moral Disagreement

Even so, in many cases moral disagreement seems permanent and unresolvable, with each side absolutely unwilling, or unable, to accept the other's arguments. In his book *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* G.J. Warnock notes this problem, and suggests:

That moral argument is not more effective than we find it to be is probably attributable to the cross that all arguments have to bear: an argument offers reasons to people, and people are not always reasonable.<sup>103</sup>

Here, the assumption seems to be that moral agreement is possible, and would be attained if only so many people were not so stupid. In any moral disagreement, at least one party must be wrong, and there must be a right answer on which all ought in principle to agree. Beardsmore challenges the assumption that all parties are arguing about the same thing:

Often [ethical disputes] are not decidable, even in principle, simply because the disputants cannot even agree over what criteria to apply. They each have reasons for the judgements that they make, but neither admits the relevance of the other's reasons. The argument here has reached deadlock.<sup>104</sup>

The move Beardsmore makes here, which is characteristic of the Wittgensteinian approach to ethics, is to suggest that this deadlock is not necessarily proof of the irrationality of at least one of the disputants. Not only does each have reasons for the judgements she makes, but each may very well have *good* reasons, which make sense in the context of her beliefs and way of living, but which are nevertheless incompatible with the other's reasons. The question of who is right fades out of the picture: in one sense, both are right, in that both can justify their positions to their own satisfaction; in another sense, neither is, because the idea of any independently, 'objectively' recognisable right, or wrong, is misleading and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of what is going on in ethical discussion. Rather than assuming that we could reach moral agreement if only we had more evidence, or if only other people (or if only we) were not so obtuse as to fail to see the rightness of certain arguments, the Wittgensteinians claim that moral disagreement occurs, and is serious, because some disagreements cannot be settled. Phillips and Mounce argue that we cannot appeal to empirical evidence, because 'moral practices are not theories'<sup>105</sup> and there is nothing independent against which their validity can be tested. Nor can we appeal to a disinterested observer, because there does not seem to be any such person:

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<sup>103</sup> Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, p. 72.

<sup>104</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 105.

Has the answer of the disinterested observer any relation whatever to the kinds of issues raised by abortion? In other words, is his answer a moral answer at all? If not, it is difficult to see how a non-moral answer can settle a moral issue. On the other hand, if the observer's answer is a moral answer, it has to do battle with all the other moral attitudes concerned. It enjoys no privileged metaphysical status.<sup>106</sup>

The evaluation of competing values cannot be left, as John Stuart Mill proposed, to 'competent judges',<sup>107</sup> because such people can only exist 'where it also makes sense to talk of a standard of competence or expertise'.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, Mill's judges will be able to agree in the judgements they make 'only if they share the same values. And the whole point of Mill's utilitarian doctrine is to secure agreement between *different* sets of values'.<sup>109</sup> Disinterestedness, so important in deciding factual questions, seems to be incompatible with participation in moral discussion. 'The fact that one has a moral point of view is not a limitation or a sign of prejudice, but a minimal condition of seriousness concerning moral questions'.<sup>110</sup> The point here is that the values to which we appeal in putting forward our moral position are our last resort, the point beyond which we cannot go in justifying our moral beliefs: we argue not *for* them, but *from* them. Other people may appeal to different values, which will lead them to different moral conclusions. Their conclusions may well follow from their values, but since we do not share their values, we disagree with them. Phillips and Mounce do not think that this means that discussion between people who hold different moral views is impossible, nor that people cannot be persuaded to change their moral positions, although they give no detailed account of how moral conversion occurs. They acknowledge that they have presented a deliberately oversimplified view of morality, and that 'very many people have no such thing as a complete moral code, a systematic morality'.<sup>111</sup> More important for their purposes is the insistence that 'we should not be afraid to say that we fail to get the feel of a moral problem because it is part of a moral viewpoint so disparate from our own that we fail to find a conceptual foothold which would enable us to understand it'.<sup>112</sup> Actions in one culture which look similar to actions in another may in fact be utterly different: it may be misleading to describe, say, child-sacrifice in pre-Abrahamic Hebrew society as murder, or the infliction of wounds on a prisoner, done in order that he can

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<sup>106</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 108.

<sup>107</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism; On Liberty; Considerations on Representative Government; Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, ed. Geraint Williams (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 89.

<sup>109</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 90.

<sup>110</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 107.

<sup>111</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 108.

<sup>112</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 108.

demonstrate his bravery, as torture: the cultures being examined may simply have no concept of murder or torture. We should not impose our own conceptual framework on them; ‘our judgements of these practices must wait on an understanding of them’.<sup>113</sup>

### Onora O’Neill’s Critique

It is because of the importance of cultural context in the Wittgensteinian account of moral philosophy that Onora O’Neill is able, in an important critical article,<sup>114</sup> to accuse Wittgensteinian ethics of both moral conservatism and moral relativism – characteristics which might initially seem unlikely bedfellows within one ethical school. Both result from the fact that moral discussion can only take place in the context of a shared tradition. With such broad preliminary agreement it is unlikely that the moral conclusions reached will surprise or dismay any of the participants in the discussion; moral discussion is unlikely to be challenging or to lead to anything new. At the same time, contact with those from other traditions ‘will lead to no shared conclusions, but to a realization that moral communication has broken down at some points’.<sup>115</sup> O’Neill argues that this claim that we cannot communicate with those with whom we disagree is overstated:

we sense that we *can* communicate many of our disagreements to those of different traditions: we cannot easily believe that those with whom we persistently disagree over, say, the eating of animals, the nature of property or the limits of favouring our own families and friends are beyond the pale of moral communication on these topics.<sup>116</sup>

Yet the Wittgensteinian perspective is also a comforting one, says O’Neill, because where moral disagreement persists we are not to conclude that our reasoning process is inadequate, but that agreement was never possible in the first place. The only way such agreement could be reached is by a wholesale re-education or conversion of those with whom we disagree, after which communication would be possible, but only because the moral practices about which we want to communicate are now commonly shared.<sup>117</sup> O’Neill notes that for Wittgensteinian accounts of moral ‘conversions’, which ‘tend to see such conversions as an “education of the heart” towards enlarged and deepened moral sympathies’,<sup>118</sup> there is no escaping the fact that any claim that changed moral sympathies have been enlarged and deepened, as opposed to twisted and impoverished,

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<sup>113</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 111.

<sup>114</sup> Onora O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, *Philosophy* 61 (1986), pp. 5-29.

<sup>115</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 14.

<sup>116</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 14.

<sup>117</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, pp. 14-15.

<sup>118</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 15.

is culture-dependent. What O'Neill misses is that the Wittgensteinians, like everyone else, are inhabitants of particular cultural settings, in which it *is* appropriate to claim that some moral responses and actions are better than others. She is right to say that 'there is no neutral standpoint from which to discern who is the missionary and who is seducing missionaries into "going native"',<sup>119</sup> but there are two corollaries to this on a Wittgensteinian account. First, the neutral standpoint is not a desirable position unattainable to us (inhabited perhaps, as some religious accounts of ethics have suggested, by God or by some other transcendent, omniscient being), but absolutely non-existent and absurd in principle. Second, Wittgensteinian moral philosophers have as much right as anyone else to judge changes in moral outlook and behaviour, according to the standards which prevail in the cultures they inhabit, and indeed a duty as moral thinkers to do so: if disinterestedness is impossible, then it cannot be recommended; as we saw above, it is not numbered among the Wittgensteinians' cardinal virtues. This means that a Wittgensteinian who claims that someone has been converted to a better way of living does not do so because she claims to have access to a neutral standpoint, but because according to her own – necessarily partisan – moral standpoint, this new way of living is better.

While moral re-education and conversion is therefore both possible and desirable for Wittgensteinians, there is of course a danger that it could take a coercive, exploitative, imperialistic form, of which the Wittgensteinians would not approve: O'Neill interestingly accuses them of a new, postcolonial form of ethnocentrism in which, while we do not attempt to impose our morality on those from different backgrounds, neither do we attempt to learn from them; the only people with whom we can communicate on ethics are those who already share our ethical beliefs:

Traditional ethnocentrism was prepared to override the practices of those beyond its pale; it preached and practised a colonialist ethic, offering to 'natives' at most the opportunity for 'them' to assimilate to 'us'. Wittgensteinian ethnocentrism, it appears, has nothing to say to those who live beyond 'our' local pale; in the face of a world in which the adherents of distinct practices meet increasingly it proposes a retreat to the cosiness of 'our' shared world and tradition. Perhaps it is not surprising that such a conception of ethics should flourish mainly in the academies of a formerly imperial power, and that it should focus predominantly on judging what has been done.<sup>120</sup>

This charge of 'Wittgensteinian ethnocentrism' has been scathingly rejected by Phillips, who claims that 'Embarrassingly for this piece of pseudo-sociology, the Wittgensteinian tradition in ethics has never been the dominant one in the context which, allegedly,

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<sup>119</sup> O'Neill, 'The Power of Example', p. 15.

<sup>120</sup> O'Neill, 'The Power of Example', p. 16.

should have made it so. On the contrary, it has combated the dominant tradition in which, sometimes, a kind of “conceptual imperialism” seemed to flourish.<sup>121</sup> Yet Phillips seems to have mistaken the nature of O’Neill’s point, which never suggests that the Wittgensteinians are dominant (not, in any case, a common anti-imperialist characteristic) but merely that they are British. More to the point, this area of O’Neill’s criticism appears to have plenty of support from the Wittgensteinians themselves, even from Phillips in his attempted rebuttal of O’Neill:

After all, one of the main thrusts of [Peter Winch’s] ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’ was against the assumption that we possess, in our culture, all we need to understand cultures other than our own; an assumption which, on Winch’s view, led to a condescending understanding of Zande witchcraft.<sup>122</sup>

Actually, this seems to be precisely the point O’Neill is trying to make: Wittgensteinian ethnocentrism results from an (admirably well-intentioned but, in her view, no less flawed for that) unwillingness to judge any culture other than our own or, if we do so, to judge it using any criteria other than those used within that culture. Winch attacks the idea that ‘moral concerns can be examined quite apart from any consideration of what it is about these concerns which makes them important to us’.<sup>123</sup> This means that moral beliefs, along with all other beliefs, have to be considered in the context of their surroundings, including in many cases their cultural surroundings; ‘Culture sets limits to what an individual can intelligibly be said to be doing’.<sup>124</sup> As Wittgenstein puts it, ‘What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what stands around it’.<sup>125</sup> This does not necessarily require ‘a retreat to the cosiness of “our” shared world and tradition’, but it does mean that we have to be careful about judging the beliefs and practices of other cultures.

### Examples and Passing Judgement

This fastidiousness regarding where it is and where it is not appropriate to judge other people’s beliefs and practices is reflected in the Wittgensteinians’ method, and particularly in their treatment of examples, the main topic of O’Neill’s article.<sup>126</sup> O’Neill observes that a distinctive feature of Wittgensteinian writings in ethics is its preference

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<sup>121</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 73.

<sup>122</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 73.

<sup>123</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 155.

<sup>124</sup> Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 201.

<sup>125</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, tr. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 144, p. 21c.

<sup>126</sup> O’Neill also discusses the use of examples in problem-centred ethics, mainly in the United States.

for literary examples, drawn largely from novels,<sup>127</sup> which ‘focus ... on examples of completed action in a context which invites moral consideration or assessment, rather than on less complete examples of a situation which raises moral problems or dilemmas’.<sup>128</sup> This preference implies that the Wittgensteinians think that ‘the primary exercise of moral judgment [is] to *reflect* or *pass judgment* on what has been done rather than to decide among possible actions’.<sup>129</sup> O’Neill’s own view, understandably common among ethicists, that moral philosophy is supposed to help us work out what to do, is very different. Moral philosophy gives us theories about how to act in morally problematic situations; literary and other sources can provide useful examples of such situations, to which we can apply our moral theories in order to work out what we ought to do if we were there. Yet for the Wittgensteinians, ‘each [example] is *sui generis* and in itself a complete example of moral thinking which can provide no basis for prescribing for others’, which means ‘that moral theories are redundant, since no task remains to be done once examples have been fully articulated’.<sup>130</sup> That ‘literary examples impose a spectator perspective’ which means that ‘we do not have to do anything, beyond “deciding what we do want to say” about the example and making sense of it’<sup>131</sup> is an astute description of the effect of the Wittgensteinians’ method, so long as it is made clear that for the Wittgensteinians the spectator of someone else’s moral problem has (as a matter of fact) no *responsibility* to decide what to do, and consequently has no *right* to do so. The position of spectator is not a comfortable one. The reason why ‘we do not have to decide ... whether to find Billy Budd guilty’<sup>132</sup> is that *we*, the reader, unlike the character Vere in Melville’s story, literally *do not have to decide whether to find Billy Budd guilty*. Vere has to do so, and we do not; the decision is none of our business. Winch says:

I believe that I could not have acted as did Vere; and by the ‘could not’, I do not mean ‘should not have had the nerve to’, but that I should have found it morally impossible to condemn a man ‘innocent before God’ in such circumstances ... According to Sidgwick ... this must mean that I think Vere acted wrongly, made the wrong decision. However, I do not think this. The story seems to me to show that Vere did what was, for him, the right thing to do.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Phillips’ own explanation of why he chooses to use literary examples implies that it has more to do with modesty than methodology: ‘Faced with the task of assembling reminders in a similar context, the philosopher, unless he is blessed with a genius for examples, like Wittgenstein was, may well turn to literature, as I have done, and see there reminders of perspectives he wants his audience and himself to be clear about’. Phillips, ‘The Devil’s Disguises: Philosophy of Religion, “Objectivity” and “Cultural Divergence”’, in S.C. Brown (ed.), *Objectivity and Cultural Divergence*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series 17, Supplement to *Philosophy* 1984, p. 72.

<sup>128</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 11.

<sup>129</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 11.

<sup>130</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 12.

<sup>131</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 17.

<sup>132</sup> O’Neill, ‘The Power of Example’, p. 17.

<sup>133</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, pp. 163-164.

Phillips says something very similar about the dilemma faced by Sue in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, who has to decide whether to stay with Jude or return to her husband, whom she does not love. 'We might have chosen differently, but then it would have been our problem and not Sue's.'<sup>134</sup> Complaints that the Wittgensteinians treat moral thought as 'a spectator sport'<sup>135</sup> fail to recognise just how seriously they take it. Indeed, both sides in this dispute have very different conceptions of what moral philosophy is for. While O'Neill complains that the Wittgensteinians are more interested in reflecting than in deciding what to do, they see the use of predetermined moral theories to solve problems as failing to take such problems seriously enough:

the presumption of theory distorts and obscures the nuances and complexities involved in moral considerations. Had O'Neill seen this, she would not have wanted to go beyond Winch's examples. Instead, she would have been content to wait on them.<sup>136</sup>

O'Neill accuses the Wittgensteinians of failing to do the most important job of moral philosophy, namely solving problems. Phillips responds by accusing O'Neill of understating the complexity of such problems in order to impose theory-determined solutions which fail to do justice to them or to those who face them.

## Moral Dilemmas

The Wittgensteinians' emphasis on the seriousness of moral problems is brought out clearly in *Moral Practices* in Phillips' and Mounce's discussion of moral dilemmas, which notes that the very reason such dilemmas arise at all is that people do not want to go against their deeply-held moral principles. A moral dilemma arises when two or more principles come into conflict with each other, so that we cannot follow one without going against another. In many such cases, there is no preset way of working out what to do, because 'the different moral practices do not tell us which takes precedence over the other. This is something we have to decide and learn as we go along'.<sup>137</sup> Even when we find it relatively easy to make a decision about which principle to follow and which to sacrifice, 'it is not surprising to find the person involved still caring about the unsatisfied right and the unfulfilled obligation. Philosophers have thought such care irrational because they have confused moral dilemmas with technical problems'.<sup>138</sup> Phillips and Mounce criticise A.I. Melden's analysis of moral dilemmas on the grounds that he

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<sup>134</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 251.

<sup>135</sup> O'Neill, 'The Power of Example', p. 18.

<sup>136</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 85.

<sup>137</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 84.

<sup>138</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 98.

mistakenly sees as 'essential to the determination of the rightness of the given course of action ... the maintenance of the moral structure of the relations between all of the parties concerned'.<sup>139</sup> They argue that moral practices aim at no single goal and cannot be harmonised so that they do so, and that values conflict because they are valued in themselves, independently of each other, rather than 'because they serve to perpetuate a so-called total moral community'.<sup>140</sup> However, the fact that they can come into conflict, and that although they are valued independently they are often relevant in the same situations, means that any description of moral practices or areas of social life as 'games' or 'language games', while it may be useful in reminding us that moral practices and social activities can arise, have sense and be valued independently of each other, can also be misleading:

The procedures of one game do not interfere with the procedures of another. If a man is playing rugby, he does not have to occupy himself with the procedures of cricket ... The various activities of a man's life have a relation to one another which does not hold between games. It is because considerations which belong to different activities in a man's life can affect one another in various ways that one may find oneself confronted by the kind of problem which is described as a moral dilemma.<sup>141</sup>

The existence of independent moral practices means that we can be faced with a moral dilemma and be forced to choose one course of action over another, thus unavoidably going against a moral principle which we think is important. It is possible to make such choices, but what philosophical accounts of how this can be done can miss is that we often feel guilty about making them, however unavoidable, and however justified, they may be:

When as a result of his action ... harm comes about, [an individual] will not be able to console himself with the thought that moral wisdom has triumphed, or that the perpetuation of a total moral community has been served. He will be faced with the fact that he had to do what he did.<sup>142</sup>

One of the reasons for this guilt seems to be that we know that we could have acted differently, and that if we had done so we could have followed the sincerely held moral principle which we have in fact broken – even though we could only have done this by going against another principle. The importance of the principles means that 'the principles themselves can provide no solution to the dilemma; nor is there any *a priori*

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<sup>139</sup> A.I. Melden, *Rights and Right Conduct* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), p. 71, quoted in Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 89.

<sup>140</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 93.

<sup>141</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 92.

<sup>142</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 94.

reason why there should be any other principle which will provide such a solution'.<sup>143</sup> And because 'There is no general method by which principles are weighed',<sup>144</sup> two different people who share the same principles may on occasion come, after sincere reflection, to different conclusions about the same dilemma.

This brings us back to Hare's treatment of Sartre's student's dilemma, which I discussed above. We saw that Hare believed that the student ought to be able to construct a moral principle which would guide him through his dilemma, allowing him either to stay with his mother or to join the Free French, and to feel comfortable with his decision either way. But the idea that we can simply modify our moral principles, whenever we find ourselves confronted with situations in which they appear to come into conflict, suggests to the Wittgensteinians an unacceptably frivolous approach to morality. If I can construct a moral principle to get me through any possible dilemma, why should I ever feel guilty? Yet people often do feel guilty, even about actions which appear to be the best available in the circumstances, and which could perfectly well be justified by a modified moral principle along the lines Hare suggested. In Sartre's example, it is precisely because *both* principles, 'Care for your mother' and 'Fight for your country', seem to the student to be absolute that the problem arises in the first place. Whatever the student decides to do, he is likely to feel guilty about either abandoning his mother or failing to join the struggle to liberate his country. No carefully constructed principle, universalisable but designed for this particular situation (perhaps 'Care for your mother unless this will prevent you fighting for your country'; perhaps vice-versa) can prevent these guilt feelings; as Phillips observes, 'it is extremely odd to regard devotion to his mother or to the Free French as theory-determined'.<sup>145</sup> It is because people faced with moral dilemmas have to live with the consequences of their actions that Peter Winch denies the need for moral judgements to be universalisable. This need was insisted upon by Hare:

One cannot with logical consistency, where *a* and *b* are two individuals, say that *a* ought, in a certain situation specified in universal terms without reference to individuals, to act in a certain way, also specified in universal terms, but that *b* ought not to act in a similarly specified situation. This is because in any 'ought'-statement there is implicit a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 102.

<sup>144</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 103.

<sup>145</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 76.

<sup>146</sup> Hare, 'Universal Prescriptivism', p. 456.

But Winch argues that there is a ‘radical distinction in significance for a man of his own acts as distinct from those of others’.<sup>147</sup> It is one thing, he says, to make moral judgements and apply them consistently to relevantly similar situations. But to claim that other people must make the same judgements ‘is to make a much more sweeping claim and one which seems to me highly questionable’.<sup>148</sup> The reason for this is that in difficult cases, where deeply-held principles conflict, where we have to come to a decision but can only do this at the cost of suppressing or making an exception to a principle we still believe to be important, we can see that there may well be good reasons for acting differently from the way in which we have decided to act, and that someone else may be perfectly justified in so acting:

I am interested in the position of a man who, *ex hypothesi*, is completely morally serious, who fully intends to do what he ought to do but is perplexed about *what* he ought to do. He feels the force of conflicting moral demands on him. ‘On the one hand I ought to do this, on the other hand I ought to do that. So what ought I really to do?’ I am interested here in the force of the word ‘ought’ in the last question and in the answer given to it. And I shall argue that when, in answer to such a question, a man says, ‘This is what I ought to do’, there is nothing in the meaning or use of the word ‘ought’ which logically commits him to accepting as a corollary: ‘And anyone else in a situation like this ought to do the same.’<sup>149</sup>

Winch considers the film *Violent Saturday*, in which a gang of bank robbers hides on a farm belonging to a strict religious community for which non-violence is a strict guiding principle. ‘At the climax of the film one of the gangsters is about to shoot a young girl member of the community in the presence of the community’s elder. With horror and doubt in his face, the elder seizes a pitchfork and hurls it into the gangster’s back’.<sup>150</sup> To Winch, a rationalisation along Hare’s lines which explained that ‘the elder has had to make a “decision of principle”, which consists in either qualifying, or perhaps even abandoning, the principle of non-violence according to which he has hitherto tried to live’<sup>151</sup> would be not merely inadequate, but a fundamental misrepresentation of what the elder is thinking. An alternative explanation, in which ‘having killed the gangster, the elder knew he had done something wrong ... [yet] if he had not killed the gangster, he would not have been able to forgive himself’<sup>152</sup> may look messier, even self-contradictory, but it accounts for three crucial facts: the elder feels guilty about what he has just done; he has no desire to renounce his principle of non-violence; if he were put in the same

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<sup>147</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 6.

<sup>148</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 154.

<sup>149</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 161.

<sup>150</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 185.

<sup>151</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 185.

<sup>152</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 186.

circumstances again he would do the same thing again. He does not construct a new moral principle, 'Never use violence except to prevent someone being shot'. He continues to attempt to adhere to 'Never use violence', and lives with the consequences of his failure to do so on this occasion.

In difficult cases, where deeply-held principles conflict, where we have to come to a decision but can only do this at the cost of suppressing or making an exception to a principle we still believe to be important, where we can see that there may well be good reasons for acting differently from the way in which we have decided to act, and that someone else may be perfectly justified in so acting, moral theory can seem not just inadequate but impertinent. Wittgensteinian ethics' apparent remoteness from moral life, from the practical resolution of moral problems, may be a consequence of their view of the extreme seriousness of many moral dilemmas and disagreements. Where most ethicists have stressed the seriousness of moral problems as a way of showing the need for solutions to them, and for theories which can help us to reach such solutions, the Wittgensteinians do so in order to show the artificiality of trying to impose any theory-determined solution at all. When a problem is serious, when no course of action is entirely satisfactory but something must be done, we have no right to condemn someone for acting in a particular way in a situation we did not have to face.<sup>153</sup> This reluctance to make moral judgements implies that it is wrong to make prescriptive judgements for others. This is, of course, itself a prescriptive judgement – a prescriptive judgement that I can apply only to myself. Yet the actions of others who are faced with serious moral dilemmas may affect me, and even do me harm. We have seen Wittgensteinian ethics accused of moral conservatism, because according to its account moral deliberation can only succeed within communities which already agree, and of moral relativism, because of its claims that moral deliberation between different moral traditions will lead to a breakdown in communication. But perhaps a more important feature is its more or less implicit advocacy of passivity and submission, as a result of its suspicion both of making prescriptive judgements about the actions of other people, and of giving self-interest any kind of role in ethics.

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<sup>153</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 163.

## 2

### Self-Interest and Reasons to be Virtuous

#### Ethical Egoism

Before we even get to the question of whether self-interest can be an adequate guide to morality, we have to work out what we mean by self-interest. This might seem obvious – surely my self-interest is whatever is best for me – but it is more complicated than that. Is my self-interest whatever I *think* is best for me – which could in principle be anything at all – or whatever is *really* best for me, a category whose contents are not necessarily accessible to me or to human reason in general, and may well conflict with what I want to do? The latter position, which contains the implicit corollary that doing what is really best for me might involve certain sacrifices or unpleasantnesses, and might only be revealed as beneficial in the long run, is reflected in utilitarianism and Kantianism, among other important ethical theories, and will be considered below: there is an important distinction between ‘doing what you see as being in your best interests is good’ and ‘doing good is in your best interests’, even though both of these positions are distinct from that of the Wittgensteinians. The belief that I ought to do whatever I think is in my own self-interest is often referred to as ‘ethical egoism’. The initial objection to ethical egoism is an obvious one. If an action is in my interests, it is at least possible that it is not in yours, or not in someone else’s, and that you or they may therefore be disadvantaged as a result of what I do. This objection is not likely to be decisive for me if I think that my interests are the only important moral consideration. However, if I have no consideration whatsoever for the interests of others, except insofar as they serve my own interests, then it is not clear why I would be listening to objections which referred to anything other than my own interests in the first place:

The ethical egoist acknowledges no general obligation to help people in need. Benevolence is never justified unconditionally or ‘categorically.’ The egoist has an obligation to promote the welfare only of those whom he likes, loves, needs, or can use. The source of this obligation is his interest in them. No interest, no obligation. And when his interest conflicts or is irreconcilable with theirs, he will reasonably pursue his own well-being at their expense, even when this other person is his wife, child, mother or friend, as well as when it is a stranger or enemy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse Kalin, ‘In Defense of Egoism’, in David P. Gauthier (ed.), *Morality and Rational Self-Interest* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 64–65.

We have to accept that for those who justify their behaviour in this way, objections to any particular action have to be made in terms of their effect on the agent rather than of their effects on anyone else who may come into the agent's line of fire. In many cases such objections may exist, but they are, and can only be, prudential and not principled objections; the underlying attitude of basic disregard for others is not questioned, and the initial objection, that others may suffer if I pursue my own interests, is not addressed. This is a problem, but it is problematic largely in terms of the practical effects on others of disregarding the objection – and therefore, by definition, not problematic at all to the ethical egoist – not because the objection itself is badly thought-out. It seems fairly pointless to write ethical theory for people who are entirely uninterested in it, and so any useful theoretical criticisms of self-interest are likely to rely on their hearers having some sort of basic understanding of and sympathy for the needs of others. Having said that, the very fact that this form of ethical egoism assumes that the agent has no understanding of or sympathy for the needs of others is likely to act as a compelling criticism of it so far as everybody else is concerned. And this may explain why, although the rationally self-interested individual is the paradigmatic economic agent in neoclassical economics, nevertheless those who construct and employ economic models are often reluctant to accept this when assessing their own motives. The economic historian Philip Mirowski found that ‘While the economists about whom he writes have been happy to model others as motivated by self-interest, “when summoned to reflect on their personal successes, they regularly cite such lofty goals as the alleviation of pain, the augmentation of general welfare, the abolition of injustice and the advancement of human understanding”’.<sup>2</sup> The fact that ethical egoism is so distasteful even to many of its proponents – or rather, that even many of those who use it as a model are not prepared to admit to using it for their own moral guidance or motivation – should raise our suspicions about its usefulness.<sup>3</sup>

Ethical egoism is not ruled out by an awareness of, and consideration for, the interests of others, although it is necessarily transformed into something which looks very different. The simple step of recognising that other people (and potentially other animals or other beings) have interests which they may legitimately take into account – the commonly-made ethical step of universalisation – has instant and far-reaching effects

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<sup>2</sup> Donald MacKenzie, ‘The Imagined Market’, Review of Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), *London Review of Books* 24: 21 (31 October 2002), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> It may nevertheless be useful as a description of economic activity, particularly if Michel Callon is right that economics is not merely a descriptive, but a performative discipline; that it does not describe an existing economy but actually helps – partly because of the influence economists have on policy-makers – to bring that economy into being. See MacKenzie, ‘The Imagined Market’, p. 22.

on what even an ethical egoist can regard as acceptable behaviour. Universal ethical egoism assumes that if it is right for me to pursue my own self-interest – and it is – then it is right for everyone else to pursue their self-interest too. This may only go so far as recognising that somebody else’s self-interested behaviour, which disadvantages me, is justified:

A universal ethical egoist may, like a player in a game, judge that others ought to do what is in their overall self-interest while simultaneously attempting to prevent such actions, or at least refraining from encouraging them.<sup>4</sup>

There is an important distinction between recognising that the self-interests of others may be legitimate while being inimical to my own, and toning down my own self-interested behaviour. The only effect of this universalisation seems to be to force an acceptance that my own self-interest cannot be uniquely protected by universally applicable legislation. I will still seek to stop others disadvantaging me, by whatever means seem most appropriate, and they will do the same to me. This is a weak universalisation which argues for the placing of no limits on my behaviour and the behaviour of others; we can presume that the strongest person will be able to act with the fewest checks on the pursuit of her self-interest. The problem with ethical egoism noted above, that some people may well be disadvantaged as a result of the self-interested behaviour of others, still exists.

### **Social Darwinism and Justifying Altruism**

This kind of ethical egoism received a boost from some interpretations of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which used the idea of struggle, and of the ‘survival of the fittest’, to explain the evolutionary success and failure of different organisms, and the adaptation of organisms to their environment. Some of Darwin’s supporters (not Darwin himself) tried to shift this insight wholesale from the realm of biological explanation to the realm of morality. Generally speaking, they took it to mean that a *laissez-faire* approach to public policy should be pursued, allowing the fittest to survive and assuming that those who did not succeed were, by definition, those who ought not to survive – ‘Just as in nature one has competition, struggle, success and failure, so also in society one has competition, struggle, success and failure’.<sup>5</sup> Michael Ruse quotes the Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner:

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<sup>4</sup> James P. Sterba, *Three Challenges to Ethics: Environmentalism, Feminism and Multiculturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Ruse, ‘The Significance of Evolution’, in Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 501.

Let it be understood that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members.<sup>6</sup>

The chief problem with this approach, from the point of view of its proponents, was that it failed utterly to achieve what they hoped it would. This is due in part to a confusion over the meaning of the word 'fittest' which, in strict Darwinian terms means 'best equipped to reproduce successfully' and not necessarily 'cleverest', 'strongest', 'richest' or possessed of any other qualities which certain human beings may choose, for whatever reason, to value. *Laissez-faire* led, as a matter of fact, to the proliferation of precisely those people whom the social Darwinists wished to eliminate, since 'it is in the poorest localities that children most abound and prudence has *no control* over the multiplying of the lowest species of humanity'.<sup>7</sup> The resulting enthusiasm of many social Darwinists for eugenic programmes involved a wholesale inversion of Darwinism, quite apart from the obvious moral question marks over the legitimacy of attempting to control or deny other people's fertility without their consent.

From a philosophical point of view, the main problem with social Darwinism is that it 'crashes through the is/ought barrier'.<sup>8</sup> The biologist Thomas Huxley, one of the earliest champions and popularizers of evolution (and, incidentally, the father of Julian Huxley, later an advocate of eugenic sterilisation),<sup>9</sup> pointed out the disjunction between (evolutionarily) good strategy and (morally) good behaviour, arguing in 1893 that

the practice of that which is ethically best – what we call goodness or virtue – involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence.<sup>10</sup>

And Stephen Jay Gould, one of the best-known modern expositors and defenders of evolutionary theory, agrees:

Those who recruit Darwin to support a particular moral or political line should remember that, at best, evolutionary biology might give us some insights into the anthropology of morals – why some (or most) people practise certain values, perhaps for their Darwinian advantage. But science can never decide the

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<sup>6</sup> William Graham Sumner, *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays*, ed. A.S. Kelle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914), p. 293, quoted in Ruse, 'The Significance of Evolution', p. 501.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Hume Clapperton, *Scientific Meliorism* [1885], quoted in Germaine Greer, *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Ruse, 'The Significance of Evolution', p. 501.

<sup>9</sup> Greer, *Sex and Destiny*, p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas H. Huxley, *The Romanes Lecture 1893: Evolution and Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 33.

morality of morals. Suppose we discovered that aggression, xenophobia, selective infanticide and the subjugation of women offered Darwinian advantages to our hunter-gatherer ancestors a million years ago on the African savannahs. Such a conclusion would not validate the moral worth of these or any other behaviours, either then or now.<sup>11</sup>

The same applies, in fact, to modern attempts to ground the morality of altruism in terms of evolutionary strategy, however much more attractive these may look than the radical individualism, or eugenicism, of earlier social Darwinists. Even if ‘We are moral because our genes, as fashioned by natural selection, fill us full of thoughts about being moral’,<sup>12</sup> the very way in which the word ‘moral’ is being used here – as a term which is applied to, rather than determined by, the thoughts and behaviour which our genes are said to encourage in us – implicitly denies the primacy of sociobiological categories in the sociobiological desire to justify altruism. The most we could say is that biology plays an analogous role to that which the Wittgensteinians ascribe to culture and language. Nevertheless, modern sociobiologists appear to reject the idea that ‘the survival of the fittest’ justifies the consciously selfish pursuit of our own personal advantage, whatever the effect this has on those around us.

### Removing Self-Interest

We have seen that the Wittgensteinians’ objection to the suggestion that morality might be defined in terms of the agent’s advantage is that this simply does not look like what we generally think of as ‘morality’. I quoted Phillips and Mounce above as saying that ‘the attempt to justify or advocate moral action in non-moral terms distort[s] the kind of importance moral considerations often have, and blur[s] the distinction between morality and prudence’.<sup>13</sup> This is not an uncommon view. F.H Bradley asks:

What answer can we give when the question Why should I be Moral?, in the sense of What will it advantage Me?, is put to us? Here we shall do well, I think, to avoid all praises of the pleasantness of virtue. We may believe that it transcends all the possible delights of vice, but it would be well to remember that we desert a moral point of view, that we degrade and prostitute virtue, when to those who do not love her for herself we bring ourselves to recommend her for the sake of her pleasures.<sup>14</sup>

And from Zygmunt Bauman, writing from an otherwise very different postmodernist perspective, comes the similar question, ‘Must morality justify itself in terms of something other than itself? Does it not cease to be morality once it feels the need, or is

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *I Have Landed: Splashes and Reflections in Natural History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 221.

<sup>12</sup> Ruse, ‘The Significance of Evolution’, p. 504.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> F.H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1876, 1963), pp. 61-63, quoted in Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 209.

forced to, apologize for what it has prompted?<sup>15</sup> James Sterba attempts to make a distinction between morality and prudence in the context of a discussion of ethical egoism:

Obviously, the practical requirements of these two forms of egoism [individual and universal] would conflict significantly with the practical requirements of morality.<sup>16</sup>

Even if we agree with Sterba, we have to be very careful with this kind of objection, which appears to beg the question somewhat.<sup>17</sup> The claim that we should pursue our own self-interest is, after all, a moral claim (it is not, as Sterba holds, a denial of ‘the priority of morality over self-interest’,<sup>18</sup> but an equation of morality *with* self-interest), whether we are sympathetic to it or not – and if we are not sympathetic to it, we have to make and argue for a different moral claim, rather than simply bracketing our opponents out of moral discussion before we have started. At the very least, we have to argue for a definition of ‘morality’ which excludes the possibility that the unconstrained pursuit of self-interest can be described as ‘moral’ (one problem in this area is that the word ‘moral’ is often used interchangeably to mean ‘concerned with questions of right and wrong’ and ‘morally right’). The Wittgensteinian framing of the objection is more sophisticated than Sterba’s precisely because it recognises that those who argue for self-interest, by blurring the boundaries between prudence and what they want to describe as morality, *are* making a moral claim, before arguing that it is not a moral claim which makes sense in the context of what we are trying to achieve when we discuss morality. One of the main reasons for thinking in terms of ‘moral’ behaviour is precisely that different people’s interests conflict and we have to choose between them; if we all had the same interests then there would be no moral conflict and we would all do what we wanted to do, and do the right thing, both at the same time. If, as in ethical egoism, the only criterion for whose interests are satisfied is the relative power of the interested parties, it is difficult to see what role moral philosophers are supposed to play beyond keeping their heads down or, if they are particularly strong, doing whatever they want. The Wittgensteinians do not argue against ethical egoism on the grounds that it leaves little space for moral philosophers to operate, however. They imply that, given that morality is intended to guide our behaviour by reference to other criteria than pure self-interest, and given that

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<sup>15</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Sterba, *Three Challenges to Ethics*, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of avoiding ‘begging the question’, understood in exactly these terms as illicitly importing the answer to an allegedly unanswered question into the question itself, is one of Sterba’s main concerns throughout *Three Challenges to Ethics*, which makes it all the more surprising to see him begging a question himself.

<sup>18</sup> Sterba, *Three Challenges to Ethics*, p. 5.

consequently 'the (morally) right thing to do' and 'what I (independently of moral considerations, and all other things being equal) want to do' commonly do not coincide, or at least that when they do coincide they do so only by accident, then morality and self-interest are entirely separate categories. This is partly, as we might expect from the Wittgensteinians, a linguistic claim: the way in which the word 'morality' is used in our culture presumes that it is set up against self-interest, not as a justification of it.

## Immanuel Kant

The Wittgensteinians are not alone in viewing morality as an attempt to avoid having to use self-interest as a guide to behaviour. In his *Practical Ethics* Peter Singer identifies a number of moral philosophers from a variety of traditions, naming Immanuel Kant, R.M. Hare, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, J.J.C. Smart, John Rawls, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jürgen Habermas,<sup>19</sup> most of whose views of morality differ from those of most of the others in important ways, but all of whom agree, as does Singer,

that the justification of an ethical principle cannot be in terms of any partial or sectional group. Ethics takes a universal point of view. This does not mean that a particular ethical judgment must be universally applicable ... What it does mean is that in making ethical judgments we go beyond our own likes and dislikes. From an ethical point of view the fact that it is I who benefit from, say, a more equal distribution of income and you, say, who lose by it, is irrelevant. Ethics requires us to go beyond 'I' and 'you' to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it.<sup>20</sup>

Impartiality, universality, disinterestedness are key words in ethics. Despite Kurt Baier's claim that 'in many [books on ethics] the view is seriously entertained that everybody is an egoist, and egoism is not always regarded as a bad thing',<sup>21</sup> nevertheless the moral philosophers mentioned above, and most influential ethical theories, see egoism as something to be opposed or transcended. The creation of a disinterested moral philosophy is one of Kant's central concerns in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

For when [previous authors] thought of man merely as subject to a law (whatever it might be), the law had to carry with it some interest in order to attract or compel, because it did not spring as a law from *his own* will: in order to conform with the law his will had to be necessitated by *something else* to act in a certain way. This absolutely inevitable conclusion meant that all the labour spent in trying to find a supreme principle of duty was lost beyond recall; for what they discovered was never duty, but only the necessity of acting from a certain interest. This interest might be one's own or another's, but on such a

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<sup>19</sup> Singer, *Practical Ethics*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Kurt Baier, 'Egoism', in Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 197.

view the imperative was bound to be always a conditioned one and could not possibly serve as a moral law.<sup>22</sup>

The point of Kant's Categorical Imperative, '*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*',<sup>23</sup> is that acting in accordance with it explicitly removes self-interest, and instead makes logical consistency, universalisability, the test of the rightness of an action – in contrast to non-moral 'hypothetical imperatives',<sup>24</sup> which take the form 'If you want X, do Y', for the Categorical Imperative the question of what I want to happen is irrelevant. Certain maxims can be universalised; others just cannot, however much we might want them to be. Kant is pointing out that there are some things which it would be *impossible* for everyone to do; if we do such things, then we are acting inconsistently, making one rule for ourselves and another (implicitly) for others. Kant's most famous example is about promise-keeping. It might sometimes be to our advantage to break a promise. However, the very fact that we can break promises depends on our being able to make them in the first place, and our being able to make them depends on their being thought to be binding, giving them a force they would not possess if everyone felt able to break them whenever they wanted to:

For the universality of a law that every one believing himself to be in need can make any promise he pleases with the intention not to keep it would make promising, and the very purpose of promising, itself impossible, since no one would believe he was being promised anything, but would laugh at utterances of this kind as empty shams.<sup>25</sup>

So there is something incoherent in a maxim like 'Break a promise when it suits you to do so'; it contains within itself elements which make it impossible to universalise. Universalised, it makes no sense. Other maxims, if acted upon, would make it impossible for others to act upon the same maxim. An example might be 'Enslave others when it is convenient for you to do so'. Those who are enslaved lose the ability to take decisions for themselves and therefore cannot choose the maxims by which they act; they are unable to enslave others for their own purposes, and cannot act on the maxim 'Enslave others when it is convenient for you to do so'. If acted upon, then, the maxim creates people who cannot act upon it. This is fundamentally different from any kind of claim that it is not in my interest to lie or to enslave, or even that I should be able to recognise and extrapolate from that fact that it is in the interest of others that they

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<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals', tr. H.J. Paton, in H.J. Paton, *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (London: Hutchinson, 1948), pp. 94-95 (pp. 432-433). All references to this work will give the page number of Paton's translation, followed in brackets by the page number of the Royal Prussian Academy Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals', p. 84 (p. 421).

<sup>24</sup> Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals', p. 78 (p. 414).

<sup>25</sup> Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals', p. 85 (p. 422).

should not be lied to or enslaved. Kant simply argues that such behaviour is nonsensically inconsistent. According to O'Neill, this implies that 'Kant's claim is that the underlying principles of a life (and perhaps of a tradition) are morally unworthy if they cannot be shared'.<sup>26</sup> My self-interest is, by definition, not shared, or at least shared only from time to time, and is therefore not an adequate basis for making moral decisions.

### Utilitarianism and Universal Prescriptivism

Even an approach to morality like utilitarianism, which gives self-interest a major role – it aims, after all, to work for the greater good of the greatest number, and to use self-interest as a guide to what that greater good consists of – diverges sharply from ethical egoism. Its aim is not the fulfilment of one particular person's self-interest, but the self-interests of as many people as possible. These self-interests may conflict, and where they do we need to find a way of working out whose self-interest we should favour or, failing that, what we should do instead. We might ask whose self-interest, if followed, would cause the least harm to the realisation of other people's self-interests, or we might impose a compromise by which certain elements of people's self-interests are pursued and others are abandoned. In many cases, utilitarianism may well recommend an action which is against my own self-interest in the name of the general good, because:

it is the characteristically utilitarian conclusion that the right action is that which maximises utility (however construed) summed impersonally across all those affected by that action. That is the standard that we are to use, individually, in choosing our own actions.<sup>27</sup>

The fundamental impersonality of welfare utilitarianism has been criticised because the fact that 'everyone in a utilitarian scheme is in principle interchangeable for someone else'<sup>28</sup> gives it the drawback of being unable to allow for special cases in which differential treatment might be justified or even essential. Nevertheless, it does rule out the problem, faced by ethical egoism in particular, that 'Putting your thumb on the scale on your own behalf, or on behalf of those of whom you are fond, is not a particularly pretty picture, morally'.<sup>29</sup> So self-interested behaviour goes into utilitarian reasoning only along with the self-interests of everyone else, and it results from utilitarian reasoning only contingently, when that self-interest happens to coincide with the general good: as

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<sup>26</sup> O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> Robert E. Goodin, 'Utility and the Good' in Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 245.

<sup>28</sup> Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', p. 246.

<sup>29</sup> Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', p. 246.

Robert Goodin puts it, “‘What should we do, collectively?’” is much more the standard utilitarian question than is “‘How should I live, personally?’”<sup>30</sup> The ‘utilitarian insistence that principles derive from preferences’,<sup>31</sup> then, does not guarantee self-interested behaviour. A utilitarian would contend that it rules it out.

One of the moral philosophers specifically attacked by the Wittgensteinians, R.M. Hare, shares some of their suspicion of self-interest, and his ‘universal prescriptivism’ is specifically designed to rule it out. The key to his position is its focus on universalisability, and the claim that a position only qualifies as moral if it can in principle be used by anyone in a relevantly similar situation:

Offences against the thesis of universalizability are logical, not moral. If a person says ‘I ought to act in a certain way, but nobody else ought to act in that way in relevantly similar circumstances’, then, on my thesis, he is abusing the word ‘ought’; he is implicitly contradicting himself.<sup>32</sup>

This does not commit Hare to any particular set of moral rules, but it does mean that whatever moral rules he chooses must be consistently applied to everyone else – he is entitled to demand nothing of anyone else which he is not prepared to demand of himself, and everything which he believes it is right for him to do must be right for everyone else in any relevantly similar situation to do as well. Of course, however, it does not follow that he can compel anyone else to act in accordance with his own moral rules, nor that anyone else can compel him; Hare seems to be more interested in offering useful moral advice than in giving orders.<sup>33</sup> But the key point here is that universalisability is intended to ensure that behaviour is not self-interested:

to think morally is, at least, to subject one’s own interests, where they conflict with those of other people, to a principle which one can accept as governing anyone’s conduct in like circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

Whether or not Hare’s focus on universalisability succeeds in producing a moral framework which satisfies the Wittgensteinians – and clearly, as we saw above, it does not – it does at least make the same distinction between self-interest and morality, and it does at least attempt to eliminate the former.

### Redirecting Self-Interest

The rejection of self-interest, then, seems central to the ethical understandings of all of these thinkers or ethical schools. But rejection can take a variety of forms. While

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<sup>30</sup> Goodin, ‘Utility and the Good’, p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> O’Neill, ‘Kantian Ethics’, in Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 157.

the Wittgensteinians seem basically distrustful of self-interest from the very beginning, the other ethicists discussed here see it as something to be transcended, yes, but something which can only be transcended by investigating its content. We can only universalise, after all, if we have something we can universalise in the first place. And for the utilitarians, and for Hare, it is precisely our self-interest, what we want to happen, which is extended and transcended by a process of universalisation, or the substitution of one person into the moral shoes of another. To see this clearly it is worth considering another, related, moral principle, the Golden Rule (various formulations, the most famous being Jesus' words in Luke 6.31, 'as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them'<sup>35</sup>). The key here is in 'as you wish that men would do to you'. The Rule presumes that I have preferences, and attempts to work with them. It recognises that I may well make one judgement, favouring myself, in a case which involves me, and another judgement in a case in which I am not involved, or in which I am involved in a different position so that the judgement I made in the first case would injure me or place me at a disadvantage. Of course, any given act will have different results for the different people affected by it. With this in mind, the Golden Rule does not attempt to *remove* self-interest from ethical decision-making, but aims to *use* my self-interest in the interests of all: it only works if I have interests and preferences, because the criterion for the rightness of my action is whether or not I can consent to someone else doing it – if I would prefer that that action were not performed by someone else, then consistency demands that I should not perform the action either.

The self-interest used by the Golden Rule need not be my own; it may belong to others whose interests are already closely identified with mine, and which I habitually consider when deciding how to act. By imagining the effect of my proposed action from the point of view of a self-interested other (whether this takes the form of imagining that I *am* another, or of imagining that I *have the same circumstances as* another), I am made more aware of the fact that my actions may have adverse effects on others, that others may need to be protected from me. The Golden Rule redirects my self-interest, using the fact that I am self-interested, and the fact that I am capable of imagining myself in the place of others, to remind me that others are self-interested too. Just as my self-interest leads me to desire that others will act in certain ways and refrain from acting in certain other ways, so (I may assume) their self-interest leads them to desire certain kinds of behaviour from me. Their self-interest is as legitimate as mine. And it is my self interest, in

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<sup>35</sup> Here, and throughout this thesis, biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version

conjunction with my imagination, which tells me what sort of behaviour others are likely to desire, and therefore what I should do. The attainment of knowledge of others' needs through knowledge of my own needs is the aim of the 'original position' in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, in which all parties are under a 'veil of ignorance' so that:

First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism. More than this, I assume that the parties do not know the particular circumstances of their own society. That is, they do not know its economic or political situation, or the level of civilization and culture it has been able to achieve. The persons in the original position have no information as to which generation they belong.<sup>36</sup>

The purpose of this is to ensure that all will come up with 'principles the consequences of which they are prepared to live with whatever generation they turn out to belong to'.<sup>37</sup> But although Rawls aims to 'nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage',<sup>38</sup> the veil of ignorance does not *remove* self-interest; like the Golden Rule, it depends on it. It is in *everyone's* interest (in a way it tends not to be in the real world) to agree to the most just principles possible, because unjust ones might disadvantage *anyone*. The veil of ignorance thus gives a real incentive for those under it to imagine themselves in the place of the least fortunate in society. Rawls uses the original position as the basis for the creation of a social contract, with what is in effect Golden Rule thinking identifying the legislators' concerns with those of the weakest members of society – precisely the people who are in real life least likely to be legislators.

This kind of redirection of self-interest can be seen to be going on in Hare's ethics. He imagines two people, *A* and *B*, in different positions in the same situation and therefore with different interests about what they would most want to happen. Reasoning morally about the situation does not involve ignoring self-interest completely, but looking at what *everyone's* self-interest consists of:

*B* should disregard the fact that he plays the particular role in the situation which he does, without disregarding the inclinations which people have in situations of this sort. In other words, he must be prepared to give weight to *A's* inclinations and interests as if they were his own. This is what turns selfish prudential reasoning into moral reasoning.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 137.

<sup>37</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 137.

<sup>38</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 94.

We saw above that utilitarianism is doing the same sort of thing, both ruling out self-interested behaviour (except where such behaviour is also in the general good) and simultaneously deriving principles from preferences. And Kantianism can be shown to share some of these characteristics too. Again, certain acts are shown to be wrong because they are inconsistent with being made universal law, an inconsistency which in turn derives in many cases from the bad results – sometimes so bad as the total breakdown of social institutions such as promise-keeping – which would result from their being universally practised. I have to put aside my short-term self-interest in favour of a wider interest in my – and in our – continuing ability to be able to act at all. All of this shows that ethical egoism is not the same as regarding self-interest as central to moral reasoning – the difference lies in whether I pursue my own self-interest or merely examine my own self-interest in order to discover the self-interest of others and the wider interests of society at large. And this distinction does not seem to be recognised by the Wittgensteinians, as we saw in the first section. A corollary of their belief that we do not choose our moral principles, but that they are a product of our language, culture and upbringing – as we saw in their criticisms of Hare – is that the binding nature of moral principles has nothing to do with the results they bring us, or indeed the results they bring to others – as we saw in their criticisms of Foot. So far as they are concerned *any* self-interest, not only the naked self-interest of ethical egoism, but the modified and redirected self-interest of the various moral philosophies discussed above, has no place in ethics.

And yet this does not seem to be the whole story. We saw above that the moral principles which the Wittgensteinians see as being implicit in our language and culture are associated with the deliberate refusal to pursue one's own self-interest. This does indeed seem to follow from the observation that moral development involves a rejection of such 'bad' practices as selfishness and greed, and all the behaviour which goes with them. Furthermore, morality is supposed to be pursued not only not because of any advantage to the agent which might result, but not for reasons contingent on results at all. There are potential problems with both of these elements of the Wittgensteinian rejection of self-interest. The first element's apparent wholesale acceptance of whatever language and culture might imply can be criticised not just on the grounds that it is morally relativistic – one of the main thrusts of O'Neill's attack on the Wittgensteinians which we saw in the first section – but because the normative value of what is implied by language and culture can be called into serious question by an assessment of how it affects those

who live within it, a line of investigation particularly associated with feminist analysis, which will be discussed below. The second element's apparent denial that morality might have a point<sup>40</sup> may be criticised both from the perspective of those ethicists discussed above, who see our interests as a useful clue to what we ought to do, and also from the point of view of virtue ethics, a branch of moral philosophy which has not yet been discussed here but whose emphasis on teleology is importantly distinct from the approach of the Wittgensteinians.

## Virtue Ethics

In virtue ethics, *character* rather than *action* (or at least, given the difficulty of making such a strict distinction, the kind of character revealed by and embodied in the performance of certain kinds of action) is typically the most important determinant of a person's moral goodness. According to Daniel Statman:

this basic assumption embodies two main theses: 1. at least some judgments about the value of character traits are independent of judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions; and 2. the notion of virtue justifies that of right conduct, that is ... the concept of virtue is explanatory prior to that of right conduct.<sup>41</sup>

One reason for virtue ethics' rejection of rules and principles as the basis for acting morally is that in difficult situations, where principles seem to conflict, the principles themselves contain no means of choosing between them. This means that even for those who want to employ rule-based moral theories, 'the virtuous person is not the person who has excellent knowledge of some set of principles, meta-principles and meta-meta-principles, but the person who has right perception as to which rules should apply here and now. And this person must be, among other things, sensitive, compassionate and perceptive'<sup>42</sup> – a judgement about her character. We can expect someone who has these qualities to act well in, and to give good advice about, difficult cases not because she knows the relevant moral principles better than anyone else but simply because she is a good person.<sup>43</sup> In other words, there is no necessary connection between knowing more about moral principles than anyone else and being a good person – and no guarantee that academic moral philosophers, say, are good people simply by virtue of their knowing a great deal more than most other people about theories governing moral

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Phillips' essay, 'On Morality's Having a Point', in *Interventions in Ethics*, pp. 1-13.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Statman, 'Introduction to Virtue Ethics', in Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Statman, 'Introduction to Virtue Ethics', p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Statman, 'Introduction to Virtue Ethics', p. 6.

decision-making. Virtue ethics' emphasis on character leads to an interest in moral self-development and in the content of a proper self-concern. This gives it the problem of having to find a way of justifying the valuing of certain characteristics over others – of describing some things as virtues and other things as vices.

One way of doing this is to appeal to the results of virtuous behaviour. We saw this in the work of Foot which the Wittgensteinians criticised, but the claim that certain virtues need to be pursued if a person is to live well, or flourish, remains a key strand of virtue ethics. Rosalind Hursthouse sets out what she describes as 'Plato's requirement on the virtues':

1. The virtues benefit their possessor. (They enable her to flourish, to be, and live a life that is, *eudaimon*.)
2. The virtues make their possessor a good human being. (Human beings need the virtues in order to live well, to flourish *as* human beings, to live a characteristically good, *eudaimon*, human life.)
3. The above two features of the virtues are interrelated.<sup>44</sup>

While there is no *guarantee* that virtuous behaviour will bring good results, there is a good chance that it will in the long run (just as by not smoking I cannot *guarantee* that I will not get lung cancer, but it is nevertheless a better bet than smoking, if I want to avoid lung cancer).<sup>45</sup> The important thing here is that the virtues are not to be followed *because* they benefit their possessor; they are to be followed because following them makes one a good person – *and* they benefit their possessor too. And the way in which they benefit their possessor is not simply by providing her with material goods (although they may), but by making her a good person – which is (by definition) a good thing to be, a benefit. 'This benefit may be perceived 'in the context of reflection on one's own character and life',<sup>46</sup> where "If only I could be less selfish and self-centred, more thankful for what I have, more concerned for the good of others and the good *in* them, how much happier I would be" is not an uncommon thought'.<sup>47</sup> Hursthouse criticises Phillips', and John McDowell's, insistence that 'the raising of questions about whether virtue or vice is a more reliable bet'<sup>48</sup> is reserved for the immoralist. Phillips, we saw, was keen to say that since virtue is its own reward it simply makes no sense for the virtuous to raise prudential questions about it, and that 'for anyone concerned about justice, death for the sake of justice is not a disaster. The disaster for him would be to be found wanting in face of

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<sup>44</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 172.

<sup>46</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 177.

<sup>47</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 177.

<sup>48</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 181.

death, and to seek the path of injustice and compromise'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, when Foot says that 'the proper use of his limbs is something a man has reason to want if he wants anything. I do not know just what someone who denies this proposition could have in mind',<sup>50</sup> Phillips will not even accept this. He gives not one, but four instant counterexamples: Jesus' words in Matt 18.9, 'if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee; it is better to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire'; Paul's thanks to God for 'the thorn in the flesh' which is a constant reminder that he is not sufficient unto himself; Rush Rhees' story of blind Brentano, who denied that his loss of sight was a bad thing, because it made him better able to concentrate on his philosophy; and those saints who prayed to partake in the sufferings of Christ.<sup>51</sup> To Hursthouse, this sort of thing 'smacks of a masculine yearning for "the short life with glory"'.<sup>52</sup> There is no reason why one should not regard losing one's life, or one's limbs, or one's eyesight, as a loss – indeed, we might have reason to think there was something wrong with someone who did not. What makes Hursthouse's critique of Phillips particularly interesting is that it considers a key Wittgensteinian concern – the context in which we learn, and in which we teach our children, about virtue:

If we brought [our children] up exclusively on stories in which the virtuous lost their lives when they risked them, and those who aimed to save their own skin always survived, if those were the only cases in the newspapers to which we drew their attention, I doubt that ... we would succeed in instilling virtue in them.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, the cultural and linguistic context in which we learn about the virtues is not the one Phillips and the other Wittgensteinians describe – it may be the case that we do not act virtuously (if indeed we do so at all) in order to benefit from it, but nevertheless we are taught that, 'when *eudaimonia* is impossible to achieve or maintain [through virtuous behaviour], that's not "what we should have expected" but tragically bad luck'.<sup>54</sup>

Peter Byrne makes a similar criticism of Phillips' wholesale rejection of teleology. Byrne rightly characterises Phillips as arguing on the basis that 'if I look for something outside morality for whose sake I recommend it, what I recommend is not morality itself, but only morality in so far as it serves this purpose'.<sup>55</sup> Like Hursthouse, Byrne accuses

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<sup>49</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>50</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 183.

<sup>53</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 184.

<sup>54</sup> Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 185.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 146.

Phillips of overstating the separation between morality and teleology, and of avoiding confronting ‘the kinds of teleology which ... see morality as a constitutive means to attain a happy, perfected life ... in which acting well figures as an inescapable way in which such a life is embodied’.<sup>56</sup> According to Byrne:

To speak of acting virtuously as a constitutive means of attaining the supreme human good is to say that the full value of so acting is only realised if it is part of a larger whole. That larger whole consists of the union of acting well and faring well. Acting well is not a contingent part of that whole, since the kind of perfected, satisfied life in view is identified in part by being the life that includes a state of virtuous thought and action. But this does not mean that the whole which is the perfected life consists entirely of a virtuous state. More is needed to constitute the whole and that more connects acting morally with the order in the world.<sup>57</sup>

Both Byrne and Hursthouse might be understood as offering a more sophisticated version of Foot’s connection between morality and its results, and thus as escaping the full force of Phillips’ criticisms of Foot’s position. Phillips is still, I would argue, right to complain that justice does not produce profitable results as consistently as Foot wants to argue, and that this should nevertheless not be understood as a compelling reason to seek injustice instead. But as Byrne says, ‘Where [Phillips’] arguments fall down is in the presupposition that only one, crude way of linking morality to teleology can be in question. The issues are just more complicated than Phillips makes out’.<sup>58</sup> The question still remains, though, of how to make the link between morality and teleology in a convincing way which avoids self-serving justifications.

Virtue ethicists sometimes claim that it is actually relatively easy to identify a virtuous person – that if we are honest we know one when we see one – and that therefore we can identify the virtues with some confidence simply by finding a virtuous person and seeing what she does. Susan Wolf’s call for a return to ‘a healthy form of intuitionism’<sup>59</sup> (the context of which is discussed in more detail in chapter 7, below) and Michael Slote’s references to ‘commonsense virtue ethics’<sup>60</sup> are both examples of this approach, and while they are convincing in their way (we really *do* think we can spot virtuous people) it is precisely their attractiveness which should make us suspicious of them – they fall into the same traps as the early-twentieth century intuitionism of Moore, Prichard and Ross which were so convincingly criticised by Ayer, MacIntyre and others. The fact that there is relatively wide agreement over what some virtues look like should

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<sup>56</sup> Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>57</sup> Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, p. 147.

<sup>58</sup> Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, p. 148.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Wolf, ‘Moral Saints’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), p. 439.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Slote, ‘From Morality to Virtue’, in Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, p. 140.

not blind us to the fact that the places where wide agreement exists – as with rule-based ethics, where the almost universal consensus on ‘do not kill’ turns out to be so obvious as not to be all that useful, most of the time – are by definition not those areas where moral philosophers are commonly called upon to give advice. There seems to be no guarantee that someone we think of as a virtuous person will be able to help with more complicated moral problems. There is no wide agreement about the difficult cases whose difficulty stems from the fact that there is no wide agreement over them, and in which we cannot rely on our intuitions. Many of these differences are culture-dependent: an intuitionist grounding for virtue ethics fails in particular to evaluate competing, culture-dependent moral claims except by reference to intuitions which, being culture-dependent themselves, can have priority over other such claims only on their own terms which, if adopted, deny the need to evaluate other competing moral claims in any case.

### **Alasdair MacIntyre and *After Virtue***

Virtue ethics is perfectly capable of recognising cultural distinctions in accounts of the virtues, however, and another of its potential justificatory strategies takes culture, or ‘practice’, as the level at which virtues should be defined and justified. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, perhaps the most influential twentieth-century account of virtue ethics, defines a virtue (in the first instance, at least) as

*an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.<sup>61</sup>*

By ‘practice’ MacIntyre means

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>62</sup>

The Wittgensteinian idea of ‘moral practices’ is never defined at so much length as this, but MacIntyre’s definition would, I think, function perfectly well as an explanation of what Phillips and Mounce mean, in *Moral Practices*, too, although with one important corollary. MacIntyre tends to focus on cultures – understood in a relatively large-scale sense; he describes ‘heroic societies’, ‘Athenian society’ and ‘medieval society’ in

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<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Second Edition) (London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 191.

<sup>62</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187.

monolithic terms<sup>63</sup> – as the locations where certain virtues should be followed and certain ways of living make sense; the Wittgensteinians are more prepared to allow for differences between members of the same culture – at least, that is a major theme of Phillips’ critique of MacIntyre in *Interventions in Ethics*:

There is surely a distinction between the picture of the alienated individual who cannot give himself to anything because he belongs to nothing, and the picture of individuals giving themselves to different things because they belong to different movements and traditions. Why should the latter be thought problematic? Is it not an accurate picture of the way things are; indeed, of the way things have always been? The alternative picture of an all-embracing social morality unifying a whole culture and its participants is nothing more than a philosophical construction.<sup>64</sup>

Although this is persuasive, it is in fact not all that clear that there is as much distance between Phillips and MacIntyre as Phillips wants to claim – or rather, that despite important differences in their analyses of the history and current state of moral philosophy (Phillips does not share MacIntyre’s pessimism, nor therefore his prescription), the similarity between what for the purposes of this discussion is the most important feature of their positions is striking. MacIntyre is identified by Theodore R. Schatzki along with Peter Winch as one of an otherwise fairly diverse group of thinkers (he also names Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Jean-François Lyotard, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) who share Wittgenstein’s ‘intuition that the social, and the social context of an individual life, is a complex of practices’,<sup>65</sup> and it is on this key similarity which I am focusing here. While Phillips is clearly more prepared than MacIntyre to allow for what we might describe as ‘subcultures’ (which might in principle be tiny) which have their own internally coherent moral beliefs and which might stand in opposition to a dominant culture, or dominant cultures, with which they interact and from which they may derive some of their moral beliefs, nevertheless the basic claim, that moral behaviour is contingent on one’s way of life rather than being capable of universal applicability, acceptability and justification, is shared by both of them. What I see as the most telling critiques of MacIntyre, namely those which examine the context in which the virtues he values make sense, and the consequences of valuing such virtues, can therefore be applied to the Wittgensteinians as well.

Putting the focus on the internal aims of an activity, without any discussion at this point of whether the aims are desirable, is similar to Kant’s notion of the

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<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapters 10, 11, 13, pp. 121-145, 165-180.

<sup>64</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>65</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, ‘Wittgenstein and the Social Context of an Individual Life’, *History of the Human Sciences* 13 (2000), p. 103.

hypothetical imperative ('If you want X, do Y') which Kant himself thought of as being entirely without moral import. Statman's observation that 'This view of VE [Virtue Ethics] has been influential especially in attempts to apply VE to the domain of business ethics'<sup>66</sup> might be seen as an indictment of the approach by those who want to call an entire practice (such as, for example, a practice whose internal aims are enshrined in law as the duty to maximise shareholder value) into question and see in MacIntyre's view no means of doing so. MacIntyre, indeed, is quite explicit about the incoherence of criticising cultures from within:

there is nothing to be made of the question: for what purpose do the characters in the *Iliad* observe the rules that they observe and honor the precepts which they honor? It is rather the case that it is only within their framework of rules and precepts that they are able to frame purposes at all; and just because of this the analogy breaks down in another way, too. All questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen.<sup>67</sup>

It is equally impossible to criticise cultures from the outside, from a detached or universal point of view, because 'In heroic society there is no "outside" except that of the stranger'.<sup>68</sup> Using tradition or culture as the basis for ethics requires assuming the necessity of certain social roles, and defining the virtues as those qualities which are necessary for the performance of those roles.<sup>69</sup> The problem with this, according to Susan Moller Okin, is its 'failure to ask: "By what ethical standard can [a society's] entire social structure be defended?"'<sup>70</sup> It is all very well to answer, as MacIntyre and the Wittgensteinians effectively do, 'by no ethical standard but its own', but this means that many potential critical strategies can never get off the ground. And, viewed from any context but the culture in question itself, many such strategies look highly convincing – indeed, many of them look convincing precisely because they pay attention to circumstances within the culture in question which that culture's own value system ignores or excuses. The Homeric tradition discussed by MacIntyre is problematic because the virtues it ascribes to women are 'different from men's, consisting primarily in their physical attractions and their fidelity', and are 'defined in relation to men, whereas men's virtues were not defined in relation to women'.<sup>71</sup> Women are not the only group to whom the heroic virtues cannot be applied:

Slaves, MacIntyre admits, were not much better off than the dead, but he defines them as 'outside the heroic community'. Having defined the

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<sup>66</sup> Statman, 'Introduction to Virtue Ethics', p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 126.

<sup>68</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 126.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, p. 51.

<sup>71</sup> Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, p. 50.

community so as to exclude its slaves, he claims that the Homeric virtues were those qualities that protected and furthered the interests of the community as a whole.<sup>72</sup>

Aristotle's account of the virtues is no less exclusionary:

Aristotle's answer to this question ['What is the good life for man?'] was a life that he thought women (as well as slaves and manual workers) were necessarily excluded from, and one that depended in large part on the performance by these excluded people of subordinate functions.<sup>73</sup>

For MacIntyre to refer to 'Aristotle's indefensible defence of slavery'<sup>74</sup> is simply not acceptable within the context of his own account of moral philosophy: either Aristotle's defence of slavery is defensible, in which case his account of the virtues may still make sense, although we may, as members of a different culture from Aristotle's, choose to reject it if slavery is something we would rather not endorse, or it is indefensible, in which case MacIntyre cannot claim that this 'need not carry any large implications for our attitudes to his overall theory'.<sup>75</sup> Slavery is not just an unfortunate side issue in Aristotle: both it and misogyny are central, even if they are unspoken. This is because Aristotle's account of 'the good life' is one in which 'the life of moral and political virtue exists for the sake of and must be subordinated to the life of contemplative inquiry'.<sup>76</sup> And 'Aristotle makes it clear that all those who participate in the performance of necessary but inferior functions such as domestic management, child rearing, and the production of daily necessities cannot live this life of excellence'<sup>77</sup> – yet if those functions were not performed, then nobody would be able to live what Aristotle sees as 'the good life'. It is simply not good enough to rule that this kind of critical strategy is illegitimate on the basis that it does not accept the terms of the culture it is criticising, given that the criticism it offers *is* its rejection of those terms.<sup>78</sup> This is most clearly the case when the criticism is offered, like this one, on behalf of people who inhabit the culture but are silenced or sidelined by it, but I want to argue that it is the case anyway. And if this criticism can be applied to MacIntyre, then it applies to those parts of MacIntyre's

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<sup>72</sup> Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, p. 50.

<sup>73</sup> Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, p. 45.

<sup>74</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 162.

<sup>75</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 162.

<sup>76</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> This is not the same as saying that Aristotle's misogyny makes it impossible for feminists to use his approach and insights in a constructive way. See for example Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): Nussbaum remains aware and critical of Aristotle's misogyny, but maintains that Aristotle's method can be extended to cover the whole of society, even if Aristotle himself does not recognise this. See also Kathleen C. Cook's claim that 'To blame people for failing to demonstrate [an awareness of truths which were missed by most if not all of their philosophical contemporaries] would seem to fall under the general heading of blaming them for not being a kind of moral hero or saint – something many of us think to be a mistake' ('Sexual Inequality in Aristotle's Theories of Reproduction and Inheritance', Julie K. Ward (ed.), *Feminism and Ancient Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 66).

analysis which are closest to that of the Wittgensteinians. In the next chapter, I will explore some ways in which feminist criticism might engage with and respond to the Wittgensteinian approach to ethics.

# 3

## The Wittgensteinian Approach and Feminism

### Shared Assumptions

One striking thing about much feminist analysis of culture and language is that it has a great deal in common with the Wittgensteinian approach, and indeed with that of MacIntyre. For example, Dale Spender, in her account of ‘second-wave’ feminism, writes that:

human beings tend to project onto the objects and events of the world the value-system they have learned, selecting evidence from the world which fits into, and reinforces, the belief-system of their culture. Depending on the society in which we live, we are ‘programmed’ for a particular and limited set of meanings, and we then proceed to respond only to that which is meaningful for us.<sup>1</sup>

Spender goes on to note, first, that ‘Contradictions tend to be censored, and we continue to see only that which is consistent with our established world-view’,<sup>2</sup> and, second, that ‘fortunately we are not confined by our original value-system ... there is some room for conflicting evidence – the contradictions – to creep in’.<sup>3</sup> We see a similar awareness of the possibility of coming to see the failings of the moral norms which surround us in the work of the Wittgensteinians: Beardsmore is prepared to discuss the existence of ‘moral rebels’ who challenge prevailing moral behaviour by reference to moral beliefs or texts which are ostensibly held to be normative by all concerned,<sup>4</sup> and Phillips bases his rejection of a particular, reward-based, belief in heaven and hell as properly Christian on an analysis of Christian beliefs with which they are held to be incompatible.<sup>5</sup> It seems, though, that so far as the Wittgensteinians are concerned it is not characteristically the belief systems themselves which are at fault, so much as the way in which people operate within them and use them to judge their behaviour. The standard error, on a Wittgensteinian understanding, is a misconstrual of the implications of a belief system by an individual or perhaps a group attempting or professing to live according to that system; it is not that the system itself is basically, inherently self-contradictory (an analysis closer to that of MacIntyre, for example). Indeed, while Phillips takes issue with

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Spender, *For The Record: The Making and Meaning of Feminist Knowledge* (London: The Women’s Press, 1985), pp. 27–28.

<sup>2</sup> Spender, *For The Record*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Spender, *For The Record*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, pp. 54–64.

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

MacIntyre's bemoaning of the lack of 'an all-embracing social morality unifying a whole culture and its participants' as 'nothing more than a philosophical construction',<sup>6</sup> his alternative 'picture of individuals giving themselves to different things because they belong to different movements and traditions'<sup>7</sup> still gives authority to those movements and traditions – and consequently still allows those movements and traditions to be the judges of those who belong to them, rather than the other way round. While the Wittgensteinians deny, with good reason, the attainability of 'absolute truth' independent of particular linguistic communities, they implicitly assert, as does MacIntyre, the existence of what might be called 'culture-dependent absolute truth' – an initially paradoxical-sounding concept by which I mean that they hold that, *within and only within any given culture or moral practice*, it makes sense to describe certain beliefs as absolute in that, *so far as that culture or moral practice is concerned*, it makes absolutely no sense to question them.

### Another Look at Moral and Other Relativisms

In chapter 1 I looked at O'Neill's accusation that the Wittgensteinians were guilty of moral relativism, and argued against this on the basis that it involved a misunderstanding of the reason why the Wittgensteinians appeared to open themselves up to such an accusation in the first place; that their refusal to pass judgement was not what it seemed to be. I pointed out that their failure to claim to occupy an authoritative, neutral, 'objective' moral standpoint stemmed from a rejection, which recurs throughout their writings, of the idea that this was in principle either possible or desirable. As Desiree Berendsen puts it, 'The whole of Phillips' work ... can be seen as a thorough application of the Wittgensteinian insight that no privileged positions are possible in any domain of life and thought'.<sup>8</sup> I noted that the Wittgensteinian position still allowed sufficiently authoritative moral judgements to be made by inhabitants of particular cultures, judgements which would not have universal authority, but which could in principle be authoritative for other inhabitants of the culture in question – an interested, not disinterested, judgement, but no less useful for all that. We can see now, in the light of feminist criticism, that there are at least two serious problems with this position.

First, although in principle anyone who understands (which on a Wittgensteinian reading does not always require inhabiting) a particular form of life, language, belief

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Desiree Berendsen, Review of D.Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Ars Disputandi* [<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>] 2 (2002), 3 (consulted 26 August 2003).

system or culture can speak with authority about what makes sense morally within that form of life, language, belief system or culture, nevertheless in practice the system of rules within that culture may give the authority to speak on behalf of the whole culture to a relatively small group, and may systematically deny the right to reason or to make authoritative pronouncements to everyone else (or, in particular, to certain groups). So, perhaps, those who hold political authority (whether democratically chosen or otherwise) or those considered to possess particular wisdom (shamans or academics, for example) may have more attention paid to their views than those who do not. And, importantly for this objection, this effectively reduces the likelihood that any speaker who is not in such a position of authority will be taken seriously (or, perhaps, say anything). For example, until their enfranchisement, women in Britain were, through being denied democratic rights which were accorded to men, automatically excluded from deciding who could speak and act with authority in the context of political leadership. By extension this meant (at the very least) that they had fewer opportunities than enfranchised men for making authoritative pronouncements, by voting, for example. It is possible in some cases that simply giving authority to one group can reduce the ability of another group or groups to have their voices heard, even if this is nobody's intention.

Second, although the Wittgensteinian version of relativism does not, contrary to O'Neill's belief, make it impossible to criticise practices in other cultures which we find unacceptable (quite the opposite, in fact), it does have an effect on the seriousness with which such criticisms are taken within those cultures. So we are entitled to say whatever we like (or rather, whatever the norms of the culture or form of life from which we speak allow us to say, bearing in mind the first objection above) about another culture, but the very fact of its being a different culture from our own means that we are likely, by definition, to fall outside the category of people who, within *that* culture, are accorded the right to speak authoritatively about it. Of course, both of these problems, which I have characterised as problems with the Wittgensteinian position, are problems in real life: the words of certain speakers really are thought to have more authority than those of others; criticism from outside any given form of life really is (in many cases) ignored by people inside it. The problem is that the Wittgensteinian approach does not give us any way of deciding what to do about this – in effect, it enables all parties to carry on as they were before, and allows the continuation of injustices which might be identified and exposed by those less philosophically inclined to write them off as 'cultural differences'.

## Feminism, Relativism, Absolutism and Criteria

This failing is why I believe that a feminist analysis can help simultaneously to reinforce the framework and to expose the weaknesses of some of the particular conclusions of the Wittgensteinian approach. Much feminist analysis is heavily indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, recognising that

Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.<sup>9</sup>

It is of course this kind of insight (which, again, has important points of contact with the Wittgensteinian approach I have been discussing) that allows feminism to get off the ground in the first place, by allowing a recognition of the non-absoluteness of truth claims and consequently the possibility of rejecting some of them. This might be seen to present a problem. It is all very well to have a philosophical basis for rejecting truth claims which appear to oppress women, but if the basis of this rejection is a radical undercutting of the possibility of absolute truth in any case, then how can alternative truth claims be made? How do feminists argue for some things and against others? The key seems to be that the rejection of absoluteness is not taken to entail the rejection of the possibility of saying anything at all – rather, it is part of a rejection of the 'all-or-nothing' philosophical binary which demands absolute certainty on the grounds that the only alternative is absolute ignorance. Such a position is accused by Grace Jantzen of being morally highly suspect:

in the face of the massively unequal distribution of resources and privileges, so that millions starve, are made refugees, are denied not only the pleasures of life but even its most basic necessities, it is hideous to pretend that we do not have adequate criteria of justice and flourishing.<sup>10</sup>

It is also implicated in 'the moral paralysis of well-intentioned folk [which] stems from the idea that either we must find a total solution for a problem, or else we might as well

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, tr. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), p. 131, quoted in part in Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 193.

<sup>10</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 216.

do nothing'.<sup>11</sup> It should be obvious that, whatever else we might want to say about it, such 'moral paralysis' is strongly in the interests of those who benefit the most from the way things are, and who have the most to lose from change.

What, then, might be feminist 'criteria of justice and flourishing'? The category 'feminist' of course covers a wide variety of philosophical and theological strategies, and incorporates a great deal of disagreement in addition to its important shared insights.<sup>12</sup> But while some philosophical approaches attempt to generate criteria of justice and flourishing by attempting to universalise across cultures, the feminist approach I want to consider is somewhat different. It identifies a serious problem with such attempts at universalisation, namely that if 'moral reciprocity involves the capacity to take the standpoint of the other, to put oneself imaginatively in the place of the other', then 'under conditions of the "veil of ignorance"' – i.e. conditions specifically introduced to eliminate difference in the interests of moral empathy – 'the *other as different from the self* disappears'.<sup>13</sup> Seyla Benhabib distinguishes between such 'substitutionalist universalism' and 'interactive universalism'.<sup>14</sup> The former focuses on the 'generalized other', 'a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves',<sup>15</sup> produced by moral theories such as Kant's. For the latter, the 'other' taken into consideration is the 'concrete other', a being whose similarity to myself is partly constituted by the fact that I, like her, 'as a finite, concrete, embodied individual, shape and fashion the circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic, cultural and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life's story'<sup>16</sup> – who shares with me, in other words, difference. We cannot draw confident moral conclusions about others from abstract universalising techniques, because 'The conception of selves who can be individuated prior to their moral ends is incoherent'.<sup>17</sup> If we want to know what justice and flourishing are for other people, we have to ask them. And the people who it is most important to ask are the people who are least commonly asked, and whose voices are least commonly heard. By bringing the silenced and the marginalised into the discussion, feminism is able to locate injustices which are simply not visible to dominant groups. But some feminists claim more than this. Jantzen argues that those who are

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<sup>11</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> For a helpful introduction to some of the different feminist approaches to philosophy of religion, see Nancy Frankenberry, 'Feminist Approaches' in Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack (eds.), *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 3-27.

<sup>13</sup> Seyla Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other', in Elizabeth Frazer, Jennifer Hornsby and Sabina Lovibond (eds.), *Ethics: A Feminist Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 283.

<sup>14</sup> Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other', p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other', p. 280.

<sup>16</sup> Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other', p. 284.

<sup>17</sup> Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other', p. 284.

oppressed occupy an epistemologically *privileged* position precisely because they are able to see through the self-justificatory discourses of power in the cultures in which they live:

The development of knowledge from a subjugated position is not automatic. It is not simply marginalization that produces insight, but ... *struggle* from this position in the face of the multiple ways in which a dominant ideology would deny the very possibility of alternatives. Truth, we might say, is in the process, as much as in the 'truths' thereby produced, and the same applies to a symbolic. Although it may indeed sometimes be difficult to ascertain what counts as justice and flourishing, far more often it will be obvious enough once we put ourselves into an engaged position.<sup>18</sup>

Even feminists are not immune from the charge of marginalising minority voices within their own ranks, as witnessed by claims that, for example, 'the white segments of the women's movement must also address, understand and fight racism inside their ranks' and recognise that 'Black and other Third World women's relationships to the systems of oppression in this society are, by definition, different from those of other oppressed groups who do not experience both racial and sexual oppression at the same time'.<sup>19</sup> The most sympathetic reading of this might see it as a problem with some feminists, or perhaps with what has sometimes been identified as 'whitefeminism', which would tend to confirm this aspect of feminist theory, rather than a problem with feminism itself.<sup>20</sup>

A feminist distinction between the rejection of absolute truth-claims and the relativistic rejection of criteria can begin, therefore, along very similar lines to the Wittgensteinian way of arguing the same distinction, as with Jantzen's here:

The rejection of absolute truth-claims does not degenerate into pernicious relativism. A partial perspective can still offer useful criteria; and it is still accountable to the scrutiny of others.<sup>21</sup>

Jantzen immediately goes on, however, to say what gives these new criteria their authority, and her answer is very different from that given by the Wittgensteinians. It gives priority to those who are marginalised in the context of any particular system of discourse, rather than to the discourse itself:

Because the symbolic generated from the margins is not automatic, but is one forged in the struggles both to 'name the pain' and also to envision creative alternatives, it is a symbolic which cannot dispense with criteria and a commitment to trustworthiness. The idea that we could do the 'god-trick' and acquire a view from nowhere is not a rejection of criteria. Rather it is the affirmation that all imagination is perceived from a particular position, is partial,

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<sup>18</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Smith, 'Notes for Yet Another Paper on Black Feminism, or Will the Real Enemy Please Stand Up?', in Laurel Richardson and Verta Taylor (eds.), *Feminist Frontiers: Rethinking Sex, Gender, and Society* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1983), p. 358.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen T. Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) seeks to respond to and take on board the Womanist critique of whitefeminism.

<sup>21</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 218.

and is subject to critical analysis, most especially from those who are in danger of becoming its victims.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, we might say, standpoint theory is nothing new: all theory is standpoint theory, but some theory does not recognise the partiality of its own perspective. Better to accept incompleteness, to make judgements in dialogue with those from other perspectives, than to pretend that such incompleteness does not exist by wilfully ignoring the perspectives of others who do not fit in to one's own particular standpoint.

One example of the latter approach is in Hare's use of a hypothetical 'archangel', a being who would always be able to know what was the right thing to do, having 'infinite knowledge and clarity of thought and no partiality to self and other weaknesses'.<sup>23</sup> Lynne Arnault argues that the archangel's admitted counterfactual status is undesirable as well as unattainable, and that it fails to take into account the factors which make it unattainable:

By discounting the effects of people's social identity upon their understandings of the world, including theory of knowledge, Hare's archangel ideal obscures and mystifies the privileged relation that members of dominant groups occupy with respect to the sociocultural means of discourse.<sup>24</sup>

The problem is that in assuming that the archangel would be capable of making judgements entirely untainted by the partialities and particularities of culture and upbringing, and therefore 'right', Hare 'does not recognise the possibility that the epistemological ideal embodied in "the archangel" reflects the experience and point of view of a particular social group, specifically white male bourgeois property owners of European descent'<sup>25</sup> – a group which Arnault implies has had little historical incentive to call into question the universality of its epistemological ideal. Catherine MacKinnon describes male dominance as 'the most pervasive and tenacious system of power in history', and as 'metaphysically nearly perfect':<sup>26</sup>

Its point of view is the standard for point-of-viewlessness, its particularity the meaning of universality. Its force is exercised as consent, its authority as participation, its supremacy as the paradigm of order, its control as the definition of legitimacy. In the face of this, feminism claims the voice of women's silence, the sexuality of women's eroticized desexualization, the fullness of 'lack,' the centrality of women's marginality and exclusion, the public nature of privacy, the presence of women's absence.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 218.

<sup>23</sup> Hare, 'The Structure of Ethics and Morals', in James P. Sterba (ed.), *Ethics: Classical Western Texts in Feminist and Multicultural Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 386.

<sup>24</sup> Lynne S. Arnault, 'The Radical Future of Hare's Moral Theory', in Sterba (ed.), *Ethics*, p. 393.

<sup>25</sup> Arnault, 'The Radical Future of Hare's Moral Theory', p. 392.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, pp. 116-117.

The relevance of this to the Wittgensteinian account in particular becomes clear here, because the critique of the 'ideal observer' as subordinating women and other dominated groups uses the same understanding of the role of cultural factors in creating moral responses as the Wittgensteinians do. The Wittgensteinians make a point of asserting the importance of such factors as language, tradition, upbringing, the availability and unavailability of certain sources of knowledge – what we might describe as 'social identity' – in making up people's views of the world. There are different ways in which such insights can be used. Post-development thinkers in the social sciences, for example, can be accused of privileging 'cultures' as sovereign, autonomous entities (from the best of motives: they are reacting against western, 'culturally imperialistic' attempts to impose values upon them), advocating non-intervention and consequently taking at their word anyone who claims to 'know' their own culture – generally people in positions of power – at the expense of those (untouchables, child-brides, lepers) who may be victims of that culture and who are systematically denied a voice within it.<sup>28</sup> The Wittgensteinian approach to culture cannot be accused of simply ignoring those whom the culture subordinates. It contains within it the possibility of a recognition that the norms of a society can oppress individuals within it, just as does the feminist approach discussed here. The difference between the feminist and the Wittgensteinian analysis, though, is that the feminist analysis functions essentially as a call to arms, intending to expose injustices as constructed and therefore avoidable – Wendy Lee-Lampshire, for example, suggests that adopting Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use can help us to see through claims to universality:

Understood as forms of life supported by sets of evolving linguistic practices, 'we' can begin to grasp slavery, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and so forth, not merely as institutions, but as plastic social constructs whose power derives from the epistemic authority of those whose claim to be in a position to know is reflected in and informed by those practices.<sup>29</sup>

And Mary Daly takes issue with forms of analysis and explanation which are content to describe rather than to challenge cultural and linguistic institutions which are oppressive of women and others:

It is truly *racist* to keep silent in the face of these atrocities, merely 'studying' them, speaking and writing deceptively about them, applying different (male-created) standards to them, failing to see and name the connections among them. Beyond racism is sisterhood, *naming* the crimes against women without

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<sup>28</sup> I am indebted to Hema Kotecha for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>29</sup> Wendy Lee-Lampshire, 'The Sound of Little Hummingbird Wings: A Wittgensteinian Investigation of Forms of Life as Forms of Power', *Feminist Studies* 25 (1999), pp. 423-424.

paying mindless respect to the 'social fabric' of the various androcentric societies, including the one in which we find our Selves imprisoned.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, as we shall see, the Wittgensteinian analysis contains elements which allow it to be rather sanguine about inequality and oppression. In effect, the Wittgensteinians do not deny that certain individuals and groups are subordinated by culture; rather, they give them the resources to submit to this subordination.

### Phillips on Women's Self-Denial

The reason so many contemporary philosophers agree that the demand for universal, univocal truth is no longer tenable is that universal truth claims fail to live up to the standards they demand of themselves. As MacKinnon points out:

Many readers (in the Kantian tradition) say that if a discourse is not generalized, universal, and agreed-upon, it is exclusionary. The problem is that the generalized, universal, or agreed-upon never did solve the disagreements, resolve the differences, cohere the specifics, and generalize the particularities. Rather, it assimilated them to a false universal that imposed agreement, submerged specificity, and silenced particularity. The anxiety about engaged theory is particularly marked among those whose particularities formed the prior universal.<sup>31</sup>

Phillips is equally suspicious of false universalisation. But his is not 'engaged theory'. It is explicitly and deliberately *disengaged* – both refusing to universalise and refusing to take sides – and the consequences of such an approach for women are quite striking. We can see this in his discussion in *Interventions in Ethics* of an argument between a 'scientific rationalist' and a 'Roman Catholic housewife' over the issue of birth control. The rationalist:

stressed the harm which could result from having too many children. The housewife, on the other hand, stressed the honour a mother has in bringing children into the world. It seems more likely that the scientific rationalist was blind to what the housewife meant by honour, than that she was blind to what he meant by harm. Are we for that reason to call the honour incidental gain?<sup>32</sup>

So far as Phillips is concerned, the two inhabit different moral practices. In the housewife's moral practice, questions of harm are of less importance than 'submission to the will of God, the honour of motherhood, the creation of a new life, and so on'.<sup>33</sup> Phillips is keen to deny that there is any neutral standpoint from which we can decide which of these understandings is better, and this is the point of his use of the example. But what Phillips sees as the *lack* of a neutral standpoint is in fact precisely a privileging,

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p. 172.

<sup>31</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, p. xv.

<sup>32</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 12.

an insulation from criticism, of the housewife's belief that submission to the will of God entails bringing children into the world. In other words, he allows the housewife, and those who agree with her, to portray their beliefs as a neutral, unarguable view – the fact that there are other neutral, unarguable views, such as that of the scientific rationalist, does not make the housewife's understanding any less immune from criticism, because the whole point is that so far as Phillips and the housewife are concerned, it makes no sense to criticise her. Here, as elsewhere in Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, then, despite a strong emphasis on the idea that particular moral understandings are culture-dependent, there is little interest in the question of how and why different cultures come to have their particular moral understandings. 'Having lots of children can be harmful' is contrasted with 'Yes, but the harm is beside the point'. The ends being pursued by the two disputants are different: that is all that can be said of the matter. We can, however, examine the likely effects of these different understandings of having children. Someone for whom the fact that having lots of children can be harmful is decisive, and who does not believe in the honour of motherhood or see it as her duty to submit to the will of God (or who does not consider submission to the will of God to involve childbearing) is more likely than the Roman Catholic housewife in this example to take steps to ensure that she does not have lots of children – or at the very least, to consider it morally acceptable for her to do so. There can be no doubt that it is in the interests of those who want women to have lots of children, or who want to restrict women to the domestic sphere, that women should believe in the honour of motherhood and should think that by having children they are submitting to the will of God. To observe that this is a fact is not in itself to invalidate the beliefs of the Roman Catholic housewife. But it is certainly to raise suspicions about it with which Phillips appears unconcerned.

Phillips says that the housewife will not be persuaded by an appeal to the fact that she is out of step with most of the rest of society: 'She believes that what the majority wants is a sign of moral decadence, and wants different things. But she does not believe because she wants; she wants because she believes'.<sup>34</sup> Phillips seems to intend here to impute to the housewife a purity of motive which might be seen to be lacking if her beliefs stemmed from the fact that she just wanted to have lots of children and needed to justify this in the face of her knowledge that this might be harmful – knowledge which might otherwise count against her desires. In fact, says Phillips, her motivation goes in the opposite direction. She does not believe that it is right for her to have lots of

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<sup>34</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 12.

children because she wants to have lots of children. It is not that sort of rationalisation – indeed, in the absence of this belief system, it is at least possible that she would not want any children at all. Rather, the reason she wants to have lots of children is that she believes that it is right for her to have lots of children – whether or not, left to her own devices, she would choose to have them, and despite her acknowledgement that having lots of children might well be (at least physically) harmful. This shows the power over her of her belief system, or moral practice. It is able to override what even she recognises as her (physical) interest in not being harmed by having too many children, by introducing interests and desires which supersede them – and makes it impossible for a scientific rationalist to persuade her that she is wrong by appealing to concerns which, so far as she is concerned, are not ultimate. It is impossible to justify any moral position by appealing to universal human goals, because there are no such universal goals. Phillips writes, ‘Sometimes, philosophers seem to suggest that despite the moral differences which separate men, they are really pursuing the same end, namely, what all men want. The notion of what all men want is as artificial as the common evidence which is supposed to support it’.<sup>35</sup> If we allow women into the discussion as well, we find that there are even more ends being pursued. But some of these turn out, after all, to be what all men want.

One of the most problematic areas of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy is its apparent lack of concern for the ill effects which the self-renunciation the Wittgensteinians see as being central to authentic moral behaviour and religious practice may well produce. In his discussion in *From Fantasy to Faith* of Edith Wharton’s novella *Bunner Sisters*, Phillips complains that although Virago Press is to be commended for making Wharton’s work more widely available, ‘some of the politicised prefaces of these publications, if followed, would distance, and mask from, us, the depth and power in Wharton’s work’.<sup>36</sup> His complaint is about Marilyn French’s preface in which she describes the context in which women’s fiction existed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as

a celebration of the ‘cult of domesticity’, a focus on women and women’s worlds which exalted the joys of motherhood, wifehood, and love ... Among its themes was women’s self-sacrifice, glorified as an immolation of the self on the altar of the well-being of others and resulting in the triumph of nobility and morality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 184-185.

<sup>37</sup> Marilyn French, ‘Introduction’ in Edith Wharton *Madame de Treymes and Others: Four Short Novels* (London: Virago, 1984), p. viii.

Phillips thinks that this forces us to see Wharton's central character, Ann Eliza Bunner, as 'simply a victim of conditioning, self-deception, and romantic illusions about the nobility of self-sacrifice'.<sup>38</sup> According to Phillips, this is a misreading. The reason Ann Eliza's faith in self-sacrifice is undermined is that she discovers that its fruits are not 'guaranteed transmission to their intended beneficiary', and that therefore 'love has no power external to itself to guarantee its success'.<sup>39</sup> Self-sacrifice therefore does not do what Ann Eliza thought it would do – but this discovery does not, as French thinks, invalidate the concept, and she is wrong to claim that in *Bunner Sisters* 'the "virtue" of self-sacrifice is ... desecrated, stripped of whatever moral exaltation, nobility, or grandeur it possesses'.<sup>40</sup> Ann Eliza had misunderstood self-sacrifice in the first place.

The results of Ann Eliza's self-sacrificial deeds are that she refuses a marriage proposal from the man she loves, Herman Ramy, so that he can marry her sister, Evelina, who then leaves and loses contact with her, only returning to blame Ann Eliza when Ramy abandons her for another woman, and then to die of a terminal illness in which Ann Eliza, who has devoted her life to serving her, is unable to comfort her. According to Phillips, in the character of Ann Eliza 'a rare self-sacrificial love is found, a love of such a kind that one reader, at least, would feel he had no right to judge Ann Eliza – no right at all'.<sup>41</sup> Yet nobody *is* judging Ann Eliza, least of all Marilyn French – a judgement is passed instead on the assumption that a well-lived life should be lived self-sacrificially, and it is passed on the evidence of Ann Eliza's self-sacrificial life, and with a great deal of sympathy for her as a result of what her belief in self-sacrifice has caused. Phillips says that his purpose is 'not to extol the virtue [of self-sacrifice], but to try to understand it'.<sup>42</sup> The problem with it is that a refusal to make judgements – not just about people, or people's actions, but about the concepts and beliefs which motivate people's actions – effectively validates concepts and beliefs which lead to actions which may be harmful and which we may very well want to condemn.

### **Self-Abnegation and Moral Reasoning**

Feminist discussions of social expectations of women's behaviour are one source of challenge to a Wittgensteinian acceptance of culture 'as it is'. Bonnelle Lewis Strickling lists qualities which women have been expected to display:

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<sup>38</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, p. 185.

<sup>39</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, p. 189.

<sup>40</sup> French, 'Introduction', p. xiv.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, p. 189.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, p. 185.

All of this is old news by now, but worth reminding ourselves of for the sake of this argument: traditionally, women have been asked to be helpful, loving without expectation of return, emotionally dependable, supportive, and generally nurturing to both children and husband both physically and in the sense of nurturing their respective senses of self, all without complaining. I am not suggesting that women have actually managed to do all these things, but certainly women have been expected to do these things, as well as many others. And, taken together, these expectations comprise the expectation of self-renunciation on an extremely large scale.<sup>43</sup>

Part of what gives the feminist critique of self-abnegation its distinctiveness (and indeed its status as ‘feminist’) is its observation that these qualities have been disproportionately required or expected of women as a class, not of men as a class, and that their display by women both limits women’s access to power as a class (by making them behave in ways which are incompatible with exercising power) and increases men’s access to power as a class (by encouraging women to be supportive of men’s exercise of power rather than demanding power in their own right). As Jantzen points out:

Women are only too apt to take on ourselves (and to have placed upon us) far too much moral responsibility for others, especially for children and for men; and even for those who harm us: how many victims of rape and abuse have been taught to blame themselves for the rape because they were ‘asking for it’ by allegedly provocative dress, behaviour, or even manner of walking[?]<sup>44</sup>

Wittgensteinian discussion of self-abnegation does not differentiate on gender grounds, and certainly could not be accused of deliberately advocating the subordination of women – part of the feminist critique loses its force when applied to the Wittgensteinians, although they may still be accused with some justice, I think, of failing to observe the gendered nature both of much cultural exhortation to renounce the self, and of many of the results of obeying such exhortations. But Strickling is interested, too, in examining the coherence of the very idea of self-abnegation, and this gives her discussion particular relevance.

Some forms of apparent self-abnegation, says Strickling, are not really self-abnegation at all. For example, the kind of co-operation required in a relationship might involve putting aside the pursuit of one’s own pleasure in favour of shared activities, considering the feelings of the other even when angry or frustrated, and forgoing things which the other does not like. ‘All of these changes involve a certain amount of self-denial, but most of us would be unwilling to call this true self-abnegation, simply because so much pleasure and so many benefits accrue as a result of doing these things’.<sup>45</sup> This is

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<sup>43</sup> Bonnelle Lewis Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, in Lorraine Code, Sheila Mullett and Christine Overall (eds.), *Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Methods and Morals* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 197.

<sup>44</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 244.

<sup>45</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 192.

not so much the denial of self-interest as the pursuit of different, shared interests, still perhaps motivated by self-interest. Such co-operation is contrasted with ‘entering into sympathy with another ... denying that one’s own way of seeing the world is the only possible way’,<sup>46</sup> which in turn is distinct from total self-abnegation, which would ‘involve completely entering into the views of others or putting aside one’s interests altogether for the sake of the other, but this would defeat the purpose for which, presumably, one engages in the kind of self-abnegation described above: what one wants is a relationship in which the interests and feelings of both are taken into consideration, and each enters into the world-view of the other’.<sup>47</sup> This leads Strickling to the central problem which faces those who advocate self-abnegation: that although ‘a certain amount of self-abnegation is necessary in order to have relationships’, nevertheless, ‘too much self-abnegation will not increase but undercut these desirable relations’.<sup>48</sup> So there is a distinction between a healthy ‘attention to the desires and feelings of others that requires us to put aside our own conflicting desires and feelings, at least temporarily’,<sup>49</sup> and a failure to pay any attention to one’s own desires and interests at all. As Strickling points out, ‘to engage in genuine self-abnegation, one must first have a self to abnegate’<sup>50</sup> – an observation strongly reminiscent of Germaine Greer’s complaint in *The Female Eunuch* that ‘Women are self-sacrificing in direct proportion to their incapacity to offer anything but this sacrifice. They sacrifice what they never had: a self’.<sup>51</sup>

Belief in the desirability of self-abnegation is difficult to universalise, because the very idea of renouncing one’s own interests implies an awareness of, and a belief in the legitimacy of, other people’s interests. This is certainly presumed by the social expectation of women’s focus on serving other people. In Carol Gilligan’s study of the different moral development and moral beliefs of men and women, *In a Different Voice*, her female subjects ‘saw selflessness as a virtue, and any claims of their own to equal rights as selfish’.<sup>52</sup> This necessarily presumes that other people have rights even if the selfless individual does not:

Only if one has no self, or at least no attachment to a self, can one give oneself to a life of service to others who are themselves permitted to be self-concerned. There would be no resentment only if one had no self to feel resentful on

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<sup>46</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 193.

<sup>47</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 194.

<sup>48</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 194.

<sup>49</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 195.

<sup>50</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 197.

<sup>51</sup> Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1971), p. 151.

<sup>52</sup> Strickling, ‘Self-Abnegation’, p. 196. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

behalf of, were not an individual in the usual sense of a particular idiosyncratic individual with an ego to nourish and a sense of self-esteem to be cultivated.<sup>53</sup>

The kind of reciprocity we saw in Golden Rule thinking, or the desire to be able to make universal law we saw in Kant, are absent here: the agent removes herself from the list of people who are legitimate objects of moral concern. Quite apart from the harm to the agent which many would want to identify as an obvious and unavoidable result of such thinking, but which many, including the Wittgensteinians, would see as being beside the point, there are also questions about whether moral reasoning which aims to use one's own desires or needs as a key input into working out what one ought to do for others is even *possible* in a context in which one's own needs and desires are systematically and deliberately removed from the equation. If I want nothing for myself – if I think there may be something morally problematic about wanting things for myself – then it is difficult to see what would result from 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' in terms of the behaviour I decide is morally required of me. This is perhaps a better formulation of 'the new standard counterexample [to the Golden Rule], the sadomasochist'<sup>54</sup> who, because he (it is always, for some reason, a he) takes pleasure from having severe pain inflicted on him, thinks he is obliged by the Golden Rule to inflict severe pain on others. I have argued elsewhere that the sadomasochist counterexample is misplaced, both because it assumes a joke-book caricature of what sadomasochism involves, and because it fails to take into account the fact that if the 'sadomasochist' is capable of and interested in reasoning morally at all (if he is not, then any discussion of how he should do so is irrelevant) then he will rapidly become aware that people do not want to have severe pain inflicted on them, and stop doing it, even if he does not recognise this straight away (as in fact, in our culture, given the existence of joke-book caricatures of sadomasochism, he would).<sup>55</sup> This sort of counterexample is pertinent, however, in a discussion of the possibility of moral reasoning for someone who is not interested in self-gratification – someone who, rather than taking pleasure from pain, simply fails to take pleasure from pleasure. Such a person might think that it is her moral duty to provide pleasure for others, and be committed to doing so – it is not clear,

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<sup>53</sup> Strickling, 'Self-Abnegation', p. 198.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Wattle, *The Golden Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> Tom Hamilton, 'The Golden Rule and the Categorical Imperative' (Unpublished MA dissertation: University of Durham, 2000), p. 16. One implicit challenge to the view I expressed there is provided by the work of MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin on pornography (see for example MacKinnon and Dworkin (eds.), *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1997)), which argues that exposure to pornography can desensitise men to sexual violence, leading them to perceive it as a normal part of sex, to interpret women's 'no' as not meaning what it says, and to fail to recognise rape as rape and abuse as abuse. While I think my objection to the 'sadomasochist' counterexample still stands, I recognise that making assumptions about what moral agents can and cannot get away with thinking about their own actions and the reactions of others is a risky business.

however, what resources she would be able to use to find out what that pleasure consists of. We saw Benhabib above criticising 'substitutionalist universalism' as undesirable because of the differences it masks; it seems in the light of the subsequent discussion that habitually self-renouncing patterns of behaviour may also make such strategies of moral reasoning literally impossible.

### Self-Abnegation as Sin

Another set of reasons for being less than enthusiastic about treating self-abnegation as a desirable trait comes from the critique that some feminist theologians have made of the common Christian understanding of the nature of sin. This understanding is characterised by Valerie Saiving as follows:

Sin is the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige; it is the imperialistic drive to close the gap between the self and others by reducing those others to the status of mere objects which can then be treated as appendages of the self and manipulated accordingly ... the human creature has a marvellous capacity for blinding himself to the fact that, no matter how altruistic his goals may be, he always inverts his own limited individual goals into his attempts to achieve them.<sup>56</sup>

On this view sin contrasts with love, which is 'completely self-giving, taking no thought for its own interests but seeking only the good of the other'.<sup>57</sup> The problem with all of this is not that such a desire for power and prestige, with its consequent objectification with the other, is not sinful, nor that self-giving love cannot be good, but 'that it is inapplicable to the situation of all humanity, while failing to recognise that this is the case'.<sup>58</sup> According to Saiving, the most common failings of women cannot be characterised as products of pride and will-to-power; rather, they are 'such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, underdevelopment of the self'.<sup>59</sup> Daphne Hampson finds a precedent in Kierkegaard's description of 'manly' and 'womanly' ways of sinning (man 'would try to be Caesar, whereas woman would be rid of herself').<sup>60</sup> She notes that 'Kierkegaard's (and Saiving's) analysis is an analysis of women as women are

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<sup>56</sup> Valerie Saiving, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View' in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 26.

<sup>57</sup> Saiving, 'The Human Situation', p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 121. Hampson is referring in particular to Reinhold Niebuhr's analysis of sin in his *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

<sup>59</sup> Saiving, 'The Human Situation', p. 37.

<sup>60</sup> Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, p. 123; see Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and tr. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 49-50.

living under patriarchy',<sup>61</sup> although there is enough in Saiving's explanation of 'feminine' sins as 'outgrowths of the basic feminine character structure'<sup>62</sup> to suggest that Saiving herself is not so alive to this possibility (admittedly in an article originally published in 1960, before feminism's 'second wave', which is early days for feminist theology) as subsequent feminist thinkers might like her to be. More recent feminist writing has challenged the assumption that female difference is primarily biological – and therefore natural. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, for example, writes:

I am not saying that women's biology is irrelevant to their understanding of themselves – birth, lactation, vaginal penetration, lesbian sexual practice, menstruation and menopause are all profound aspects of women's experience, but none floats free of cultural definition.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, Judith Plaskow's development of Saiving's analysis employs 'a definition of women's experience as the interrelation between cultural expectations and their internalization'<sup>64</sup> – again, as with Spender's account above, an understanding with which we might expect the Wittgensteinians to have some sympathy – which would help to account for the failure of some Black women, for example, to recognise Saiving's alternative list of 'female' sins as relevant to their own experience.<sup>65</sup>

None of this serves to delegitimise the thrust of Saiving's case – rather, we might say that it offers a salutary (and properly Wittgensteinian) reminder of the danger that attempting to universalise insights which can be shown to have validity in particular situations may be to take those insights a step too far. Insofar as it resonates with some women, in some places, at some times, Saiving's account functions as a sufficient indictment of the tendency in theology (as in philosophy and, indeed, in the academy generally before feminist concerns became harder to ignore) to discount women's experience without recognising that anything was being discounted. As Jean Hampton puts it:

Probably because most philosophers have, up until now, been males from relatively privileged social positions – a background that encourages people to think well of themselves – there has been virtually no recognition of how difficult it can be for some people to believe in their own worth.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Hampton, *Theology and Feminism*, p. 123.

<sup>62</sup> Saiving, 'The Human Situation', p. 37.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), p. 159 n. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 2-3.

<sup>65</sup> Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God*, pp. 77-79.

<sup>66</sup> Jean Hampton, 'The Wisdom of the Egoist: The Moral and Political Implications of Valuing the Self', in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (eds.), *Self-Interest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 48.

The feminist critique of such a partial understanding of sin is not merely that it is incomplete (although this is of course a problem) but that it has real-world consequences for people – notably, but not exclusively or universally, women – whose problem is not pride but rather its opposite. Put simply, it is one thing to tell a successful, self-confident man that a bit more humility might be desirable; it is quite another to give the same advice to someone whose life is already characterised by service, failure or self-hatred – and the temptation to universalise advice which might be helpful for the former could have disastrous consequences for the latter. And such advice really has been given and taken by many women in a specifically Christian theological context. Ann Loades quotes an astonishingly patronising passage from the 1987 papal encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*:

In the light of Mary, the church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.<sup>67</sup>

She comments that ‘Women’s well-being may well depend upon their finding at least some of these characteristics less than unambiguously praiseworthy’.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Kerry Ramsay argues that ‘The equation of love with self-sacrifice, self-denial and self-abnegation ... is dangerous to women’s psychological, spiritual, and physical health, and it is contrary to the real aim of Christian love’.<sup>69</sup> I will argue in more detail later that bearing these and similar examples in mind, and paying attention to the feminist concerns addressed in this chapter, can help us to uncover the key – ethical – problems with the Wittgensteinian approach to ethics. First, though, I want to look at the assumptions the Wittgensteinians bring to their philosophy of religion – the discipline for which they are best known – and show that there are important similarities between Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion and the Wittgensteinian moral philosophy I have discussed up to this point. Indeed, given the critical strategies I want to explore, to which I have alluded here, it would be incomplete and misleading to give an account of one without exploring the other.

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<sup>67</sup> John Paul II, ‘Redemptoris Mater: On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church’, quoted in Ann Loades, ‘The Virgin Mary and the Feminist Quest’, in Janet Martin Soskice (ed.), *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), p. 164.

<sup>68</sup> Loades, ‘The Virgin Mary and the Feminist Quest’, p. 164.

<sup>69</sup> Kerry Ramsay, ‘Losing One’s Life for Others: Self-sacrifice Revisited’, in Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *Challenging Women’s Orthodoxies in the Context of Faith* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 121.

## II

# SELF-RENUNCIATION

# 4

## Self-Renunciation in Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion

### Shared Assumptions

Much of what the Wittgensteinians, especially Phillips, say about morality can equally well be applied to what they, especially Phillips, say about religion and religious belief. This is important, not least because Phillips' writings on religious belief are much more extensive than his writings on morality, and they contain clues about how to deal, in the sphere of religion, with the same sorts of philosophical problems which Wittgensteinian writings on morality raise but leave largely unanswered. One way of identifying these connections is to apply a technique Phillips sometimes uses himself, namely to take a piece of writing and to adapt it to see if it can be used effectively for a different purpose, or for the same purpose with certain changes made to it. For example, at the beginning of *The Concept of Prayer* Phillips quotes Augustine's reflection on the nature of time in the *Confessions*, then paraphrases the same passage in order to show the unquestioned importance of prayer, and yet the elusiveness of a clear explanation of it, in the life of the religious believer:

One could imagine a religious believer asking, 'What is prayer? Who can readily and briefly explain this? Who can even in thought comprehend it, so as to utter a word about it? But what do I utter in discourse more familiarly and knowingly than prayer? And, I understand when I pray; I understand also when I hear another praying. What then is prayer? If no one asks me I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.'<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes this technique is used, as above, to bring out similarities in concepts, sometimes as a rhetorical tool for making his opponents appear ridiculous.<sup>2</sup> Using it on Phillips himself can help to bring out the close connections between his views on morality and his views on religious belief. In *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* Phillips writes that 'no serious account can be given of religious belief which does not take note of the way in which it is interwoven with the surrounding features of human life'.<sup>3</sup> Substitute 'morality' for 'religious belief' here and we have an argument very similar to those we saw in chapter 1. And many of the characteristics of morality identified by Phillips and other

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Phillips' argument that the lack of room within religious discourse for such constructions as 'I believe that it is highly probable that there is an almighty God, maker of heaven and earth' shows the 'conceptual poverty' of philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, J.L. Mackie and T.A. Roberts, who believe that religious claims should be assessed in terms of their probability, in *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 63-64.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 79.

Wittgensteinian moral philosophers are also characteristics of religion, according to Phillips. Neither moral nor religious beliefs are arrived at by rational arguments,<sup>4</sup> which means that the criteria for assessing the intelligibility of moral and religious beliefs can only be found within the moral practice or religion in question.<sup>5</sup> Just as Beardsmore argued that children learn moral terms such as ‘murder’, ‘suicide’ and ‘lying’ along with the moral values attached to those terms,<sup>6</sup> in the same way, says Phillips, religious discourse ‘is taught to children through stories by which they become acquainted with the attributes of God. As a result of this teaching the child forms an idea of God’.<sup>7</sup> In the course of this learning process, when lying is described as ‘wrong’ this is ‘a grammatical remark’ by which we learn the limits of moral words like ‘wrong’,<sup>8</sup> and the stories we hear about God teach us ‘what it makes sense to say to God and about God. In short, theology is the grammar of religious discourse’.<sup>9</sup> Just as within a moral practice it makes no sense to say that lying might be right,<sup>10</sup> so within theology it makes no sense to say that God might not exist.<sup>11</sup> Within these grammatical limits it is possible for people to make comprehensible protests against what they see as illicit ways of behaving morally or of expressing religious belief.<sup>12</sup>

All of these connections are important and revealing, but what they have in common is that they concern the acquisition and structure of religious and moral beliefs, not their content. And this is consistent with the Wittgensteinian view of philosophy, whether of language, morality, religion or whatever, as a means of clarifying what it is that is going on within the language, morality or religion being discussed, not of prescribing what language, morality or religion should do. Philosophy, as Wittgenstein says, ‘leaves everything as it is’.<sup>13</sup> A commitment to this approach was clear in Winch’s claim that our job as moral philosophers is ‘to look at particular examples and see what we *do* want to say about them: there are no general rules which can determine in advance what we *must* say about them’.<sup>14</sup> Phillips vigorously defends Winch against O’Neill’s attack on this position, which was outlined in chapter 1.<sup>15</sup> But there we also came across an important corollary to the Wittgensteinian commitment to leave everything as it is,

<sup>4</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 7; Phillips *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 111; Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Beardsmore, *Moral Reasoning*, p. 62; Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), I, 124, p. 49c.

<sup>14</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 182.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, pp. 70-85.

namely that disinterestedness is incompatible with participation in moral discussion; we might say the same about religious discussion, and possibly about other areas of philosophical interest. This means that the line between description and prescription is more blurred than Wittgenstein, Winch and Phillips tend to suggest. Phillips quotes Wittgenstein's remark, 'To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life',<sup>16</sup> and goes on:

Becoming acquainted with a language is not simply mastering a vocabulary and rules of grammar. It is to know how things bear on one another in such a way as to make it possible to say certain things and see certain connections, but not others. The same must be said for religion.<sup>17</sup>

Any investigation of a series of interconnected 'grammatical' rules will be able to show that certain constructions do not follow these rules; pointing this out might as well be prescriptive so far as people who want to use the rules properly are concerned, even if the investigators can claim to be non-participants who are interested only in seeing what the rules are and how they work. And once he has started to analyse a form of life:

There will be constant temptations for the philosopher to be either a sceptic or an apologist. It will always be difficult not to present theses or answers; difficult to leave everything where it is. For all these reasons, when a philosopher talks of an audience for whom he provides conceptual reminders, there is always the likelihood that, quite often, he is talking about himself.<sup>18</sup>

With this self-admonition in mind, it might be worth examining whether Phillips, in his writings on morality and religion, really does manage to leave everything as it is, or whether there is evidence that he succumbs to the temptation he warns himself against.

### 'Superstition'

Phillips describes those religious beliefs and practices which he exposes as confused as 'superstitious', and he employs the category 'superstition' with great frequency in his writings in the philosophy of religion. 'Superstition' is supposed to be a neutral, descriptive term for a belief or practice which displays a number of connected features. First, a superstition is inconsistent with the beliefs alongside which it is held:

I have argued that religious reactions to various situations cannot be assessed according to some external criteria of adequacy. On the other hand, the connections between religious beliefs and such situations must not be fantastic.

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<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, 19, p. 8c, quoted in Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 79. Anscombe's translation, which is the one to which Phillips refers in his footnote (p. 128, n. 1), actually reads 'And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life'.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, 'The Devil's Disguises', p. 77. See also Phillips' words from his inaugural lecture as Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Claremont in February 1993: 'We are tempted again and again to become too familiar with holy things by putting them at the mercy of our methods. One way of looking at my work is as a series of charges against the immodest methods employed by some philosophers in the philosophy of religion. I make these charges against tendencies which I recognise all too easily in myself' (Phillips, 'At the Mercy of Method', in Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (eds.), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 1).

This in no way contradicts the earlier arguments, since whether the connections are fantastic is decided by criteria which are not in dispute... The religious responses are fantastic because they ignore or distort what we already know. What is said falls under standards of judgment with which we are already acquainted.<sup>19</sup>

The most important manifestation of the inconsistency of religious beliefs and practices with their wider context is in the belief that rituals and prayers are causally efficacious. Such a belief may well be explained by the fact that the believer has a strong vested interest in getting what she prays for:

Superstitions are not adequately accounted for as errors or mistakes. The connection between superstitions and our hopes and fears cannot be ignored. The lover wishes to see his lover to such an extent that he becomes convinced that he will see her again, even though she is dead.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the wider context in which superstitious beliefs exist can show that they are confused; if the claims they make are couched in the same terms as, say, scientific claims, they should be justified in these terms. In the case of prayer, 'if someone's talk and conduct showed that he believed the efficacy of prayer to be causal efficacy, he would have to justify his belief in terms of what we know about cause-effect relations',<sup>21</sup> and this is something which he would in fact find impossible. Since prayer cannot be justified in these terms, it must be about something other than getting whatever it is that the believer wants if the religion of which it is a part is to be free of philosophical confusion.

There are a number of problems with Phillips' use of the category 'superstition'. Lance Ashdown argues that his distinction between connections which are and are not 'fantastic' requires an appeal to 'a paradigm of rationality'<sup>22</sup> which is specifically ruled out by his own philosophical method. According to Ashdown:

Phillips' argument breaks down because he attempts to have his cake and eat it, too. He wishes to allow religion immunity from reductionist attempts to assess it by the Verification Principle or some other criterion, but he also wishes to dictate what counts as 'true' or 'genuine' religion according to 'what we already know'.<sup>23</sup>

Ashdown's explanation for what he sees as this lapse in consistency is that Phillips is addressing a community of philosophers and others who have accepted 'the Western scientific model of rationality'.<sup>24</sup> From a rhetorical point of view, Phillips' use of 'we' and

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<sup>19</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ashdown, 'D.Z. Phillips and his Audiences', p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ashdown, 'D.Z. Phillips and his Audiences', p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ashdown, 'D.Z. Phillips and his Audiences', p. 27.

his appeal to scientific rationality are designed to establish common ground with his audience in order to persuade them of the legitimacy of religion in principle. Phillips' audience is unlikely to be sympathetic to what they see as 'superstition'; by emphasising that he shares their suspicion of such superstitious things as expecting God to give us whatever we ask for in prayer, Phillips aims to make them more inclined to listen to the rest of his argument. The obvious response to Ashdown's objection would be that it is not just Phillips and the audience he addresses who buy into the Western scientific model of rationality; many who pray in ways Phillips describes as 'superstitious' buy into it as well. In employing this model for most of the things they do while continuing to hope for miraculous divine interventions it is they, not Phillips, who are attempting to have their cake and eat it too. Nevertheless, Ashdown's criticisms demonstrate, in a characteristically Wittgensteinian fashion, the need to proceed with caution when evaluating the religious behaviour of those with significantly different world-views from the one shared by Phillips and most of his readers.

A more serious criticism of Phillips' use of the category 'superstition' arises from the fact that 'superstition' is a loaded word. Brian Clack argues that the term is always pejorative, even if Phillips does not intend it to be; to describe something as 'superstitious' is to label it worthless.<sup>25</sup> He observes that 'Roman Catholicism, primitive religions and even Fabian socialism have at one time or other been thus labelled'.<sup>26</sup> Phillips is undoubtedly right that 'From the fact that there are irresponsible accusations of superstition, one cannot conclude that "superstition" "is not a genuine category"',<sup>27</sup> but the force of Clack's point does not depend upon whether or not the accusations he lists are justified. It is the fact that an accusation of superstition, irresponsible or not, is always an *accusation* and never a dispassionate description, that makes the category problematic. 'Superstition', like 'heresy', is a word which carries an agenda. Phillips is of course aware that 'superstition' is not a neutral term, and so far as this is concerned his use of it is consistent; indeed, his response to Clack that one might think something a low form of religion without thinking it superstitious<sup>28</sup> implicitly reinforces Clack's argument that the term 'superstitious' is always pejorative – more pejorative, it seems, than 'low'. There is never any suggestion in his writings that superstition is something Phillips wants to encourage. In *The Concept of Prayer*, for example, 'superstition' is associated with words like 'suspect', 'tenuous' and 'pseudo-prayer', and contrasted with

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Clack, 'D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion', p. 113.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Clack, 'D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion', p. 113.

<sup>27</sup> Phillips, 'On Giving Practice its Due - A Reply', p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Phillips, 'On Giving Practice its Due - A Reply', p. 123.

‘genuine’, ‘devotion’, ‘dependence’ and ‘Christian’.<sup>29</sup> Clack accuses Phillips of ‘making propaganda for what he sees as “true religion”, and employing the religion/superstition distinction to do so’.<sup>30</sup> Phillips’ insistence that ‘in pointing out superstitions a philosopher is describing, not reforming; a clarification of grammar is involved’<sup>31</sup> is somewhat disingenuous; after all, once a practice has been shown to be confused and inconsistent, there is likely to be little left to recommend it: the strong implication is that reform is needed, even if it is not the philosopher’s job to say precisely what that reform should look like. As Phillips himself says with approval of Wittgenstein’s similar approach, ‘Taking a pragmatic attitude to religious practices ... does not mean that Wittgenstein lets anyone, participants included, whether they happen to be philosophers or not, get away with confused accounts of religious practices’.<sup>32</sup> Philosophy leaves everything as it is, but it leaves some things more as they are than others.

### Superstition and Morality

This means that it is worth exploring what Phillips describes, both in his writings on religion and in those on morality, as not confused, not inconsistent, not superstitious (bearing in mind that for obvious reasons the category ‘superstition’ is not employed in his moral philosophy) and seeing if there are features which he has a tendency to emphasise. We saw in the first chapter the criticisms Phillips and Mounce make in *Moral Practices* of Foot’s contention that moral behaviour is to the advantage of those who behave morally. They insist on a strict separation between morality and advantage, firstly on the grounds that the profitability of moral behaviour is contingent, not necessary – indeed, that certain ways of behaving which are commonly described as immoral, such as ruthlessness, may be the most profitable for certain individuals<sup>33</sup> – and secondly because dying for the sake of justice, which considered in terms of profit and loss would seem to be a definite loser, is nevertheless by definition a just act.<sup>34</sup> Although Phillips and Mounce are being descriptive rather than prescriptive here, aiming to expose confusions at the heart of Foot’s account of morality rather than to argue against ruthlessness and in favour of martyrdom, the effect is to show that a morality which aims at personal gain is not morality at all – or at least that it is not compatible with what is normally understood as morality. In the grammar of the moral practice in which Phillips and Mounce and

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 115-130.

<sup>30</sup> Brian Clack, ‘D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion’, p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, ‘On Giving Practice its Due - A Reply’, p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 251.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 26.

most of their readers operate, 'selfishly pursuing one's own personal gain is bad' is just as much a given, and therefore just as unnecessary in ordinary discourse, as 'lying is bad'; to point this out can be a descriptive grammatical remark as well as a prescriptive judgement. Phillips carries the same argument into a religious discussion in his monograph *Death and Immortality*, in which he repeats his criticisms of Foot and extends them to criticise Peter Geach as well. Geach argues that even if moral behaviour leads to bad results in this life, or even in a premature end to this life, for the religious believer in immortality this does not settle the question of whether morality brings advantage. Morality, understood as obedience to God, will have its reward in heaven; immorality, or disobedience, will have its punishment.<sup>35</sup> But Phillips complains that when morality is pursued on the basis of the reward it will bring, whether earthly or heavenly, it ceases to look like morality:

when we are confronted with two men, one of whom loves justice, kindness and generosity, without thought for what they bring, while the other thinks only of what they bring, do we not want to say different things about them? Do we not want to say that only one of them loves justice, while the other's love is a mere pretence, a façade? ... even if for an infinite duration success follows fast on the heels of virtue, there will be an eternal distinction between the man who was moved to pity, and the man who 'pitied' because he was moved by love of success.<sup>36</sup>

So Phillips' concern to uncover confusions in explanations of how morality works leads to conclusions about what is valid and what is invalid as the content of morality; indeed, when morality is expressed in a religious context, as in Geach's understanding of immortality as a means of vindicating previously unrewarded moral behaviour, to conclusions about what can and cannot be said in theology. Concern for one's own reward is not considered an admirable motive for moral behaviour, nor for religious practice. Phillips quotes a remark by Rhees:

Is the reason for not worshipping the devil instead of God that God is stronger than the devil? God will get you in the end, the devil will not be able to save you from his fury, and then you will be *for* it. 'Think of your future, boy, and don't throw away your chances.' What a creeping and vile sort of thing religion must be.<sup>37</sup>

Note that 'creeping and vile' is a *moral* response to this way of thinking; such a moral response only makes sense in a context in which 'might is right' is considered an inadequate explanation of where our worship or allegiance should be directed. This, and any other account of religion which presents immortality as a way of providing reward

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, p. 82.

and punishment for behaviour in this life – and there are certainly many religious groups which do seem to see immortality in this way – is confused, because it sanctions an appeal to self-interest which is explicitly argued against in parallel discussions of morality by these same religious groups. Immortality becomes like the supposedly ‘free gift’ which an advertiser offers not out of pure generosity but as an incentive because the original product is not sufficiently attractive to be bought without it. The religion in question is not valued in its own right, but for what comes with it.

A similar analysis is offered of petitionary prayer in *The Concept of Prayer*, in which Phillips claims that any prayer which is intended to influence God to do something is superstitious. The implication of praying in this way is that there is something we can do, a particular formula, which God will respond to. If we do not follow the formula, God will not respond. There is a causal link between our prayer and the response, or lack of a response, to that prayer, so that “I didn’t pray hard enough” is akin to, “The spell was not powerful enough”. Prayer seems to be conceived of as acting on God in some way.<sup>38</sup> Yet there are various concepts inherent in a religious understanding of God which are inconsistent with the idea that we can do things which could affect him in the same way that we can do things which affect other people, that our talking to him is like talking to any other person: ‘One need only mention the ideas of God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence, to show how differently His reality is conceived from that of a finite individual.’<sup>39</sup> Misunderstandings of prayer are a result of failing to recognise the radical difference between God and people which may be disguised by some religious language but which is nevertheless clear when we look at that language as a whole. For example, if God knows everything, prayers of confession cannot be understood as filling in God’s incomplete knowledge of the sins one has committed. While we might be able to avoid letting other people find out about something we have done, ‘it does not make sense to think that God can be the victim of such duplicity’.<sup>40</sup> The same goes for petitionary prayer: it cannot be seen as a way of giving God information which would otherwise not have been available to him about whatever it is that we want to happen, because it is inherent in the idea of God’s omniscience that God already knows. Nor does it make sense to suggest that in praying for something we are trying to *persuade* God to make it happen; again, God is not a participant in discourse whose mind can be changed by arguments he had not thought of, or who can be worn

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<sup>38</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 55.

down by the constant repetition of a request. Prayer *must* be about something else if it is to avoid charges of confusion and superstition.

## Simone Weil

The most striking common feature of the approaches to morality, to immortality and to prayer which Phillips criticises is that they all see *benefit* to the individual believer or moral agent as the criterion of the truth of the religion or moral outlook in question. We act morally because it will lead to the best results for us in the short or long term; we believe in God because if we do we will go to heaven; we pray in a particular way so that we can get what we pray for. And these understandings of morality, of immortality and of prayer can be shown to be confused simply by analysing moral and religious language on their own terms, irrespective of other possible ways in which they may be criticised.<sup>41</sup> One response to this discovery would be to describe all morality, all prayer and all belief in immortality as inherently confused and, where they claim to be religious, as superstitious, rejecting them and the religions which contain them. An alternative would be to try to find understandings of morality, of prayer and of immortality which do not contain the features Phillips criticises. And fortunately such understandings do exist. The one to which Phillips most frequently turns is that of the French philosopher Simone Weil, although he makes extensive use of other writers, notably Søren Kierkegaard, as well. Phillips makes no secret of the debt he owes these writers, and acknowledges their influence in the preface to one of his earliest published works, *The Concept of Prayer* ('I owe more than I can say to the insights of Søren Kierkegaard and Simone Weil. They are difficult, but they are genuine'),<sup>42</sup> and in one of his most recent, *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides* ('What I am trying to elucidate I have *always* found in Christianity. When I read certain writers such as Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton and Rush Rhees, they gave me perspicuous representations, in a philosophical context, of what I had already known in a religious context').<sup>43</sup> Phillips' appeal to these members of what he sees as an important strand of the Christian tradition acts in his early career as the basis of his account of a Christianity which is not confused and self-interested, and in his later career as a response to those critics who have

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<sup>41</sup> One other way in which the concept of immortality might be criticised, for example, is by asking whether, if it is construed as survival after death, it makes any sense in the first place. In the first chapter of *Death and Immortality* Phillips notes that the question 'Does belief in immortality rest on a mistake?' is considered to be 'all-important' by most contemporary philosophers of religion, but so far as he is concerned, 'I do not think that it takes us finally to anywhere of very great interest'. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. vii.

<sup>43</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 155.

complained that this account bears little relation to Christianity as it is manifested by Christians.

Weil is a favourite of Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion: in addition to Phillips' extensive use of her work, Winch wrote a book about her thought and Rhees' writings about her were extensive enough to be edited by Phillips and published in book form.<sup>44</sup> Her value to Phillips is that she can be held up as an example of a Christian whose beliefs have no place for those elements of Christianity which he rejects. She provides evidence that, if we accept Phillips' analysis of the category 'superstition', Christianity is not necessarily superstitious. We saw above that Phillips sees as superstitious those prayers which attempt to influence God in some way, to get something done, and that the superstition in these prayers stems from their inconsistency with belief in God's eternity, omnipotence, omniscience and so on. Prayer, then, if it is to have any value at all, must have a different purpose. And Weil's writings are at the heart of Phillips' alternative account of what that purpose is. Phillips joins Norman Malcolm in arguing that it is less important for philosophers of religion to try to establish the truth of religious claims than for them 'to pay attention to the internal properties of the Hebrew and Christian conceptions of God. Instead of asking, "Is there a being such that...?" one must ask, "What is the grammar of our idea of God: what can we say and what cannot we say about God?"'<sup>45</sup> This means that so far as religious believers are concerned, and irrespective of any empirical investigations of the world – because it is a religious claim rather than the basis for any kind of scientific explanation – the world is dependent on God. A believer's recognition of this complete dependence is linked to prayers of thanksgiving:

When a believer thanks God for his creation, it seems to be a thanksgiving for his life as a whole, for everything, meaning the good *and* the evil within his life, since despite such evil, thanking God is still said to be possible... To be able to give thanks to God is to be able to have a love for the world... To see the world as God's creation is to see meaning in life. This meaningfulness remains untouched by the evil in the world because it is not arrived at by an inference from it.<sup>46</sup>

Phillips draws important implications from the fact that the presence of evil in the world is not seen as a bar to Christians offering prayers of thanksgiving to God. This must reveal something about the nature of God and therefore of Christian belief, because

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<sup>44</sup> Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Rhees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, ed. D.Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 82. See Norman Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review* 69 (1960), pp. 41-62.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 97-98.

there are obvious moral grounds to reject a God whom we are expected to thank despite the existence of evil, if the existence of evil is thought to be contingent on God's actions. Phillips makes use at this point of the distinction employed by Weil between a natural and a supernatural conception of God.<sup>47</sup> A natural God is one whose nature can be ascertained by reference to events in the world, because he can be said to be responsible for them. If bad things happen, we can hold God responsible for them and infer from this that those who suffer have done something to provoke God's anger. But prayers of thanksgiving are impossible if we believe in a God who is responsible for suffering, because such a God would not be worthy of praise or thanksgiving. In addition, such a view of God places us, not God, at the centre of the universe, and this is inconsistent with a Christian understanding of the nature of God and of creation. Divine love and mercy, if God is conceived of as natural rather than supernatural, are contingent upon the way things go, not necessary; and if love and mercy are contingent, then they are not love and mercy at all. Weil contrasts an understanding of the divine mercy which could be undermined by experiencing suffering with 'an abiding conception of the divine mercy, a conception which does not change whatever event destiny may send upon me and which can be communicated to no matter what human being'.<sup>48</sup> It is impossible to love God while continuing to think that one is owed an explanation of why one thing happens rather than another, while continuing to assert one's independence from God:

Love of God *is* sacrificial; it involves a denial of the self. According to Simone Weil, the spirit of God is the spirit of self-denial. This is why she calls such a God supernatural. In doing this, she contrasts the supernatural with the natural. By the latter, she means quite simply, what is natural to man, namely, to assert oneself, to use the power of one's will, whenever one has the opportunity to do so. Now if this is one's conception of God too, that is, if one's conception of God is of an almighty being who commands whenever he has the power to do so, then one believes in a naturalistic God. One ought rightly to expect such a God to do some things rather than others. He is the God of *the cause*; the God who favours one party, one course of events, rather than another. Any atrocity can be committed (and has been committed) in the name of such a God, for if God is for one, who has the right to be against one?<sup>49</sup>

Weil sees such a conception of God as idolatrous; indeed, she sees God's creation as an act not of divine self-expression, an exercise of power, but of divine self-denial for the sake of his creation – because it involves permitting the existence of things distinct from and of less worth than God, and therefore necessarily God's diminution – to which the appropriate response, which we can nevertheless refuse to make, is for us to deny

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<sup>47</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, tr. Emma Crawford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 100-101.

ourselves for him<sup>50</sup> (Weil describes renunciation as the ‘Imitation of God’s renunciation in creation’<sup>51</sup>). Any kind of prayer which is offered on condition that things go well for the one praying, whether this is a prayer of thanksgiving for one thing happening rather than another, or a petitionary prayer that something will happen, assumes a natural God placed at the service of the one who prays to him. Divine love and mercy, if God is conceived of as natural rather than as supernatural, are contingent, not necessary; meanwhile, ‘an abiding conception of the divine mercy... does not change whatever event destiny may send upon me and ... can be communicated to no matter what human being’.<sup>52</sup> Even suffering, when it is understood as standing in need of explanation, affirms the worth of the sufferer:

The Christian... is tempted by suffering to stress himself. The instinct for self-preservation makes men ask, “Why is this happening to *me*?” But suffering can also be used to teach one that one is nothing just because it does tempt one to put oneself at the centre of one’s concern. Simone Weil puts the point well: “If I thought that God sent me suffering by an act of his will and for my good, I should think that I was something, and I should miss the chief use of suffering which is to teach me that I am nothing. It is therefore essential to avoid all such thoughts, but it is necessary to love God through the suffering”.<sup>53</sup>

So the recognition that one is nothing, the renunciation of the self, is central to the very possibility of being able to thank God, because it is only when one is nothing that the fact of suffering no longer requires an explanation, and only when suffering no longer requires an explanation in terms of God’s will regarding the sufferer that one can express one’s complete dependence on God. Weil draws out what she sees as the implications of complete dependence on God on action in the world:

We should not take one step, even in the direction of what is good, beyond that to which we are irresistibly impelled by God, and this applies to action, word and thought. But we should be willing to go anywhere under his impulsion, even to the farthest limit (the cross)... To be willing to go as far as possible is to pray to be impelled, but without knowing whither.<sup>54</sup>

True dependence on God seems to be understood here as incompatible with initiative, as with Weil’s insistence on considering every act ‘from the point of view not of its object but of its impulsion’.<sup>55</sup> This dependence is simultaneously an act of renunciation and of imitation. Its importance is particularly clear in the light of the emphasis placed by both Weil and Phillips on forbearance, on refusing to act even when it is possible for us to act,

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<sup>50</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, tr. Emma Crawford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 102.

<sup>51</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 104.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 101-102, quoting Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 39.

<sup>55</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 40.

and with an understanding of creation as a divine self-renunciation which we are called upon to imitate. There seems to be no limit in Weil's thought to the extent to which our desires and actions are to be subordinated to God's; 'God can love us only in this consent to withdraw in order to make way for him, just as he himself, our creator, withdrew in order that we might come into being'.<sup>56</sup> And this withdrawal appears to consist of a willingness to forgo our own desires in order to allow God to work through us. Weil describes the need 'To be what the pencil is for me when, blindfold, I feel the table by means of its point – to be that for Christ ... If I knew how to withdraw from my own soul it would be enough to enable this table in front of me to have the incomparable good fortune of being seen by God'.<sup>57</sup> Is it perhaps fair to say that Weil sees absolutely all independent activity (a blink, a thought, the lifting of an arm) as impinging on the realm of God, except where it is God's will that such activity is carried out?

### **Weil and Phillips on Existence and False Consolation**

A good example of the strong reliance on Weil's thought in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion can be found in Phillips' paper 'God and Concept-Formation in Simone Weil', collected in *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides*. Phillips makes extensive use of Weil's writings in his investigation of the way in which the concept of God is acquired by religious believers, focusing on the characteristically Wittgensteinian, and especially Phillipsian, claim that the question of 'whether the word "God" refers to anything, or worse, whether it "stands for" anything' leads us to 'become embroiled in grammatical confusions'.<sup>58</sup> Paying attention to the actual surroundings instead of paying attention to the 'surface grammar' would tell us 'that belief in God is found in a hunger for an absolute goodness and love which cannot be satisfied by any object, by anything that exists'.<sup>59</sup> Phillips claims that Simone Weil teaches us 'that if we want to understand what is meant by the reality of God, we should look at what it means to love God'.<sup>60</sup> He quotes her as saying that 'Nothing which exists is absolutely worthy of love. We must therefore love that which does not exist'.<sup>61</sup> For Weil, the idea that God exists would be more problematic than his non-existence, because 'This non-existent object of love is not a fiction ... for our fictions cannot be any more worthy of

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<sup>56</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 35.

<sup>58</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 214.

<sup>59</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 215.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 215.

<sup>61</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 99, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 215.

love than we are ourselves, and we are not worthy of it'.<sup>62</sup> Here, a religious believer's actual use of religious terms like 'love' acts as evidence that God, despite surface appearances, is not believed in as 'an object, an existent among existents'.<sup>63</sup> This seems to work perfectly well as an argument, although Phillips' opponents might be able to wheel out examples of religious believers for whom the 'existence' of God is the same sort of existence as the existence of other real objects in the world – believers whom Phillips would be able to accuse of having mistaken surface- and depth-grammar. Phillips acknowledges that Weil's work may appear to fail to do justice to the great variety which exists within religious experiences and understandings, or at least to give 'priority to certain religious possibilities to the detriment of others'.<sup>64</sup> I referred above to her distinction between natural and supernatural religion – the distinction between a God who is like an infinitely powerful human being, to whom we can pray for specific things and from whom we can expect punishment and compensation, and a God characterised by love, goodness, renunciation and grace. Phillips emphasises in Weil's defence that 'she thought the possibilities she emphasises are central to Christianity and to most of the major religions of the world',<sup>65</sup> but he also allows that for those who believe in what she would describe as 'natural religion', 'there are active religious responses ... even if they are not particularly admirable'.<sup>66</sup> This enables Phillips to use Weil against one of his standard targets, philosophers who are so preoccupied with the epistemology of religion, with assessing belief in God, that they ignore the real content and character of religious discourse. For Weil, there is no reason to assume that 'love of God presupposes belief in the existence of God';<sup>67</sup> quite the opposite: she says, 'I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure that my love is not illusory'.<sup>68</sup> If she can be sure that her love is real, then the question of whether that love has an object is 'purely abstract and verbal',<sup>69</sup> which is not necessarily to say that it is a bad question from a philosophical point of view, but simply that it is not a question that arises in the life of the religious believer:

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<sup>62</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 100, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 215.

<sup>63</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 215.

<sup>64</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 225.

<sup>65</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 225.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 225.

<sup>67</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 225.

<sup>68</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 103, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 225.

<sup>69</sup> Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, ed. and tr. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 158, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 226.

before one has eaten, it is neither needful nor particularly useful to believe in bread. What is essential is to know that one is hungry; and this is not belief, it is absolutely certain knowledge which can only be obscured by lies.<sup>70</sup>

Phillips' charge against philosophers of religion is that they miss this, that they ignore 'the grammar of the religious commitment Simone Weil is talking about'.<sup>71</sup>

Phillips is right on this, I think. But we should look again at what Weil is saying. In the quotations above, she claims that her belief in the non-existence of God comes from a belief that existence is incompatible with being worthy of love, and goes on to say (with, it should be said, perfect consistency) that we ourselves are not worthy of love. Phillips takes issue with Weil's argument that 'men are not really satisfied with finite things', saying that it is not plausible to claim that 'I do not really think worth desiring that which I desire *in my actual situation*'.<sup>72</sup> This seems right, but neither here, nor in his related denial of her apparent belief that 'a love of finite things [is] a product of self-deception',<sup>73</sup> does Phillips offer a rejection of the basis of Weil's denial of God's existence as stated above – a denial with which Phillips seems to have sympathy. And Phillips does not argue with Weil's claim that existent objects are not worthy of love. This desire for perfection and belief in the worthlessness of anything imperfect can be seen in Weil's own life. Weil described her attitude to herself as 'contempt, hatred and repulsion',<sup>74</sup> and had health problems associated with malnutrition (there is some debate over the question of whether she suffered from anorexia nervosa, with which she was never diagnosed in her lifetime, but some of whose symptoms she appears to have displayed) which was not helped by the fact that for her 'eating became a chore, since she was disgusted by any food not absolutely flawless'.<sup>75</sup> I will go on in chapter 6 to discuss some of the problematic issues raised by Weil's life.

Phillips goes on to distinguish between two ways in which religious believers may react to and account for what he calls 'the limits of human existence: birth, death, the presence of unavoidable suffering, the arbitrariness of fate, the contingencies of time and place'.<sup>76</sup> One response is to create fantastic accounts of God as 'a policeman in the sky'<sup>77</sup> who can see every injustice and will resolve them all in the future, and to whom

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<sup>70</sup> Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, p. 159, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 225.

<sup>71</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 226.

<sup>72</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 218.

<sup>73</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 217.

<sup>74</sup> Ann Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism* (London: SPCK, 1987), p. 53.

<sup>75</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 53.

<sup>76</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 218.

<sup>77</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 218.

obedience is due, but only because it functions as ‘justified prudence’<sup>78</sup> – ‘Pascal’s wager’, for example, seems to understand religious belief in this way.<sup>79</sup> Phillips protests that this meeting of ‘one set of contingencies ... by the promise of another set of contingencies’ is ‘an attempt to meet the finite in terms of the finite’,<sup>80</sup> and quotes Weil as saying: ‘We have to be careful about the level on which we place the infinite. If we put it on the level which is only suitable for the finite it does not much matter what name we give it.’<sup>81</sup> He mentions Weil’s (somewhat tendentious) association of this sort of conception of God with early Hebrew and Roman religion, and her assertion that the promise of compensation it offers is a lie. Putting aside such false consolation involves, in Weil’s understanding, detachment: ‘Attachment is a manufacturer of illusions and whoever wants reality ought to be detached’.<sup>82</sup> Detachment consists of accepting life’s limitations, accepting necessities, and it contains within itself the possibility of seeing everything as a gift and of coming to a love of the beauty of the world – a love which ‘involves trials and tribulations as much as blessings’, because the will of God to which she submits herself ‘is expressed in unavoidable sufferings’:<sup>83</sup>

God sends affliction without distinction to the wicked and the good, just as he sends the rain and the sunlight. He did not reserve the cross for Christ ... No event is a favour on the part of God – only grace is that.<sup>84</sup>

Phillips includes a striking quotation from Weil which helps to show what he means when he talks about the relationship between suffering, detachment, grace and the love of God:

If I thought that God sent me suffering by an act of his will and for my good, I should think that I was something, and I should miss the chief use of suffering which is to teach me that I am nothing. It is therefore essential to avoid all such thoughts, but it is necessary to love God through the suffering.

I must love being nothing. How horrible it would be if I were something! I must love my nothingness, love being a nothingness. I must love with that part of the soul which is on the other side of the curtain, for the part of the soul which is perceptible to consciousness cannot love nothingness. It has a horror of it. Though it may think it loves nothingness, what it really loves is something other than nothingness.<sup>85</sup>

Phillips observes that ‘Some have seen in remarks such as these a denial of human dignity’, but is adamant that ‘Nothing could be further from her intention’<sup>86</sup> – a claim

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<sup>78</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 219.

<sup>79</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. Isaac Taylor (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 47-51.

<sup>80</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 219.

<sup>81</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 48-49, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 219.

<sup>82</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 14, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 220.

<sup>83</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 221.

<sup>84</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 101, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 221.

<sup>85</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 101, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 221.

<sup>86</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 221

which helps to bring out just how much, for Weil as read approvingly by Phillips, can be counted as ‘false consolation’. Only by dying to the self can one ‘see all human beings as children of God’;<sup>87</sup> only in this context ‘can someone help the sufferer without thinking that he is something, and the sufferer can receive charity without feeling bought’.<sup>88</sup> A tough-minded distinction is made between joy and pleasure: ‘A test of what is real is hard and rough. Joys are found in it, not pleasure. What is pleasant belongs to dreams’.<sup>89</sup> This apparent distrust of pleasure, associating it with illusion, and the characterisation of joy – in the face of the common understanding of the word – not as something which is pleasurable but as the acceptance of life as it is, is reminiscent of the suspicion of pleasure and reward as a motivation for moral behaviour in Phillips’ moral philosophy. It is difficult to see how Phillips’ criticism of the ‘unattractive austerity’ of remarks like ‘I feel so clearly that even the affection which human beings evince for me can only be a mistake on their part’<sup>90</sup> as doing ‘violence to the character of *particular* relationships and particular loves’<sup>91</sup> can sit with his apparent approval of Weil’s understanding of existent beings as unworthy of being loved.

### Self-Renunciation and Immortality

The temptation to place oneself at the centre of one’s concerns lies behind what Phillips sees as the most important confusion in accounts of what prayer involves and in accounts of God’s existence which link his existence to his power, and therefore to his power to act for us. It is also key to a common misunderstanding of what a religious belief in immortality is about. Phillips takes further his criticisms of Geach’s contention that belief in immortality functions as an eschatological extension of Foot’s account of morality, as a guarantee that obedience to God will bring its reward after death, disobedience its punishment. It is not only that this does not look like a moral motivation for obeying God, although the fact that ‘this life’s lowest motives and desires seem to determine the conception of immortality involved’,<sup>92</sup> is one aspect of the condemnation of such an understanding of immortality as self-interested. The criticism is not merely of a *desire* to be compensated after death for one’s earthly sufferings (which, however at odds it may be with acceptable motives for moral behaviour, seems perfectly

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<sup>87</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 221.

<sup>88</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 222.

<sup>89</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 47, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 222.

<sup>90</sup> Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil: Volume Two*, tr. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 364, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 223.

<sup>91</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 223.

<sup>92</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 150.

understandable), but of a belief that one *ought* to be compensated – that punishing the wicked and rewarding the good is a matter of justice. And this is something which it is easier for the religious believer to portray as a disinterested expression of what they believe God’s will to be. Yet even this, according to Phillips, again making use of Weil’s writings, betrays a confusion:

The effort of suffering from some offence causes us to expect the punishment or apologies of the offender, the effort of doing good makes us expect the gratitude of the person we have helped, but there are only particular cases of a universal law of the soul. Every time we give anything out we have an absolute need that at least the equivalent should come into us, and because we need this we think we have a right to it. Our debtors comprise all beings and all things; they are the entire universe. We think we have claims everywhere. In every claim which we think we possess there is always the idea of an imaginary claim of the past on the future. This is the claim which we have to renounce.<sup>93</sup>

When sin is analysed as debt, then we have an absolute right to be compensated for offences against us, and God has an absolute right to be compensated for offences against him. And any failure to receive such compensation is a form of undeserved suffering. But the idea that we have a right to be compensated for the evil we have suffered and the good we have done is inconsistent with the role played in Christianity by forgiveness. If we are asked to forgive others – that is, to forgo any claim we may have on those who have offended against us – and this forgiveness lasts only until death, at which point our claim will be remembered and compensation will be forthcoming, then forgiveness becomes both easy and provisional. Furthermore, this understanding reveals an assumption that pleasure, not suffering, is our just and natural state – and even implies that doing good is an onerous task for which we ought to be compensated. Forgiveness, like love and mercy, is not forgiveness at all if it is contingent.

Phillips and Weil do not reject the analysis of sin and goodness in terms of debt and credit, but they do consider its implications in the light of the Christian emphasis on forgiveness:

To renounce these claims is to renounce one’s personality. Time and again one finds the same language of renunciation in the writings of the mystics. Forgiving the debts of others is to strip oneself of one’s ego, it means, as Simone Weil points out, realizing “that in the ego there is nothing whatever, no psychological element, which external circumstances could not do away with. It means accepting that truth. It means being happy that things should be so”.<sup>94</sup>

Disregarding forgiveness, except by understanding our own forgiveness of others as a sort of undeserved punishment, involves the same confusion noted above, of putting

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<sup>93</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, pp. 150-151, quoted in Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 52.

<sup>94</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 70, quoting Weil, *Waiting on God*, pp. 174-175.

oneself at the centre of the universe, of failing to depend on God. Weil expresses how this lack of dependence interferes with a correct understanding of immortality:

The principal claim which we think we have on the universe is that our personality should continue. This claim implies all the others. The instinct of self-preservation makes us feel this continuation to be a necessity, and we believe that a necessity is a right. We are like the beggar who said to Talleyrand: 'Sir, I must live,' and to whom Talleyrand replied, 'I do not see the necessity for that.' Our personality is entirely dependent on external circumstances which have unlimited power to crush it. But we would rather die than admit this. From our point of view the equilibrium of the world is a combination of circumstances so ordered that our personality remains intact and seems to belong to us. All the circumstances of the past which have wounded our personality appear to us to be disturbances of balance which should infallibly be made up for one day or another by phenomena having a contrary effect. We live on the expectation of these compensations. The near approach of death is horrible chiefly because it forces the knowledge upon us that these compensations will never come.<sup>95</sup>

We can square the unavailability of death with our demand for compensation by redescribing death not as the end, but as the admittedly unpleasant prelude to a new beginning in which we can enjoy a blissful and eternal payback for the sufferings and injustices of this life – and in which those who have caused or profited from our suffering will be paid back too. Yet, Phillips argues, this entirely changes the significance of death:

By reducing the status of death to the status of sleep, we hope to wake again to a new and better life. But then the lesson religious believers see in death is lost, since death no longer reveals the fact that there is to be no compensation, but is seen as an additional fact for which compensation must be sought.<sup>96</sup>

Or as Weil puts it:

Belief in immortality is harmful because it is not in our power to conceive of the soul as really incorporeal. So this belief is in fact a belief in the prolongation of life, and it robs death of its purpose.<sup>97</sup>

The Christianity described by Phillips and Weil is a hard-edged, austere, highly serious religion which contains many hardships and few benefits save the dubious one of living without any illusions either that one deserves better or that things will improve – in effect, it poses a stark theological choice between being happy and being right.

Phillips uses Weil's insistence that immortality should not be understood as a form of compensation to show the inadequacy of the accounts of immortality given by Geach and by Antony Flew. But he does not use them to show that belief in immortality is fundamentally misplaced – just as he did not use Weil's insights into the confusions

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<sup>95</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 151, quoted in Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 53.

<sup>96</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 53.

<sup>97</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 33.

involved in believing that God will answer prayer while accepting the presence of evil in the world to show that prayer itself was an inherently nonsensical activity for the religious believer. Once again, Weil's writings provide the basis for an alternative account of what is going on when Christians say that they believe in the immortality of the soul:

We can agree with Simone Weil that 'The thought of death calls for a counterweight, and this counterweight – apart from grace – cannot be anything but a lie', but nevertheless show how an account of immortality can be given in terms of grace. Such an account can be arrived at by displaying the contrast between the desire for compensation and the religious conception of dying to the self. This is the contrast between the temporal (that is, the concern with the self) and the eternal (that is, the concern with self-renunciation).<sup>98</sup>

This is a clever move by Phillips. Suddenly, the desire for eternal life – normally described as involving the possibility of compensation for earthly suffering and of living in a state of heavenly bliss, whatever that might mean – is characterised as a concern with the temporal; a lack of concern for whatever might happen at death, in which therefore the prospect of death changes absolutely nothing in the relationship between the believer and God, is placed at the heart of what it means to have eternal life. To believe that one has eternal life, then, is not to live in the expectation of immortality, of living for ever in a manner for which critics like Geach and Flew want (not unreasonably) to find empirical evidence before they can take it seriously, but to lead a life in which temporal considerations are unimportant – a switch, in effect, from a positive to a negative definition of eternal life. So, 'The immortality of the soul refers to the state an individual is in in relation to the unchanging reality of God';<sup>99</sup> immortality is defined in terms of the relationship between the believer and God rather than of that between the believer and time:

For the believer, his death, like his life, is to be in God. For him, this is the life eternal which death cannot touch; the immortality which finally places the soul beyond the reach of the snares and temptations of this mortal life.<sup>100</sup>

Death is not avoided, but accepted in its finality; and it is by accepting death that the believer transcends it.

### **Self-Renunciation and Moral Self-Interest**

Self-renunciation is at the heart of Phillips' account of what authentic religious belief and practice, participation in the reality of God, must consist of. The following

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<sup>98</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 53, quoting Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 16.

<sup>99</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 60.

statement, which seems to me to be reasonable to treat as a convenient summary of Phillips' position on the nature of religion, suggests that the latter *necessarily* involves the former:

In learning by contemplation, attention, renunciation, what forgiving, thanking, loving, etc. mean in these contexts, the believer is participating in the reality of God; *this is what we mean by God's reality*.<sup>101</sup>

The renunciation of the self seems to be, to Phillips, a corollary of 'the religious belief that nothing belongs to us by right and that everything is a gift of grace'.<sup>102</sup> Grace, the pointlessness of evil and self-renunciation are all inextricably bound together. Evil's pointlessness teaches us that we have no rights. The fact that we have no rights entails a denial of the self:

It is precisely because evil has no explanation, that one can find nothing in oneself to explain or justify what is happening to one, that the suffering can be used to show that one is nothing.<sup>103</sup>

Through accepting that she is nothing, however, the believer can come to see life as a gift from God in a way which would not be possible if she thought that she was owed it in any case, and can come to a love of the beauty of the world which would not be possible if such beauty were thought of as a natural state marred by suffering – as a right – rather than, again, as a gift from God.<sup>104</sup> We saw in our discussion above of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy evidence for a serious mistrust not only of moral strategies designed to work to the advantage of the agent, but even of moral decision-making *per se*. Now it is possible to trace connections between this and Phillips' philosophy of religion – indeed, many of the characteristics displayed in the moral philosophy are easier to see in the philosophy of religion. There are passages in which Phillips appears to run the two together, as in this application of Weil's writings to a discussion of Father Paneloux in Camus' *The Plague*:

[Weil], like Paneloux, puts aside all compensatory notions of religion. Suffering is not the means to a higher good. Christianity offers a use for suffering, not a remedy for it. We come to see that there is no reason in ourselves why we are visited with ills and misfortunes. We cease to think of providence as owing us anything. Faced with this phenomenon, existentialists have spoken of 'absurdity' and placed great emphasis on the self and its choices. Faced by the same phenomenon, the Christian speaks of all things being in the hands of God, the gifts of grace. Paneloux mentions, but does not develop, the notion of active fatalism. The Christian is called on to see other human beings and natural objects as gifts of grace, not to be appropriated or dominated by others. He has to die to the self, cease to see himself as the

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<sup>101</sup> Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 55.

<sup>102</sup> Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>103</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 103.

<sup>104</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 98.

centre of the world. There is no compensation for the death of a child. Yet in the very absence of such compensation, we come to see how God's will can be found in it as it was in the death of Jesus on the Cross.<sup>105</sup>

It is easy to see how a recognition of the apparent pointlessness of evil can precipitate an existentialist concentration on the self to the exclusion of other possible concerns; since such a recognition seems to be closely bound up with the failure of theodicy, the alternative approach of Phillips and Weil, which insists that if a failure to solve the problem of evil results in a loss of faith then there was nothing much to that faith in the first place ('One has to be ready in face of one's cry, "Why is this happening to me?" to reply "Why shouldn't it?"<sup>106</sup>), can be fairly characterised, as Brian Clack says of Phillips' account, as 'exceptionally high-minded'.<sup>107</sup> The same might be said of his understanding of morality. There are clear similarities between his account of what it does and does not make sense to say in morality, both as moral statements and as strategies of justification for such statements, and his account of what is appropriate and what inappropriate in religious belief and practice. In both cases, the desire for personal advantage, material gain, the exercise of power or even release from pain and hardship are seen as illicit motives for moral and religious behaviour which result from philosophically confused accounts of what morality and religion are for. Phillips has as little time for those whose religious belief is motivated by such things as he does for those who see it as a justification for moral behaviour.

### Critics of Phillips

It should be clear from the examples discussed here that Phillips assumes that prayer is not necessarily superstitious, that belief in immortality can make sense – that Christianity is not ultimately confused. Other philosophers assume that since no obvious explanation of prayer or immortality exists, and since many religious believers give such manifestly bad explanations, there is no good explanation. It is easy to see why Phillips' strategy would be highly irritating to those who disagree with him. His whole enterprise in *The Concept of Prayer* and *Death and Immortality* looks to them like an attempt to move the goalposts: a response to philosophers who say, 'Look, Christian beliefs about prayer and immortality are fundamentally confused' with, 'What you describe are indeed fundamentally confused, but they aren't Christian beliefs about prayer and immortality'. O.R. Jones notes Phillips' selectiveness in the texts and authorities he draws upon in *The*

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<sup>105</sup> Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>106</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 76.

<sup>107</sup> Brian Clack, 'D.Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion', p. 114.

*Concept of Prayer* and argues that while this is perfectly acceptable in ‘an exercise in persuasive definition’, nevertheless ‘many religious believers will justifiably grudge him the definite article in the title of his book’.<sup>108</sup> And one perfectly fair response to Phillips’ work would be to ask whether in fact the Christianity he describes bears any resemblance to Christianity as it is widely practised. Phillips himself concedes that his account of prayer is not exhaustive:

In face of prayers which do not fit readily into my exposition, all I can do is note them and leave it at that. I do not say that they are not prayers (who is a philosopher to say that?), but simply that I do not understand what is involved in them.<sup>109</sup>

Nevertheless, he immediately follows this concession with a statement which implies that those prayers which do not fit into his exposition are not really worth spending much time on:

Religious believers can make mistakes and be confused, just like philosophers, scientists, or anyone else one cares to mention. What is important is to notice that whether a mistake or confusion has occurred, is to be recognized by criteria found within religion.<sup>110</sup>

It should not go unnoticed, therefore, that the set of supposedly Christian prayers which do not fit readily into Phillips’ exposition is considerably larger than the set of those which do. Flew does indeed notice this, complaining that ‘the philosopher who fails to insist that the practice of prayer does presuppose an affirmative answer [to the question of God’s existence] is simply not in touch with prayer as conceived by the Saints and the Fathers’.<sup>111</sup> This line of criticism (which, after all, is part of a general enterprise aimed at preventing the removal of religion from philosophy’s line of fire, something Phillips claims to have no interest in opposing<sup>112</sup>) is to my mind, however, considerably less interesting than one which accepts rather more of Phillips’ account. In other words, rather than asking ‘Do Christians really believe this?’ I want to ask ‘What if Christians *do* believe this?’ Perhaps too many of Phillips’ critics have attacked his account of religious belief on the grounds of what it does not include rather than of what it does include, with the result that his account of self-renunciation as an essential characteristic of authentic religious belief and practice has been undeservedly neglected.

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<sup>108</sup> O.R. Jones, Review of D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), *Philosophy* 42 (1967), p. 98.

<sup>109</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 8.

<sup>111</sup> Antony Flew, Review of D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), *Mind* 76 (1967), p. 295.

<sup>112</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, pp. 12-15.

# 5

## Self-Renunciation as a Theme in Christian Theology and History

### Critics of Phillips and Winch

Phillips supports his claim that authentic Christianity is characterised by self-renouncing behaviour with reference to a very small, select group of texts and writers. Weil is clearly the most important of these, but some biblical passages are cited too, along with Kierkegaard and Tolstoy. Phillips also makes occasional non-specific references to 'the writings of the mystics' and to the prayers of 'the saints'.<sup>1</sup> The work of various other modern poets, novelists, playwrights and filmmakers is employed to help Phillips' religious and moral arguments, with varying degrees of success<sup>2</sup> – and however useful they might be as illustrations, the use of such writers is not the same as the tracing of tendencies or patterns through Christian history. Many of them simply do not claim to be representative of the Christian tradition at all. Of course, Phillips never claims otherwise, but nevertheless on the evidence he produces himself, his placing of self-renunciation at the heart of authentic Christian belief and practice is on rather shaky ground. This has not gone unnoticed by some of Phillips' critics. Indeed, appeal to the majority is a standard tactic used against him. Keith Ward, for example, says that Phillips' account of immortality in *Death and Immortality* 'certainly does not reflect the opinions of the vast majority of believers'.<sup>3</sup> Stephen T. Davis argues that 'The vast majority of ordinary theists would insist that the religious form of life includes certain beliefs or statements taken as factually true about, for example, the existence of God, the origin of the world, and survival after death'.<sup>4</sup> And Richard Swinburne describes Phillips' argument in *The Concept of Prayer* as 'a totally false account of the meaning of the prayers of most of those who have prayed in the Christian and other theistic traditions over

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<sup>1</sup> On biblical sources, see for example Phillips' discussions of Job in *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 98-100, and in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, pp. 153-169. Kierkegaard is discussed in *Death and Immortality*, pp. 47-49, and Tolstoy in *Death and Immortality*, p. 51. The mystics are referred to in *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 70, the saints in *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 131, and in *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Phillips, *Through a Darkening Glass: Philosophy, Literature and Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) and *From Fantasy to Faith*.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Ward, *The Concept of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 56

many centuries, including the present century',<sup>5</sup> and accuses his account of religious language of being

in essence plainly false as an account of what the vast majority of normal users of religious language during the last two millennia have meant by the words and sentences which they have uttered. The vast majority of those who have prayed petitionary prayers have hoped that their prayer would make a difference to the way things happen ... The vast majority of those who have expressed in the Nicene Creed their belief in "the resurrection of the dead, and the Life of the World to come" have believed in survival after death ... the vast majority of those who have used religious language have certainly treated the affirmation that God created the world as the confident propounding of a hypothesis explaining its existence.<sup>6</sup>

While Swinburne may be correct, he is unfortunately guilty of the same failure to produce evidence for his claims as Phillips – he supports his appeals to 'the vast majority' with the argument that 'if anyone still doubts this, perhaps only an extensive sociological and literary survey of what the utterers of theological sentences suppose to be implied by what they say will convince them'.<sup>7</sup> Swinburne hopes that 'a brief reflection on the points which I have made will render this unnecessary'.<sup>8</sup> This really will not do as an argument, particularly since Swinburne himself appears to intend to imply (correctly) that a sufficiently 'extensive sociological and literary survey of what the utterers of theological sentences' – most of them, of course, now dead; most of their utterances, of course, unrecorded; most of their suppositions, of course, inaccessible – 'suppose to be implied by what they say' would be literally impossible to conduct. John Hick, while arguing along similar lines, does recognise that the reason Phillips argues as he does is that he believes that such literalistic understandings of religious statements are philosophically untenable. Nevertheless, of what he characterises as Phillips' rejection of the idea that religion tells us about the actual structure of reality, revealing a larger context of existence than our present earthly life, Hick comments that 'if it is a mistake, it is one that virtually all the great religious founders and teachers seem to have made!'<sup>9</sup>

In a highly critical discussion of Winch's paper 'Understanding a Primitive Society', Robin Horton argues that Winch is wrong to claim there that Zande mystical thinking expresses an attitude similar to the Judeo-Christian 'conception of "If it be Thy Will," as developed in the story of Job', which Winch describes in terms very similar to Phillips' approach in *The Concept of Prayer*:

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 140-141n.

<sup>6</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism (Revised Edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion (Third Edition)* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1983), p. 91.

Because this conception is central to Christian prayers of supplication, they may be regarded from one point of view as freeing the believer from dependence on what he is supplicating for. Prayers cannot play this role if they are regarded as a means of influencing the outcome for in that case the one who prays is still dependent on the outcome. He frees himself from this by acknowledging his complete dependence on God; and this is totally unlike any dependence on the outcome precisely because God is eternal and the outcome contingent.<sup>10</sup>

According to Horton, the understanding of religion presented here, which features ‘God, not as a being who might help one control the vicissitudes of everyday life, but rather as a being through whom one learns to transcend any care about such vicissitudes’,<sup>11</sup> and expounded by ‘such figures as Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, Bonhoeffer, Wittgenstein, D.Z. Phillips and Winch himself ... is a kind of thinking by no means confined to theologians and philosophers. Indeed, one might say that it is central to the life of many modern Western Protestants. I for one imbibed it, if not with my mother’s milk, at least all through school and university chapel’.<sup>12</sup> Horton argues that this conception of religion is the one which was brought to Africa in the early twentieth century by Christian, and especially Protestant, missionaries – and that it was in large part rejected by the new African converts to Christianity, who took ‘the new message of an active, morally-concerned supreme being, but [used] it as the basis of a comprehensive scheme for the explanation, prediction and control of events in the space-time world’, whose resulting new ‘spiritual’ churches are today, unlike the missionary foundations, ‘a growing-point in African religious life’.<sup>13</sup> However, if Horton is right in his striking claim that ‘what has happened here is simply that African peoples have been offered a Winchian conception of religion, and have rejected it’,<sup>14</sup> then what this amounts to is an acknowledgement that the Winchian, or Phillipsian, conception of religion is the one which Western Christian missionaries held themselves and attempted to spread in Africa – in other words, that Winch’s and Phillips’ position has been much more dominant, and much more influential, in post-Reformation Western Europe than many of their critics are prepared to acknowledge.

Horton’s wider argument is that Winch’s understanding of religion, which rejects attempts to make it into a scientific or causal explanation for the way things are, aiming to ‘make us feel the unworthiness of the struggle for explanation, prediction and control,

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<sup>10</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 39, quoted in Robin Horton, ‘Professor Winch on Safari’, in Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner (eds.), *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 385-386.

<sup>11</sup> Horton, ‘Professor Winch on Safari’, p. 401.

<sup>12</sup> Horton, ‘Professor Winch on Safari’, p. 402.

<sup>13</sup> Horton, ‘Professor Winch on Safari’, p. 402.

<sup>14</sup> Horton, ‘Professor Winch on Safari’, p. 401.

and the nobility of the struggle to achieve a resigned contemplation of life's contingencies',<sup>15</sup> is a result of a distinction, non-existent until relatively recently, between religious and scientific activity. As science simultaneously dispensed with theistic paradigms and gained increasingly impressive and unchallengeable results 'in the sphere of explanation, prediction and control', so theologians 'began to emphasize that the ends of religion were quite different from the ends of science, and to deny that they were in any sort of competition with the scientists'.<sup>16</sup> Like Swinburne, Ward, Davis and Hick, Horton appeals to the majority in support of his argument:

For whilst it is true that there have always been traces of the Jobian attitude to God in the Western Christian heritage, it is equally true that, up to four hundred years ago, a majority of Western Christians would have found this attitude as alien as most African Christians find it today. For them too, beliefs about God were first and foremost the constituents of a theory in terms of which they explained, predicted and attempted to control the events of the world around them.<sup>17</sup>

This could, if correct, be counted as a serious problem with Winch's and Phillips' conception of religion if their advocacy of that conception turned on a claim that it is or has been the way in which a majority of Christians have understood their religion – but it does not.

### Phillips' Defence

Phillips' strategy for dealing with attacks like these can be found in his response to the criticisms of Terrence Tilley who, in an analysis of Phillips' problematic use of the concept of 'superstition', complains that Phillips chooses a tiny, highly unrepresentative group of Christians as examples of non-superstitious believers: 'My thesis is that Phillips has been holding up his glass to the forest of religion and has seen in it only a few eccentric and exceptional trees'.<sup>18</sup> Tilley's complaint is that Phillips' exemplars – Kierkegaard, Weil and characters from the stories of Flannery O'Connor – represent 'the "odd ducks" of religious communities'.<sup>19</sup>

While no one would deny their significance and deep interest, they are clearly not anywhere near the 'standard' of religious practitioners. They are post-Reformation Christians who stand in opposition to many of the everyday beliefs and practices held by members of their traditions. They also not only reject Enlightenment Christianity but also appeal to other 'intellectual' individuals who reject Christianity while living in an Enlightenment culture. But most importantly, these exemplars are rugged individualists in their religions,

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<sup>15</sup> Horton, 'Professor Winch on Safari', p. 407.

<sup>16</sup> Horton, 'Professor Winch on Safari', p. 405.

<sup>17</sup> Horton, 'Professor Winch on Safari', pp. 404-405.

<sup>18</sup> Tilley, 'The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion', p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> Tilley, 'The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion', p. 351.

appealing figures who go against the grain of the everyday in order to plumb the depths of their traditions, figures seductive to modern intellectuals who seek to forge new paths that go against the grain of the received tradition in their own fields.<sup>20</sup>

There is clearly some truth in this accusation, but Phillips can respond that his intention in studying religion is not sociological but philosophical; in other words, that the issue is not the beliefs of the majority, but what makes sense and what does not within the context of the religious beliefs they hold. Phillips says that ‘In many contexts, mistakes *may* predominate; in religion, imperfections *always* do’.<sup>21</sup> Where Tilley accuses Phillips of ‘making the unusual normative for his distinguishing religion from superstition’,<sup>22</sup> Phillips’ point is that imperfections – superstitions – should not be taken as *normative* simply because they are *normal*. For example, although acts of ‘imperfect’ contrition, in which contrition is ‘motivated by a fear of hell as punishment for one’s sins’, have a formally recognised place within Roman Catholicism,<sup>23</sup> nevertheless ‘calling them “imperfect”, *in this confessional practice*, shows that they *are* logically dependent on the sense of the rarer “perfect contrition”’<sup>24</sup> – and it is not surprising that the latter are rare and the former are common.<sup>25</sup>

Phillips’ fullest statement of his attitude to the criticism of philosophers who think that ‘if believers reject the accounts of their belief I offer, their rejection is the last word on the matter’<sup>26</sup> can be found in his paper ‘Religion in Wittgenstein’s Mirror’, collected in *Wittgenstein and Religion*. Here Phillips argues that it does not actually matter very much what a believer thinks her beliefs entail in any case – the true implications of her beliefs will be shown by their relation to other beliefs, and in particular to the believer’s practice. He asks ‘If some things we do are confused, how is this to be pointed out except by reference to other things we do?’<sup>27</sup> and suggests that there is something absurd in suggesting that the believer should have final authority on the question of what religious belief is about:

According to the impatient philosophers, we must accept the believers’ gloss. The suggestion is baffling. These philosophers would not dream of advocating this procedure elsewhere in philosophy. I can be told any day of the week in my local pub that thinking is a state of consciousness. Does that settle the matter? I can also be told that thinking is a brain-state. Does that settle it too? No philosopher is going to accept these procedures. Why advocate them, then,

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<sup>20</sup> Tilley, ‘The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion’, p. 352.

<sup>21</sup> Phillips, ‘Practices, Practice and Superstition: A Response to Terrence W. Tilley’, p. 358.

<sup>22</sup> Tilley, ‘The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion’, p. 352.

<sup>23</sup> Tilley, ‘The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion’, pp. 347-348.

<sup>24</sup> Phillips, ‘Practices, Practice and Superstition’, p. 358.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips, ‘Practices, Practice and Superstition’, p. 361.

<sup>26</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 245.

in the philosophy of religion? On this view, no philosopher could capture deformities of thought in his philosophical mirror since, if every gloss is to be accepted, there are no deformities to mirror.<sup>28</sup>

The drinkers at Phillips' local pub clearly possess an unusually high degree of philosophical sophistication, but even so, none of their claims should be thought to resolve once and for all highly controversial and difficult philosophical questions. As Phillips says, 'you cannot philosophise by Gallup poll'.<sup>29</sup> In the same way, believers are not necessarily authorities on the nature and content of beliefs. Phillips gives one of his favourite examples:

it is superstitious to think that there is some kind of queer causal connection between sin and worldly punishment. Being distanced from God is not a causal consequence of sin. Sin, pride and envy, for example, create the distance in simply being what they are. Praying to avoid God's anger is thus not a praying to avoid consequences, but a praying to avoid becoming a certain kind of person.<sup>30</sup>

The believer can think what she likes, but the question of 'whether a religious belief is superstitious is not up to the individual concerned to decide'.<sup>31</sup> If she believes in punishment as a causal consequence of sin, she is just wrong, because this explanation does not make sense of the nature of sin. Praying to avoid God's anger just cannot be a prayer to continue to feel pride and envy but for God not to mind; it *must* be a prayer simply not to be proud and envious if it is not to be confused. And even if every Christian prayed in such a superstitious way, they would still all be wrong – and Phillips' analysis would still stand.

So Phillips is, so far as he understands his own position, in no way committed to the belief that many or most Christians avoid what he sees as 'superstitious' forms of Christian belief – on the contrary, since the non-'superstitious' form is so difficult, we should not expect to find many who achieve it. While Phillips may be right about this, I want to argue in this chapter that his lack of interest in historical support for his philosophical claims does a disservice to his arguments. It is not only in Christianity that we can find evidence for asceticism as an important part of religious life, both ideally – the very word 'Islam', for instance, means 'submission' or 'surrender'<sup>32</sup> – and in practice.

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<sup>28</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, pp. 243-244.

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 41. In this case, however, Phillips comes close to doing himself what he criticises in others: 'When my first book, *The Concept of Prayer*, came out in 1965, it annoyed many philosophical attackers and defenders of religion because it urged them to give up a common game they were playing. Religious newspapers, however, greeted the book as characterising a faith they knew'.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, pp. 245-246.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam: The Foundations of Muslim Faith and Practice* (London: I B Tauris, 1996), p. 21.

This has perhaps been noted by anthropologists more than by theologians: Clifford Geertz observes that ‘With the possible exception of Christian Science, there are few if any religious traditions, “great” or “little”, in which the proposition that life hurts is not strenuously affirmed, and in some it is virtually glorified’;<sup>33</sup> Émile Durkheim thought of asceticism as a religious universal:

asceticism is not, as we would have thought, a rare, exceptional, and almost abnormal product of religious life; on the contrary, it is one of its essential elements. Every religion contains an ascetic kernel, for there is none without a system of prohibitions.<sup>34</sup>

From philosophy of religion Hick, too, argues for the widespread presence both within and outside Christianity of arguments and prayers for selflessness in religious belief:

long before Kant religious thinkers were teaching that we should love God for God’s sake and not for any hope of reward. Both the Muslim Rabia and the Christian St Francis Xavier have been credited with the prayer: ‘O God, if I worship thee for fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship thee in hope of heaven, exclude me from paradise; but if I love thee for thine own sake, withhold not thine everlasting beauty.’ And, earlier still, it was Plotinus who said, ‘If a man desires the good life except for itself, it is not the good life that he desires.’<sup>35</sup>

Given this, we can expect to find plenty of evidence that self-renunciation, asceticism and self-sacrifice are not only contained, as Phillips claims, within Christianity as its core doctrines are traditionally expressed, but can frequently be found in Christian writings and practices, from the beginnings of Christianity onwards. My presentation of some of this evidence will be somewhat less ambitious than the kind of extensive sociological and literary survey Swinburne might demand: I am not attempting to argue that all those who have described themselves as Christians have possessed a self-renouncing faith (I am sure that this is not the case) nor indeed that most Christians have done so (I do not believe that it would be possible to make a confident quantitative assessment of the mostly unrecorded beliefs of two thousand years’ worth of mostly unknown Christian believers), but simply that very many Christians have done so and, importantly, that many of those who have done so have been singled out within Christianity as exemplary believers. If I am correct, then Phillips’ failure to present much evidence does not imply that his thesis lacks evidence. This is not, then, an exhaustive survey, but a partial tracing of a way of thinking which has, as Phillips rightly claims, been important to Christianity throughout its history.

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<sup>33</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 103.

<sup>34</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* [1912], tr. Carol Cosman, abr. Mark S. Gladis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 232.

<sup>35</sup> Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 10–11.

## Rejecting Self-Interest in the New Testament and the Early Church

The ministry of Jesus is announced by John the Baptist, an ascetic figure who 'wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey' (Matt 3.4), and preceded by Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, during which time 'he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry' (Matt 4.2) – a feat echoing that of Moses (Ex 24.18), and subsequently commemorated, by the late fourth century, by the forty-day Lenten fast which led up to Easter when most baptisms were celebrated, recalling Paul's fasting before his own baptism (Acts 9.9).<sup>36</sup> Although Jesus' disciples are described, unlike the disciples of John and of the Pharisees, as not fasting, this is explained as a response to the presence of 'the bridegroom' (Mark 2.18-19) – in future, Jesus suggests, the bridegroom will be 'taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day' (Mark 2.20); according to John Suggit, 'this verse was probably a creation of the evangelist to justify the church's custom of fasting on Good Friday'.<sup>37</sup> Fasting seems to have been widespread in the earliest days of Christianity, partly as a way of marking a distinction between the Christians and their contemporaries:

Not only at some important occasions and not only by leaders, but frequently and in all branches of the early Christian society people engaged themselves in fasting. Regulating measures of the Church were lacking: the intensity of the fast was completely left to the piety of the faithful themselves. Jesus had only given the principles for fasting and left the Church to make rules for carrying them out. Initially the necessity of these rules was lacking because of the deep faith of the Early Christians.<sup>38</sup>

Fasting is probably the single most widespread form of Christian ascetic practice from the birth of Christianity onwards, not to mention its prevalence in pre- and non-Christian religions. Caroline Walker Bynum lists some of the enormous variety of meanings given to it in early Christian texts:

Fasting (e.g. the fast before baptism) could be religious preparation; it could be purification or exorcism of evil spirits; it could express mourning for the departure of the bridegroom (as, e.g., in the fast of two or three days before Easter). It was also a meritorious work for God and neighbour. Moreover, fasting could be penitential. As it had been for the ancient Hebrews, food abstinence was an expression of grief and repentance, a plea for deliverance from some test or chastisement, a sign of confidence in God's mercy, an intercession and a preparation for meeting God. As such, fasting was intensely corporate, a companion for prayer and almsgiving, a recapitulation of as well as a preparation for the eucharistic sacrifice. By fasting, the Christian joined with Christ, who, in the garden and on the cross, kept the rule that Adam had

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<sup>36</sup> John N. Suggit, 'Fasting', in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 225.

<sup>37</sup> Suggit, 'Fasting', p. 225.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 19.

violated in paradise and became himself sacrificial food, propitiating God and saving sinners.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, evidence for belief by early Christians in a strong connection between fasting and effective prayer may be seen in the addition by copyists of 'and fasting' to Jesus' words after casting out a particularly resilient unclean spirit, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer' (Mark 9.29 and margin).<sup>40</sup>

Jesus teaches his disciples to disregard worldly concerns. He tells them, 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (Luke 12.15), that they should 'not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?' (Matt 6.25). They are commanded to 'Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys' (Luke 12.33). Again and again conventional values are turned upside down: 'Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Luke 17.33); 'every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted' (Luke 18.14). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes as 'blessed' those who are poor, who hunger, who weep, who are hated (Luke 6.20-23). Jesus tells a rich young man to 'go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven' (Matt 19.21), commenting to his disciples that 'it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matt 19.23-24). In a phrase which, as we shall see, became enormously influential for later Christians, Jesus tells the disciples 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?' (Luke 9.23-25). The cost of discipleship, then, is high: 'If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14.26). Indeed, 'whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14.33). In the Acts of the Apostles the early Christians are described as renouncing private property and holding everything in common (Acts 4.32-37); Ananias and

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<sup>39</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 34-35.

<sup>40</sup> Suggit, 'Fasting', p. 225.

Sapphira are punished for keeping back some of the proceeds of the property they have sold by dropping dead on the spot (Acts 5.1-11). As Elizabeth Clark says, ‘Despite dilemmas of definition, scholars of early Christianity largely agree that ascetic renunciation was one of the important characteristics of the early Christian movement’;<sup>41</sup> this is not to say, however, that the early Christians were unique in this respect. In contextualising 1 Cor 7, a set of instructions on marriage which is arguably the most clearly ascetic passage in Paul’s letters (it opens with the bald statement ‘It is well for a man not to touch a woman’ (v1) and the rest of the chapter might be seen as an elucidation of the subsequent ‘But’), Vincent Wimbush argues that it should not be seen as diverging markedly from contemporary non-Christian practice, since ‘Almost universally (Panhellenistically) “salvation” entailed some form of ascetic behaviour, namely, some form of renunciation of the world, or part thereof.’<sup>42</sup> E.R. Dodds agrees that asceticism, albeit in a milder form than that of the Christians and Gnostics, can be widely found in ‘pagans of purely Hellenic education’, and that ‘Contempt for the human condition and the body was a disease endemic in the entire culture of the period’.<sup>43</sup>

### Persecution and Martyrdom

Many of the New Testament passages quoted above proved useful resources for Christians in the context of intermittent persecutions by the Romans prior to the conversion of Constantine in 313. The introduction of severe penalties for failing to honour Roman gods presented Christians with a perfect opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to pay the high cost of discipleship, to save their lives by losing them. Narratives of martyrdom ‘provide us with a kind of rudimentary theology of martyrdom. It is a theology of the imitation of Christ and of the glory of the cross, which are Pauline and Johannine themes’.<sup>44</sup> Martyrs were imitators of Christ through their suffering and death, and the parallels are made explicit in contemporary accounts such as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written in 155, in which Polycarp’s burning body is explicitly connected with the bread of the Eucharist and thus with Christ himself:

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding according to 1 Corinthians* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London: SCM, 1993), p. 130.

The fire took the shape of a vault, like a ship's sail bellying in the wind, and it made a wall round the martyr's body; and there was the body in the midst, like a loaf being baked or like gold and silver being tried in the furnace.<sup>45</sup>

An emerging theology of martyrdom gave martyrs particularly high status:

the martyr was a privileged individual indeed, for he bore witness to Christ by the most complete conformation to his suffering and death. In fact the restriction of the term 'martyr' (meaning 'witness') to those who died for Christ, or who were about to do so, indicates that they were considered to be his witnesses in an unqualified manner, par excellence. As such they merited a veneration, both in life and in death, which was unique to them.<sup>46</sup>

In such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that some Christians deliberately sought martyrdom by ostentatiously refusing to offer sacrifices to Roman gods or in some other way breaking the law, or, as in the case of Ignatius of Antioch, martyred in Rome before 117, warning influential Roman Christians not to try to obtain his release.<sup>47</sup> This had to be discouraged, as in the following passage by Clement of Alexandria:

And if he who kills a man of God sins against God, he also who presents himself before the judgement-seat becomes guilty of his death. And such is also the case with him who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture. Such a one, as far as in him lies, becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor. And if he also uses provocation, he is wholly guilty, challenging the wild beast.<sup>48</sup>

With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, persecution of Christians ceased, but martyrdom continued to be important. Shrines and altars set up at places where martyrs had died became places of pilgrimage for Christians, and many new saints' days commemorating martyrs were incorporated into the Christian calendar. This served, amongst other things, to continue to focus attention on martyrdom as ideal Christian behaviour, and while literal martyrdom was of course now largely impossible, the desire on the part of many Christians to imitate Christ, to take up their crosses daily, to lose their lives in order to save them, remained, and had to be channelled in different directions. As a result, therefore, 'monasticism may be seen as the successor of martyrdom. The monastic life was a daily martyrdom of asceticism, a heroic substitute for the heroism of the martyr'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, XV, in Henry Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church (Second Edition)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, p. 123.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Pelican, 1967), p. 30.

<sup>48</sup> Clement, *Stromateis* 4.10.76f., tr. Beresford James Kidd, quoted in Ramsay MacMullen and Eugene N. Lane (eds.), *Paganism and Christianity 100-425 C.E.: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 223.

<sup>49</sup> Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, p. 133.

## The Desert Fathers

St Antony retreated to the desert around 270, and although he is commonly regarded as the first of the desert fathers, in his *Vita* Athanasius describes various ascetics and solitaries, ‘superior to him in zeal and ascetic practice’,<sup>50</sup> who had preceded Antony and inspired him to copy them. Clark argues that both Christian asceticism and Christian monasticism began well before the fourth century, and that ascetic teachings are present in various early Christian writings including Paul’s letters, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the second century writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, and Tertullian’s third century advocacy of sexual abstinence and criticisms of second marriage. She also points out that criticisms of asceticism in early Christian writings, from the Pastoral Epistles to the accusations of Manicheanism aimed at Jerome and Augustine, indicate the presence of significant ascetic currents which some Christians saw the need to argue against.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, it was during the fourth and fifth centuries that the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine became filled with significant numbers of monks seeking to follow Antony’s example:

By the 320s and 330s, the first inhabitants of rigorous ascetic groups at Nitria, Scetis, and ‘the Cells’ are in place. Pachomius’ organization of communal monasticism is usually dated to the 320s, and Palladius reports that by the end of the century the Pachomian monasteries boasted about seven thousand inhabitants.<sup>52</sup>

Athanasius’ claim that ‘the desert was populated with monks who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in Heaven’<sup>53</sup> suggests that certain commonly expected aspects of the ascetic lifestyle, such as solitude and peace, might have been relatively difficult to achieve – as Peter Brown says, ‘To flee “the world” was to leave a precise social structure for an equally precise and ... an equally social alternative’<sup>54</sup> – but this testifies to the popularity of the ascetic lifestyle during this period.

The desert fathers are recorded as performing extraordinary feats of renunciation, accompanying extreme fasts with ‘sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, self-flagellation, burning oneself and other forms of self-torture. By these rigorous practices the “sinful” flesh was weakened while the “perfect” soul was strengthened and more ennobled. In this manner the way was smoothed for a virtuous life and Christian perfection, aimed at

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<sup>50</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, tr. Robert T. Meyer (New York: Newman Press, 1950), 4, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, pp. 25-27, 39-42.

<sup>52</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, 14, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 217.

restoring the image of God'.<sup>55</sup> Clark describes reports in Syria from the fifth century onwards of 'wandering, homelessness, living in common with the animals, wearing iron chains around the body, standing for years on pillars'.<sup>56</sup> Simeon Stylites famously spent between twenty and thirty years in the mid-fifth century living at the top of a sixty-foot pillar on a platform six feet square in Telneshe (now in Turkey),<sup>57</sup> inspiring several imitators, including one, Daniel, who after visiting Simeon lived for thirty-three years on a pillar near Constantinople, until his death at the age of eighty-four.<sup>58</sup> Many of the desert fathers are said to have taken fasting to remarkable levels: Antony himself, who lived for twenty years on bread, salt and water; the hermit Hero, who ate only every three months; Macarius of Alexandria, who progressively increased his deprivations on hearing of others who were surpassing him, restricting himself at first to only as much as he could pull out of a narrow-necked jar, and later to just a few cabbage leaves on Sundays. Jerome records a monk who survived for thirty years on bannock and water; another got by on five figs a day; Battheus of Edessa 'fasted so long that maggots began to crawl from his teeth'.<sup>59</sup> Anthony's *Vita* describes his daily practice as follows:

He fasted continually, his clothing was hair on the inside while the outside was skin, and this he kept to his dying day. He never bathed his body in water to remove filth, nor did he as much as wash his feet or even allow himself to put them in water without necessity. No one ever saw him undressed, nor did anyone ever look upon his bare body till he died and was buried.<sup>60</sup>

However strange such behaviour might look, it is important to recognise that so far as the desert fathers themselves were concerned, they were doing no more than was required of them by their Christian faith:

To some extent, the desert monks were simply responding to certain gospel texts in that peculiarly literal fashion which had marked the Christian ascetical tradition from its earliest moments; it was necessary to clear away the bonds to the world that prevented one from following the Gospel with total devotion. The monks also recognized that there was more to renunciation than this physical and social dislocation; learning to be free from the ties that bound one was a painful, lifelong process. Therefore they gave considerable attention to cultivating the spirit of detachment. This included not only learning to free themselves from dependence on certain habits of living but also rooting out the inner sources of all kinds of false dependence. The ultimate goal of this process of detachment was freedom. And the monks thought and spoke of this freedom in terms directly dependent on the Gospels: they sought to realize in

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<sup>55</sup> Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Doren, Introduction to Doren (tr.), *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), pp. 16-17.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Foreword to Doren (tr.), *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>60</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, 47, p. 60.

their own lives that elusive 'freedom from care' which Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>61</sup>

Jesus had, after all, told his followers, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Matt 16.24); early Christian ascetic practice merely took such injunctions seriously, and literally. As Douglas Burton-Christie argues, 'There are indications that certain key gospel texts (for example, Mt 19:21) played an important role in shaping the ideal of renunciation'.<sup>62</sup> And the desert fathers were seen by many of their contemporaries, who may have been unwilling or unable to imitate them, as being worthy of respect and admiration, and as possessing special powers. Many were visited by pilgrims; the sand from the footsteps of Abba Copres was gathered by local farmers to scatter on their fields for a richer harvest.<sup>63</sup> This testifies to the fact that fleeing the world seems to have been a way, intentionally or otherwise, of gaining power and influence in the world:

such men used the power accorded them to issue blessings and curses, to mediate disputes, to predict future events, to smooth human relations within their communities in an era when legal and other governmental structures were proving inadequate. So with Simeon [Stylites]: atop a pillar in alleged isolation, he performed cures, rendered sterile women fertile, foretold droughts, famines, and plagues, issued verdicts in legal and personal disputes, and exhorted eager mobs twice a day during festivals... all this, as his foot rotted under him.<sup>64</sup>

In this period, therefore, practices of extreme asceticism were widespread and were respected as Christian even by many of those who did not perform them themselves. The desert fathers were visited and venerated; their sayings were written down; numerous *vitae* were written to inspire and edify. There are serious question marks over the accuracy of many of these hagiographies, but these are not important for my purposes here. Bynum notes that Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*, which contains the story of Macarius of Alexandria mentioned above, is 'more a historical novel than a factual account but for exactly that reason an excellent reflection of what non-ascetics admired in their ascetic heroes and heroines'.<sup>65</sup> If some desert fathers did not take their asceticism as far as their hagiographers claimed, then the fact that accounts of their asceticism were exaggerated or invented only goes to confirm suggestions that such behaviour was considered praiseworthy. If alterations were made to make their theology appear more orthodox to later audiences (as appears to have been the case with Athanasius' life of

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<sup>61</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 213.

<sup>62</sup> Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, p. 213.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 221.

<sup>64</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, p. 36.

<sup>65</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 38.

Antony),<sup>66</sup> then the fact that their asceticism was still emphasised implies that *this* aspect of their lives was not theologically embarrassing. If there is in many of the practices of the desert fathers ‘a strong element of competitive display’,<sup>67</sup> then this only goes to strengthen the impression that their asceticism had to be extreme in order to become noteworthy in their contemporary context. The point is that at this stage of Christian history asceticism and self-renunciation were regarded by many Christians as proper, indeed ideal, Christian behaviour.

### Extreme Asceticism in Early Medieval Christianity

So far as extreme ascetic practices are concerned, the feats of the Desert Fathers are often taken to represent a high point. But there are several examples of extreme asceticism performed outside the deserts by European Christians by the mid- to late-fourth century, in Italy, Gaul and Spain,<sup>68</sup> and in the early stages of Irish monasticism.<sup>69</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg writes that ‘pious self-mortification through fasting and the cultivation of illness ... proved to be extremely important in the making of female saints from approximately 500 to 1100’.<sup>70</sup> She cites the *vitae* of numerous fasting saints from the period before noting that:

In considering the effects of these ascetic programmes of self-starvation, it is necessary to re-emphasize the fact that these regimes were carried out in conjunction with the already sorely deficient diets of the period. Moreover, the physical problems associated with excessive fasting were no doubt further compounded by other practices, such as bloodletting. Like fasting, this custom appears to have been utilized for purposes of health, as well as to ‘control the flesh’ and rid the body of its lustful tendencies.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to fasting, holy women frequently deprived themselves of sleep, ‘another culturally approved type of self-mortification’,<sup>72</sup> endured serious afflictions – one of the most spectacular being that of St Ita (d. ca. 570), abbess of Killeedy in Ireland, who endured ‘a stag-beetle as big as a lap-dog a-sucking her [which] destroyed the whole of one of her sides’<sup>73</sup> – and tortured their own bodies. The hagiography of the Frankish queen-saint Radegund (ca. 520/525-587) gives a particularly extreme and unpleasant example of the deliberate self-infliction of pain:

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<sup>66</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 34n.

<sup>68</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 377.

<sup>71</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 386.

<sup>72</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 387.

<sup>73</sup> *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* [9<sup>th</sup> century], quoted in Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 392.

One time she had brought to her three [circles] or bracelets of iron which she wore during Lent around her neck and arms; she also took three chains which she had pulled tightly, so that her delicate skin came up and covered the hard metal, and after Lent she was no longer able to remove this belt since her skin enveloped it. In order to disengage the iron chain, it was necessary to make an incision all around in the back and chest; there was a heavy loss of blood and her weakened body seemed to be at death's door. Another time, she had a brass plate made into the monogram of Christ, then enclosing herself in her cell, she made it red-hot in the fire and pressed it so deeply to two places on her body that the skin was destroyed. But like a clever torturer, she contemplated going still further: during one Lent she had brought to her a brass pot filled with glowing coals; when all the sisters had retired, subduing the trembling of fear which raced through her limbs, she summoned up her courage to confront the suffering, and since the time of persecution had passed, she made ready to make a martyr of herself. Then ... wishing that her body was also overtaken by this fire, she brought it into contact with the incandescent pot: her burning flesh crackled, her burnt-up skin disappeared and left large gaping wounds, as far as the effect of the fire had penetrated. The saint was silent, trying to conceal her wounds; but the spent blood betrayed by its odour that which she forced herself not to say.<sup>74</sup>

Many saints, like Radegund, isolated themselves from those around them by staying in the privacy of their cells, since 'the adoption of the solitary life and permanent confinement within a very small space provided yet another component of self-mortification, and it was viewed as a means to move one closer in the quest for holiness'.<sup>75</sup> Some went further by choosing to have themselves permanently enclosed within their cells, a practice which seems to have been widely approved of since bishops are recorded as officiating at sealing ceremonies for St Liutberga of Wendhausen (late ninth century) and St Wiborada (d. ca. 926).<sup>76</sup> Schulenburg emphasises that such austerities, like those of the desert fathers, were motivated by what their practitioners believed to be their redemptive value:

Thus in attempting to pursue the *vita perfecta*, one was expected to imitate Christ by adopting a life of self-abnegation, mortification, persecution, and suffering. In this context, as strong preoccupation, or in some cases an obsession, with the agonies of Christ and his crucifixion can be found among a number of these early women saints.<sup>77</sup>

These examples of extreme asceticism, as we have already seen, took place against a background in which admittedly less memorable forms of self-denial were considered proper forms of Christian behaviour.

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<sup>74</sup> Fortunatus, *De vita Sanctae Radegundis liber I*, pp. 372-373, quoted in Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 389.

<sup>75</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 390.

<sup>76</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 391.

<sup>77</sup> Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex*, p. 394.

## Medieval European Monasticism

As Christianity spread, so Christians throughout Europe were inspired to imitate the behaviour of the desert fathers. In the sixth century, the theological basis of such ascetic movements was augmented with 'the first treatises ... which offered a coherent plan for a monastic community'.<sup>78</sup> The most significant of these was the Rule of St Benedict, which formed the basis of the Benedictine order. The Rule 'was one of simplicity and self-discipline, not of penitential austerity and self-inflicted mortification',<sup>79</sup> but following it still required the loss of self-will:

And in all things let all follow the Rule as their guide: and let no one diverge from it without good reason. Let no one in the monastery follow his own inclinations, and let no one boldly presume to dispute with his abbot, whether within or without the monastery. If anyone so presume, let him be subject to the discipline of the Rule. The abbot, for his part, should do everything in the fear of the Lord and in observance of the Rule; knowing that he will surely have to give account to God for all his decisions, as to a most impartial judge.<sup>80</sup>

The monastery was seen as a place set apart from the world in which worldly concerns were therefore no longer important; new monks symbolically abandoned all connection with the world, submitting themselves to God, to the abbot, and to the Rule:

Self-negation was the ideal which made obedience practicable, and as a social ideal it was nearer to realization in the transcendent atmosphere of monastic life than in society itself. When he entered the abbey the new monk had to take off his secular clothes as a symbol of renunciation of his former personality, an act which referred to St Paul's metaphorical language "that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature" (Col 3.9-10; Eph 4.22-24). Henceforward the hierarchic structure of the monastery would take care of his whole being. He becomes the child whose problems are solved and whose needs are fulfilled by his "father", the abbot. Obedience is what the monk gives in return.<sup>81</sup>

Ludo Mills describes Benedictine monasticism as offering 'an adequate answer to personal sanctification by self-denial, probably the best and the most balanced solution ever worked out within the borders of our cultural area'.<sup>82</sup> Yet with the economic expansion of western Europe, the extent of the self-denial required of Benedictine monks, and the affluence of Benedictine monasteries, became increasingly out of line with the spirit of the Rule, leading to the founding of new monastic orders, most notably the Cistercians, which aimed to return to the Rule's ideals of simplicity and poverty. Founded in 1098, the order grew rapidly under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux: by

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<sup>78</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages (Second Edition)* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 183.

<sup>80</sup> *The Rule of S. Benedict*, III, in Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 117.

<sup>81</sup> Ludo J.R. Mills, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men: Monasticism and its Meaning to Medieval Society* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992), p. 139.

<sup>82</sup> Mills, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men*, p. 152.

his death in 1153 there were three hundred and forty-three Cistercian abbeys across Europe, and by 1500 seven hundred and thirty-eight men's abbeys and six hundred and fifty-four for women.<sup>83</sup> As with the Benedictines, this expansion went alongside a gradual departure from the principles on which the order had been founded in the first place, 'as the early self-denying ordinances proved to be incompatible with the process of expansion'.<sup>84</sup> However, this should not be taken as evidence that the importance of self-renunciation as a component of Christian piety diminished. On the contrary, as C.H. Lawrence writes:

The response of ascetics to the economic expansion of Western Europe and the growing affluence of the twelfth century was to idealise voluntary poverty, which now began to assume a critical role in the monastic tradition.<sup>85</sup>

The various institutional failures to live up to Christian ideals led to the creation of new movements which reacted by requiring even greater asceticism of their members.

These movements included the Waldensians, or Poor Men of Lyons, founded by Valdes, a wealthy cloth merchant from Lyons who renounced all his property and vowed in 1181 'never in his life to possess gold or silver, or to take any thought for the needs of the morrow – he would accept nothing except food and clothing for the day'.<sup>86</sup> Valdes was not considered a heretic, and no theological objections were made to his emphasis on voluntary poverty, although he clashed with the church authorities over the issue of the right of lay people to preach.<sup>87</sup> Another ascetic movement was the Humiliati of northern Italy, some of whom were approved by Pope Innocent III in 1201.<sup>88</sup> But perhaps the most influential new development was the creation of the orders of mendicant friars which emerged in the early thirteenth century. Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181-1226) marked his break with his wealthy family 'by stripping naked in the main square of Assisi, casting off clothes given to him by his father and receiving a simple cloak from the bishop'.<sup>89</sup> After living for a while as a hermit in caves and derelict churches, Francis gathered together a group of disciples with whom he intended to imitate the earthly life of Christ aiming, in a claim to direct biblical authority 'to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without personal possessions, and in chastity'.<sup>90</sup> The first draft of the Rule he presented for approval to

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<sup>83</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 183.

<sup>84</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 199.

<sup>85</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 150.

<sup>86</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 242.

<sup>87</sup> Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 220.

<sup>88</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, p. 221.

<sup>89</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, p. 228.

<sup>90</sup> *The Rule of S. Francis*, 1, in Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 128.

Pope Innocent III in 1209 was said to consist of ‘nothing but a catena of texts from the four Gospels’.<sup>91</sup> A later version of the Rule, approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223, shows the radical extent of the Franciscans’ version of voluntary poverty:

The brothers shall possess nothing, neither a house, nor a place, nor anything. But, as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving God in poverty and humility, they shall confidently seek alms, and not be ashamed, for the Lord made Himself poor in this world for us. This is the highest degree of that sublime poverty, which has made you, my dearly beloved brethren, heirs and kings in the Kingdom of Heaven; which has made you poor in goods but exalted in virtues.<sup>92</sup>

Such austerity proved remarkably popular: in 1209 Francis had visited Rome with eleven followers; by 1217 he had around 5000; in the century following his death there were around 28,000 active Franciscans throughout and beyond the Christian world.<sup>93</sup> Lawrence notes that they recruited mainly from the more affluent sectors of society: ‘Voluntary poverty was not an ideal that easily appealed to those who were born poor’.<sup>94</sup> In addition to the Franciscans, at least nine orders of begging friars were founded in the thirteenth century, the most important being the Dominicans, set up as a preaching order, who embraced poverty for tactical reasons, aiming ‘to adopt a lifestyle as austere as that of the Cathar perfects in order to gain credibility with the heretics’ sympathizers’.<sup>95</sup>

### Women’s Monasticism

By the fifteenth century nuns outnumbered monks for the first time in some parts of Europe.<sup>96</sup> This seems in part to have been a result of demographic shifts – including, of course, rising male monastic celibacy – which increased the numbers of unmarried women who had few economically viable and socially acceptable alternatives to a religious life.<sup>97</sup> The growth in the number of convents also reflects the fact that while many women were attracted by the preaching of the new religious movements, which ‘expressed many of the basic themes found in women’s religiosity in its orthodox forms: a concern for affective religious response, an extreme form of penitential asceticism, an emphasis both on Christ’s humanity and on the inspiration of the spirit,

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<sup>91</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 247.

<sup>92</sup> *The Rule of S. Francis*, 6, in Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 130.

<sup>93</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, p. 232.

<sup>94</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 248.

<sup>95</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, p. 235.

<sup>96</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>97</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, p. 213.

and a bypassing of clerical authority',<sup>98</sup> the male monastic reformers themselves 'regarded contact with women as a hazard to their souls to be avoided at all costs and ... were therefore reluctant to assume the responsibility of directing nuns'.<sup>99</sup> The second order of St Francis, for example, founded by St Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) and later known as the Poor Clares, differed from the male order in that a life of itinerant preaching was considered unacceptable for women. Clare formed a cloistered community of nuns in Assisi and composed a rule which, while it did not include the Franciscan ideal of preaching, still incorporated personal and corporate poverty within a cloistered setting.<sup>100</sup> In addition to these cloistered religious women's orders, various less formal movements sprang up, notably the beguines in northern Europe, the tertiaries in southern Europe and the beatas in Spain. These movements included women living alone and in community, with no single leader or organisational structure, but a shared commitment to 'set themselves apart from the world by living austere, poor, chaste lives in which manual labour and charitable service were joined to worship (which was not, however, rigidly prescribed as it was in convents'.<sup>101</sup> Most of their recruits were women whose social status, as a result of the general economic growth of Europe, was rising, and who may have felt uncomfortable with their new wealth: their aim 'was not simply austerity but, rather, *renunciation* of comfort and wealth'.<sup>102</sup> The vocation was astonishingly popular:

The thousand women living in beguine communities in Cologne in 1320 accounted for about 15 percent of the adult female population (and this excludes beguines living alone). In Strasbourg and Basel, other centres of the movement, beguines accounted for about 2.5 percent of the total population in the same period.<sup>103</sup>

Like the friars, most beguines were based in towns, and like the friars they were, as Lawrence somewhat patronisingly puts it, 'inspired by a new kind of vision formed in the uncomplicated minds of lay Christians – the vision of the evangelical life, or literal imitation of the life of Christ'.<sup>104</sup> Many nuns and beguines contributed to the growing corpus of devotional and mystical Christian literature, which gives us important insights into the way they understood their lives and their faith.

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<sup>98</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 17.

<sup>99</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 219.

<sup>100</sup> Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, p. 234.

<sup>101</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 17.

<sup>102</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 18.

<sup>104</sup> Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, p. 231.

## Ascetics as Exemplary Christians

Self-denial continued to occupy a central place in Christian behaviour, manifested in but not confined to the various forms of monasticism described above. It is sometimes claimed that ‘A second flourishing time of extreme fasting’ – and other forms of religiously motivated self-mortification – ‘only emerged in the late Middle Ages’.<sup>105</sup> While this is a somewhat misleading judgement which fails to do justice to the prevalence of such practices in previous centuries, it does reflect the fact that there is a particular abundance of evidence for them from around the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. As Maureen Flynn says, ‘Perhaps no other major world religion endows pain with greater spiritual significance than Christianity, and among Christians none spoke so directly to the issue of suffering as the mystics of late medieval and early modern Europe’.<sup>106</sup> The period produced an enormous quantity of saints’ writings and other literature from the hagiographical tradition which surrounded the saints. Of course, saints are by definition abnormal individuals – this is part of the reason why they are admired, why they qualify as saints in the first place:

Those holy women of whom we have records, especially those who were canonical or widely revered, were *chosen* by their contemporaries as heroines, mirrors and lessons ... It is therefore not unwarranted to take the stories most commonly told about saintly women – however atypical or abnormal they may appear to medieval or modern common sense – as important evidence about the assumptions of the people who admired the saints.<sup>107</sup>

Within that abnormal, but widely admired, group, certain extreme forms of asceticism became the norm:

By the high Middle ages, fasting and eucharistic devotion were expected of saints, especially hermit saints and women. Those, such as Richard Rolle, who were not able to maintain fasts were criticised for their failure; and a writer like Tauler who did not have the gift of food asceticism felt it necessary to apologize for the lack.<sup>108</sup>

Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth argue that the prolonged fasting which became part of the piety of many people, particularly women, in this period, was in part a reaction against the tendency of many theologians to ‘spiritualise’ commandments recommending abstinence into injunctions to refrain from sins rather than from food. This reaction could take the form of severe self-inflicted bodily punishments. In their desire to share in Christ’s suffering on the cross, ‘As well as severe fasting several saints

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<sup>105</sup> Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 23.

<sup>106</sup> Maureen Flynn, ‘The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996), p. 257.

<sup>107</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>108</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 82.

exposed themselves to other extreme ascetic practices like flagellation for hours, wearing shoes with pointed nails, piercing their tongues, cheeks or other parts of the body with iron pins, and sleeping on a bed of thorns or iron points'.<sup>109</sup>

Behaviour like this appears to be no bar to the saints who display it being considered worthy of veneration by Christians, even today. Numerous Christian devotional volumes, many of them aimed at a popular audience, continue to describe ascetic saints whose lives are intended to inspire their readers. On the back cover of James Bentley's well-illustrated *A Calendar of Saints: The Lives of the Principal Saints of the Christian Year* its publisher claims that 'On almost every page inspirational sayings illustrate the courage, humour and wisdom of those who put their commitment to God before everything else'.<sup>110</sup> The book contains brief lives of many of the saints already mentioned in this chapter, including Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, Antony, Simeon and Daniel Stylites, and Francis and Clare of Assisi. Bentley also records numerous saints, who are described as having led lives characterised by the patient bearing of suffering or by extreme ascetic behaviour. St Humility (b. 1226), lived for twelve years bricked into a cell against the wall of her church in Faenza, Italy, eating only bread and water and occasionally a few herbs, before becoming abbess of the first Vallombrosan nunnery.<sup>111</sup> St Margaret of Hungary, daughter of the King and Queen of Hungary, was placed in a nunnery as a girl, 'starved herself to keep her spirit humble', refused to marry the King of Bohemia and died aged twenty-eight in 1270; her servant Agnes 'rightly observed that this daughter of a monarch showed far more humility than any of the monastery's maids'.<sup>112</sup> St Catherine dei Ricci, a Dominican from Tuscany, in Lent 1542 'meditated so heartrendingly on the crucifixion of Jesus that she became seriously ill, until a vision of the Risen Jesus talking with Mary Magdalene restored her to health on Holy Saturday. For twelve years she went into a kind of trance each Thursday. Then her body would re-enact the sufferings of Jesus from the time of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, through his scourging, his trial, his painful journey to Golgotha and his crucifixion'.<sup>113</sup> Another Tuscan nun, St Agnes of Montepuciano, 'lived on bread and water for fifteen years [and] slept on the floor with a stone for a pillow'.<sup>114</sup> St Joan de Lestonnac (1556-1640) founded a monastic order in Bordeaux, France, and was dismissed as mother

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<sup>109</sup> Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 23.

<sup>110</sup> James Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints: The Lives of the Principal Saints of the Christian Year* (London: Orbis, 1986), back cover.

<sup>111</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 97.

<sup>112</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 18.

<sup>113</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 35.

<sup>114</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 75.

superior after rumours were spread about her by a 'vicious sister named Blanche Hervé', at which point 'her great meekness triumphed. She was beaten and humiliated, but she bore all so patiently that even Blanche Hervé was moved to confess her own maliciousness'.<sup>115</sup> St Mary di Rosa 'quite simply wore out her frail body serving those in need in her native Brescia from the age of seventeen until she died in 1855 aged only forty-two'.<sup>116</sup> St Charbel Makhlouf, a Lebanese Maronite, lived as a hermit for twenty-three years, modelling his life on that of the desert fathers: 'For all these years Charbel had not tasted meat. He had spoken to another monk only when it was absolutely necessary. He had drunk no wine, save a drop at the Eucharist. He had eaten no fruit. Instead of a bed [he] had used a duvet filled with dead leaves, on top of which he used a goatskin for cover. His pillow was a piece of wood'.<sup>117</sup> He died in 1898.

One of the most striking examples of a saint who combines continuing contemporary popularity with extreme asceticism is the Peruvian saint Rose of Lima (1586-1617), who is recorded by F.W. Faber (whom Sara Maitland accuses of taking 'a strangely voyeuristic pleasure in her sufferings'<sup>118</sup>) in his *The Saints and Servants of God* as having performed some appalling self-inflicted penances:

It was no less astonishing that she should find room on her emaciated body to engrave in it, by her discipline, the wounds of the son of God ... she gave herself such blows that her blood sprinkled the walls ... and as she practised this penance daily every night she reopened her bleeding wounds by making new ones ... Her confessor having ordered her to use an ordinary discipline and leave off her iron chain, she made it knot three rows and wore it round her body ... This chain soon took the skin off and entered so deeply into her flesh that it was no longer visible ... She bound her arms from the shoulder to the elbow with thick cords ... she rubbed herself with nettles ... [in her full length hair shirt] she appeared more glorious in the eyes of God for her having armed it underneath with a great quantity of points of needles to increase her suffering by this ingenious cruelty ... She exposed the soles of her feet at the mouth of the oven ... she drank gall and rubbed her eyes therewith ... in her ardent desire for suffering she made herself a silver circlet in which she fixed three rows of sharp points in honour of the thirty-three years that the Son of God lived upon earth ... she wore it underneath her veil to make it the more painful as these points being unequally long did not all pierce at the same time ... so that with the least agitation these iron thorns tore her flesh in ninety-nine places ... To keep herself from sleep she suspended herself ingeniously upon a large cross which hung in her room ... and should this fail she attached her hair [the one lock she had not shaved off] to the nail in the feet of her Christ so that the least relaxation would inflict terrible suffering on her.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 28.

<sup>116</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 240.

<sup>117</sup> Bentley, *A Calendar of Saints*, p. 245.

<sup>118</sup> Sara Maitland, 'Rose of Lima: Some Thoughts on Purity and Penance', in Alison Joseph (ed.), *Through the Devil's Gateway: Women, Religion and Taboo* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 69.

<sup>119</sup> F.W. Faber, *The Saints and Servants of God* (London, 1847), pp. 27-45, quoted in Maitland, 'Rose of Lima', pp. 60-61. Maitland says she presents 'a minute sampling' of the sufferings Faber describes (p. 69 n. 1).

Maitland notes that Rose's behaviour elicited great contemporary admiration: her funeral had to be postponed for fear of riots, 'An archbishop presided at her requiem and her bier was carried through the city by leading members of the civic authorities'.<sup>120</sup> Even today she remains a popular saint, as principal patron of South America and the Philippines: representations of her are widely circulated on holy cards and until recently she appeared frequently in hagiographical volumes 'designed for the edification of small girls'.<sup>121</sup> Mariana Paredes y Flores, another South American saint noted for extreme penitential practices, died in 1645 but was canonised as late as 1950;<sup>122</sup> in 1970 Teresa of Ávila and Catherine of Siena became the only women saints to have been honoured by the Roman Catholic Church with the title of Doctor,<sup>123</sup> a testament to the continuing respect with which they are held, and the continuing relevance they are thought to have for contemporary Roman Catholics, particularly Catholic women. Catherine of Siena (ca. 1347-1380) was able during her short life to exert great influence within her society, becoming well known 'as a mystic and an extreme ascetic, a prophet and a healer, an ambassador for the pope and a tireless worker for church reform and for the return of the papacy from Avignon to Rome';<sup>124</sup> she became an important public figure in 1368 when she experienced an ecstatic 'mystical death' in which 'she experienced Christ's passion and his love for all humans'.<sup>125</sup> Catherine had begun having mystical visions of Christ at the age of six, after which, 'Wanting to imitate the Desert Fathers, she sought out hidden places where she could scourge herself'.<sup>126</sup> She cut off her hair to make herself less attractive, and practised sleep deprivation as well as self-starvation which became increasingly severe – she ate only bread, water and raw vegetables from about the age of sixteen, and gave up bread aged about twenty-three after which she consumed only the eucharist, cold water, and other bits of food which she sucked and spat out or swallowed and vomited up. More than once she drank pus or put her mouth into the putrefying breast of a dying woman, telling Raymond, her hagiographer, 'Never in my life have I tasted any food and drink sweeter or more exquisite'.<sup>127</sup> She was thirty-three when she died. In 1999 Pope John Paul II named Catherine co-patroness of Europe, along with Bridget of Sweden and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, saying of her that 'she was

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<sup>120</sup> Maitland, 'Rose of Lima', p. 63.

<sup>121</sup> Maitland, 'Rose of Lima', p. 60.

<sup>122</sup> Maitland, 'Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience', in Linda Hurcombe (ed.), *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 127.

<sup>123</sup> Maitland, 'Rose of Lima', p. 61.

<sup>124</sup> Steven Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 128.

<sup>125</sup> Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, p. 130.

<sup>126</sup> Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, p. 129.

<sup>127</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 167-172.

blessed from her early childhood with exceptional graces which enabled her to progress rapidly along the spiritual path traced by Saint Dominic on a journey of perfection which combined prayer, self-denial and works of charity'.<sup>128</sup>

### Phillips on Christian Self-Renunciation: Empirical Support

Even if Phillips' claim that self-renunciation is a mark of authentic religious – and especially Christian – belief and practice is primarily philosophical rather than sociological, nevertheless a consideration of evidence that it has been a far more widespread characteristic of Christian religiosity than his critics have tended to assume may add to its plausibility, as well as highlighting its relevance. It seems that renunciation – of world, of power, of pleasure, of sex, of food – was widespread from the beginnings of Christianity through the medieval period and beyond. It was practised by large numbers of people and, in accounts of their holy lives, was given and continues to be given as a model of Christian behaviour to even greater numbers. But there are important ways in which such renunciation can be seen as highly problematic – and problematic not merely in the sense that, on an individual physical level, prolonged fasting and bodily mortification tend not to be healthy, a consideration whose relevance, as we saw, Phillips explicitly denies. Phillips and the Wittgensteinians place particular emphasis on the complex interrelationships between ways of life – culture and language – and the moral expectations and norms which follow from them, and which cannot easily be challenged or escaped. Given this, we should be aware of the fact that historically, different kinds of self-renunciatory behaviour have been open to different social groups, and different kinds of self-renunciatory behaviour have been advocated for and performed by these different groups. Perhaps the most obvious example of this difference is in gender, in the meanings of self-renunciation for men and for women. Bynum documents in great detail both the literal fasting and the use of fasting and food metaphors by medieval women in particular:

It is a threefold pattern: women fast, women feed others, and women eat (but never ordinary food). Women fast – and hunger becomes an image for excruciating, never-satiated love of God. Women feed – and their bodies become an image of suffering poured out for others. Women eat – and whether they devour the filth of sick bodies or the blood and flesh of the eucharist, the foods are Christ's suffering and Christ's humanity, with which one must join before approaching triumph, glory, or divinity.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio* Proclaiming Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Co-Patronesses of Europe', 1 October 1999, 6 [[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_motu-proprio\\_01101999\\_co-patronesses-europe\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_01101999_co-patronesses-europe_en.html)] (consulted 26 August 2003).

<sup>129</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 186.

According to Bynum, medieval women's religious symbols characteristically derived 'from such ordinary biological and social experiences as giving birth, lactating, suffering, and preparing and distributing food ... which contrasts sharply with the enthusiasm contemporary males felt for symbols of reversal (especially the renunciation of wealth and power)'.<sup>130</sup> Of course, although fasting seems to have been most common amongst women, it was not restricted to them; nobody seems to have been exempt. Alan of Lille, after a catalogue of history's great fasters, tells his readers, 'if you are not moved by ancient examples, be moved at least by the tale of St. Nicholas the baby, who took only one breast on the Wednesday and Friday fasts'.<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, the extreme rarity of accounts of male, as opposed to female, miraculous abstinence between the fourth and fifteenth centuries is striking,<sup>132</sup> and there is a remarkable discrepancy in the fact that while 'women account for only 17.5 percent of those canonised in the later Middle Ages ... they account for 53.2 percent of those saints in whose lives patient bearing of infirmity was the central factor in reputation for sanctity'.<sup>133</sup> This suggests both that those in the medieval period who displayed the kind of religious behaviour I have been discussing were disproportionately female, and that the religious behaviour of medieval women which was considered noteworthy and admirable, indeed as evidence of sanctity, was overwhelmingly self-sacrificial. Some of this can no doubt be accounted for by the fact that certain avenues by which a holy reputation could be acquired, such as the priesthood, great scholarship, or the godly exercise of political power, were largely inaccessible to women. But Jantzen observes that the gendering of particular forms of holiness has serious consequences:

[Women's] holiness was bought at a price which no man would ever be expected to pay: acceptance of gender stereotypes which made the identification of women with food, the flesh and suffering service seem natural. Once again, the question of who could count as a mystic was answered in a way which, though it did not exclude women, made sure that the women who were included conformed to the needs of men for nurture and for service.<sup>134</sup>

The fact that religious women denied themselves in particular ways which were rarely seen in men, and that they were admired – and in some cases are still admired – as a result, raises questions about the extent to which exhortations to self-renunciation have been perceived as requiring different things of men and women in the cultural surroundings they inhabit, and the extent to which such exhortations and the gendered

<sup>130</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 6.

<sup>131</sup> Alan of Lille, *Summa*, ch. 34, Pl. 210, col. 178, quoted in Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 44.

<sup>132</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 198.

<sup>133</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>134</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 223.

nature of their fulfilment have contributed to the subordination of women in western society. It is to these questions that I now turn.

# 6

## Problematising Christian Self-Renunciation

### Misogyny, Virginity and Feminist Criticism

It has become a commonplace in feminist criticism to identify much Christian discourse as misogynistic. This sometimes functions as a justification for a wholesale condemnation of Christianity or of a particular Christian church, or as an indictment of certain influential theologians, their work and the work of those influenced by them as irredeemably sexist.<sup>1</sup> Paul's argument that 'the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God ... For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man' (1 Cor 11.3, 8-9); Tertullian's notorious description of woman as 'the Devil's gateway';<sup>2</sup> Jerome's complaint that 'Women with child present a revolting spectacle';<sup>3</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux's justification of single-sex monastic communities on the grounds that 'To be always with a woman and not to have sexual relations with her is more difficult than to raise the dead';<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth's ordering of man as A and woman as B, 'and therefore behind and subordinate to man';<sup>5</sup> the list of offensively sexist theological statements goes on, endlessly expandable, endlessly embarrassing and irritating to sympathetic scholars of the theologians in question. Using sexism as a stick with which to beat Christian theology in particular seems somewhat unfair, given that Christianity has hardly had a monopoly on misogyny over the last two millennia – although of course this does not constitute a particularly effective defence. R. Howard Bloch writes that:

So persistent is the discourse of misogyny – from the earliest church fathers to Chaucer – that the uniformity of its terms furnishes an important link between the Middle Ages and the present and renders the topic compelling because such terms still govern (consciously or not) the ways in which the question of woman is conceived by women as well as by men. Misogyny is not so much a historical

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1989); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* [1973] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), and *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: The Women's Press, 1979); Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), and *After Christianity* (London: SCM, 1996); Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980); Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *De Cultu Fem.* 1, 1, quoted in Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church', in Ruether (ed.) *Religion and Sexism*, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Barr, 'The Influence of Saint Jerome on Medieval Attitudes to Women' in Soskice (ed.), *After Eve*, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*, Sermon 65, para. 4, quoted in Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III, Part 4, p. 171, quoted in Eleanor Commo McLaughlin, 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Medieval Theology', in Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism*, p. 259.

subject as one whose very lack of history is so bound in its effects that any attempt merely to trace the history of woman-hating is hopelessly doomed, despite all moral imperative, to naturalize that which it would denounce.<sup>6</sup>

It is in this context, of a continuity of misogynistic discourses from the early church through the middle ages to the present, that Christian exhortations to asceticism, particularly to chastity and sexual asceticism, should be seen – and should be seen as problematic.

Rosemary Radford Ruether shows how a misogynistic attitude informed the way many of the Fathers looked on marriage, sexuality and virginity, with woman as symbolic of sin and carnality, and sexual intercourse allowable only for the purpose of procreation, not for sensual pleasure – viewing woman, in effect, as a ‘baby-making machine’.<sup>7</sup> Male virginal asceticism seems to have been informed by a great deal of distaste for female sexuality (some of it rather luridly and, as for example in the case of Jerome, voluminously expressed), and the same can be found even in Christian discussions of the proper expression of sexuality within marriage. Augustine could claim that ‘A good Christian is found in one and the same woman to love the creature of God whom he desires to be transformed and renewed, but to hate in her the corruptible and mortal conjugal connection, sexual intercourse and all that pertains to her as a wife’,<sup>8</sup> and could draw a parallel between the relationship of husband and wife and the Christian commandment to ‘love our enemies’.<sup>9</sup> In this context, virginity for a woman, while it offers her the opportunity to avoid sinful carnal pleasure, is also understood as the only way for her to rise ‘to spirituality, personhood and equality with the male ... at the expense of crushing out of her being all vestiges of her bodily and her female “nature”’.<sup>10</sup> Leander of Seville describes the virgin thus: ‘forgetful of her natural feminine weakness, she lives in manly vigor and has used virtue to give strength to her weak sex, nor has she become a slave to her body, which, by natural law, should have been subservient to a man’.<sup>11</sup> Virginity here is described as a form of liberation from subordination, and indeed it may well have been such to many who chose the vocation. Nevertheless, there are three serious reservations which have to be voiced about this liberatory aspect of virginity. First, it is liberation from a form of subordination (‘slavery’, even) which goes entirely unchallenged, and which indeed is understood by virginity’s advocates as the

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<sup>6</sup> R. Howard Bloch, ‘Medieval Misogyny’, *Representations* 20 (1987), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ruether, ‘Misogynism and Virginal Feminism’, p. 162.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *De Sermone Dom. in Monte*, 41, quoted in Ruether, ‘Misogynism and Virginal Feminism’, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Ruether, ‘Misogynism and Virginal Feminism’, p. 161.

<sup>10</sup> Ruether, ‘Misogynism and Virginal Feminism’, p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Leander of Seville, *De Instit. Virg.*, preface, quoted in Ruether, ‘Misogynism and Virginal Feminism’, p. 159.

proper nature of Christian marriage. Second, the liberation takes the form of a spiritual marriage with Christ whose power dynamics are understood in a precisely analogous way, as Cyprian's words make clear: 'You do not fear the sorrows of woman or their groans. You have no fear of the birth of children. Nor is your husband your master, but your Master and Head is Christ, in the likeness and in the place of man'.<sup>12</sup> And, third, a point admittedly slightly inconsistent with the previous one, the virgin is understood to be, in an important sense, not a woman at all (unlike male ascetics, who did not cease to be seen as men, and whose *vitae* emphasise their – albeit nonsexual – virility); 'it was normal to speak of the virgin who lived the "angelic life" as having transcended her female nature and having become "male" (*vir*)',<sup>13</sup> and this went along with an expectation that the bodies of female virgins should be unadorned, obscured by unshapely dress and veiled.<sup>14</sup> So virginity liberates at the price of simultaneously reinforcing sexual stereotypes and desexing, as well as desexualising, the virgin.

These intellectual currents continued through medieval theology. For Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, 'the male is ordered to the more noble activity, intellectual knowledge, whereas the female, although possessing a rational soul, was created solely with respect to her sexuality, her body, as an aid in reproduction for the preservation of the species'.<sup>15</sup> He writes 'of a "friendship" between husband and wife, but it must necessarily be that of inferior to a superior, a hierarchical love comparable to the love of the soul for God'.<sup>16</sup> We can, of course, switch this around – the love of the soul for God is a hierarchical love comparable to that between husband and wife – and the implications of this way of framing the relationships involved will become apparent below: suffice it to say for now that it implies that any erotic imagery employed in religious expression must necessarily have much more strongly hierarchical connotations than we might initially expect, and that this becomes problematic when assessing much mystical literature, as we shall see. A thirteenth-century tract argues that 'God has commanded that the woman be always in submission; as a young girl, she obeys her parents and masters, later her husband, or if she becomes a religious, the rule and her superior'.<sup>17</sup> Again, as with the earlier Christian period discussed above, female and male monastic virginity were understood in different ways, so that while the monk, by remaining chaste, fulfilled his proper end as a rational man; the nun, also preserving her

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<sup>12</sup> Cyprian, *De habitu Virg.* 22, quoted in Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism', p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism', p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism', p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> McLaughlin, 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes', p. 217.

<sup>16</sup> McLaughlin, 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes', p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe de Novaire, *Des quatre tens d'age d'ome*, quoted in McLaughlin, 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes', p. 231.

virginity, was denying her femaleness – an admirable course of action for her to take, but one whose meaning was fundamentally different from, rather than equivalent to, male monasticism: only the woman ‘must deny what the society defined as her nature in order to follow the religious life’.<sup>18</sup> This difference in understanding does, of course, allow the possibility that ‘sexual virginity in women was at least one sign of defiance of what seemed to be the “natural” order of things’,<sup>19</sup> a possibility which could not exist for men. And of course monasticism for women provided a socially acceptable means to avoid the only other socially acceptable way of life available to them, namely marriage and childbearing, as well as giving them the opportunity to gain education and influence. Nevertheless, this only goes to remind us how tightly circumscribed options for women were in medieval Europe.

My first serious concern with the Christian emphasis on ascetic self-renunciation, then, is that a significant part of the Christian ascetic impulse in the early and medieval church seems to involve the renunciation of sexuality motivated not merely by distaste for pleasure, or by distaste for sin, but by distaste for women. So far as men are concerned, this is distaste for sexual (or, in some cases, all) contact with women, identified primarily in their femininity as sexual temptresses. So far as women are concerned, it is distaste for the state of being a woman, to the extent that femaleness (and not maleness) can be transcended through asceticism. As Loades puts it:

Sexual asceticism *could* be a life-transforming option, free from a measure of male domination, though it could produce stony asexuality and bizarre behaviour, and could be associated with the abasement of a woman’s visual image so that she would never appear as a woman in the eyes of a man. Seclusion, and sexless or male attire were possible defences against misogyny as well as forms of acceptance of it. Women could be and were sometimes denigrated and devalued because they were not male, and they could only approximate to godlikeness in this life insofar as they approximated to masculinity, became viragos – when masculinity was associated with spirit and virtue and the quest for moral and spiritual perfection.<sup>20</sup>

My second concern, which derives heavily from the elements which are defined as problematic in the first, but is distinct from them, is about the way in which visions and images of the relationship between Christ and the soul, particularly visions and images of identification with Christ’s suffering, use metaphors which are both highly gendered and highly sexualised. For example, Catherine Innes-Parker describes the complex network of metaphors in a set of thirteenth-century English texts known as the Katherine Group,

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<sup>18</sup> McLaughlin, ‘Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes’, p. 234.

<sup>19</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, pp. 40-41.

written for an audience of anchoresses, female religious who were enclosed in cells attached to churches. Their sufferings are linked with the sufferings of Christ on the cross through images of bleeding, sexual love and marriage, the pain of birth, the sacrifices of child-rearing and mother-love. Passion meditations can take the form of love poems, as in *The Wooing of Our Lord*, in which Christ plays the role of the knight fighting in order to redeem his lover's soul:

The price which Christ has paid for the anchoress's love is his own body and blood; and she can hardly accept such love without committing herself to an equal cost, imaged in terms of sharing the suffering which has purchased her love through mystical union with Christ on the cross.<sup>21</sup>

While Innes-Parker says that many of the metaphors used here are 'not entirely negative',<sup>22</sup> since they involve the transfiguration of sinful flesh and the redemption of the world, nevertheless

the gendering of the concept of Christ in such vividly feminine terms implies that it is precisely *female* flesh which is in such urgent need of redemption. Further, the *way* in which feminine redemption is figured implies that it can only be achieved through excessive and extreme suffering. Thus, although women can participate in the process of redemption in a uniquely feminine way, their participation is more heavily associated with guilt and penance than is masculine redemption, and therefore more closely linked to that most feminine of images in the Middle Ages, suffering love.<sup>23</sup>

Where above I wanted to call attention to the profound misogyny wrapped up in asceticism, now I want to discuss the nonetheless sexual nature of much medieval Christian mystical discourse about submission to God, and the gender assumptions which are betrayed and reinforced by such discourse.

### **Eroticism in Mystical Writings**

The content of mystical accounts of the relationship between the soul and God is important if we want to understand what a self-renunciatory Christian belief consisted of, and was thought to consist of, for those who held it. Many commentators have observed that there is a significant erotic or sexual content to many medieval mystical visions – especially, but it must be said not exclusively, to those written by women; this particularly striking erotic image comes from a man, Rupert of Deutz:

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<sup>21</sup> Catherine Innes-Parker, 'Mi bodi henge with thi bodi neiled o rode: The gendering of the Pauline concept of crucifixion with Christ in medieval devotional prose for women', *Studies in Religion* 28 (1999), p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Innes-Parker, 'Mi bodi henge with thi bodi neiled o rode', p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> Innes-Parker, 'Mi bodi henge with thi bodi neiled o rode', p. 56.

I took hold of him whom my soul loved. I held him. I embraced him, I kissed him for a long time ... in the midst of the kiss he opened his mouth so that I could kiss more deeply.<sup>24</sup>

Another, by Marguerite of Oingt, uses the image of Christ the bridegroom:

And in the evening when I go to bed, I in spirit put him in my bed and I kiss his tender hands and his feet so cruelly pierced for my sins. And I lean over that glorious side pierced for me.<sup>25</sup>

Here, the most important theological role erotic imagery seems to be playing is in emphasising the love of Christ, as well as his humanity, and it is relatively easy to portray it in a positive light. Elizabeth Petroff describes the erotic stage of visionary activity as helping the mystics to present 'a highly significant validation of the feminine';<sup>26</sup> Karma Lochrie makes a similar point, arguing that 'The mystic who insists on that which has been excluded in medieval Christianity, namely, the feminine, the pervious flesh, and defilement, takes abjection for the sublime'.<sup>27</sup> This reference to abjection should alert us to the fact that there is more to mystical eroticism than just visions of kissing Christ or of lying in bed embracing him. Lochrie quotes Julia Kristeva's claim that:

The mystic's familiarity with abjection is a fount of infinite jouissance. One may stress the masochistic economy of the jouissance only if one points out at once that the Christian mystic, far from using it to the benefit of a symbolic or institutional power, displaces it indefinitely ... within a discourse where the subject is resorbed ... into communication with the Other and with others.<sup>28</sup>

This may sound acceptable – if somewhat opaque – until we consider the extent to which mystical visions of abjection, including sexual abjection, actually *have* served to displace any symbolic or institutional power; that is to say, whether such symbolic or institutional powers still exist and whether this kind of religious expression reinforces or undermines them. Julie Miller's serious objections to affirmations like these are based on the violent nature of the sexual content of many medieval mystics' visions. She argues that the uncritical stance of many scholars, including feminist scholars, to such literature results from a perfectly laudable concern, in the context of an awareness of the historical silencing of women, for 'validating and celebrating the words and actions of historical

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in J. Giles Milhaven, 'A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989), p. 344. Rupert seems to have been fond of this image: elsewhere he writes of Mary, 'Hurry to meet [your Creator], that you may be kissed with the kiss of the mouth of God and be drawn into His most blessed embraces' (quoted in McLaughlin, 'Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes', p. 248).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Milhaven, 'A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing', p. 347.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 127, quoted in Lochrie, *Margery Kempe*, p. 49.

women',<sup>29</sup> as well as from 'the often unspoken assumption that the "nature" of the erotic is inherently positive'.<sup>30</sup> Incidentally, some criticism of this aspect of mysticism stems from an opposite view of the erotic and of bodiliness, as J. Giles Milhaven argues: 'It is the degree of physicality of the women's experience that make [sic] it unintelligible and often repugnant to mystical theologians of the tradition, even modern ones'.<sup>31</sup> The conceptual division, and hierarchy, between 'spirit' and 'body', which some criticisms of women's mysticism – see for example William James' assessment of the 'Revelations' of St Gertrude as displaying 'theopathic saintliness', consisting of 'Assurances of [Christ's] love, intimacies and caresses and compliments of the most absurd and puerile sort'<sup>32</sup> – seem to reflect is itself highly gendered, and implicated in the subordination of women; in light of this, the work of feminist and other scholars to affirm it and take it seriously is welcome and important.

However, Miller's own reading of the literature itself presents content and assumptions which may be seen as highly problematic from the point of view of feminist scholarship. She identifies what she calls 'five major motifs found within mystical literature: (1) God's active assault upon and (2) piercing penetration of the soul; (3) the soul's vehement desire for God; (4) the consequent combat between God and the soul; and (5) the necessity of the soul's final annihilation'.<sup>33</sup> The problem is not that some visions are sexually explicit; it is in the nature of the sex they describe. Some examples will serve to illustrate this point. Here is Mechthild of Magdeburg mingling imagery of Christ's crucifixion with imagery of sex in her description of the violence and pain, experienced as pleasure, with which God acts on the soul:

She is captured in the first experience  
 When God kisses her in sweet union.  
 She is assailed with many a holy thought  
 That she not waver when she mortifies her flesh.  
 She is bound by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
 And her bliss is indeed manifold.  
 She is slapped with the great powerlessness  
 Of not being able to enjoy without interruption eternal light  
 ...  
 She is buffeted and beaten with severe blows  
 When she must return to the body  
 She is stripped of all things  
 When God clothes her with the silk of fair love

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<sup>29</sup> Julie B. Miller, 'Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15/2 (1999), p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> Milhaven, 'A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing', p. 350.

<sup>32</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p. 245.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 29.

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With the hammer of the chase of love she is nailed so fast to the cross  
That all creatures are not able to call her back again...<sup>34</sup>

There is pleasurable violence, too, in Hadewijch of Antwerp's description of Love:

That is mighty Love's mode of action:  
If she wholly lures someone to her hand,  
Although she forces him with violence,  
She contents him and sweetens his chains.

For this reason  
She is highly renowned  
And greatly praised in all lands.<sup>35</sup>

Hadewijch's union with Christ is described as what looks to the modern reader like a sexual encounter:

After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desires of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported. Also then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this; but soon, after a short time, I lost that manly beauty outwardly in the sight of his form. I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference ... After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself; and I was changed and taken up in the spirit.<sup>36</sup>

Note here Hadewijch's 'melting' and 'passing away' so that 'nothing any longer remained to me of myself'; I will return to the theme of the annihilation of the soul later. The penetration of the body, again experienced simultaneously as pain and pleasure, by such various means as a ray of light, an arrow, a dart, is a recurring theme in women's mystical visions. This particular arrow, which advances and retires 'for some time', is described by St Gertrude:

After I had received the Sacrament of life, and had retired to the place where I pray, it seemed to me that I saw a ray of light like an arrow coming forth from the wound of the right side of the crucifix, which was in an elevated place, and it continued, as it were, to advance and retire for some time, sweetly attracting my cold affections.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, tr. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 117-118, quoted in Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', pp. 30-31.

<sup>35</sup> *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, tr. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 179, quoted in Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, Vision Seven, pp. 280-282, quoted in Petroff, *Medieval Women's Mystical Literature*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> *The Life and Revelations of Saint Gertrude*, Part II, pp. 82ff, quoted in Petroff, *Medieval Women's Mystical Literature*, p. 14.

Another penetrating ray of love is described in *Purgation and Purgatory*, attributed to Catherine of Genoa and probably reflecting her own ideas although it is unlikely that she wrote it herself:<sup>38</sup>

God sent her a ray of his love so burning and deep that it was an agony to sustain. Issuing from the fountain of Christ that love, wounding the soul, stripped it of all other loves, appetites, delights, and selfishness. The soul cried out, sighed deeply, and in its transformation was taken out of itself. God deeply impressed upon her the fountains of Christ with their fiery bloody drops of love for man.<sup>39</sup>

Both here and in the next extract, also from Catherine, the penetration is burning and painful, but pleasurable at the same time:

The action of God in penetrating the soul is so fierce  
that it seems to set the body on fire  
and to keep it burning until death.  
The overwhelming love of God  
gives it a joy beyond words.  
Yet this joy does not do away with one bit of pain  
in the suffering of the souls in purgatory.  
As the soul grows in its perfection,  
so does it suffer more  
because of what impedes the final consummation,  
the end for which God made it;  
so that in purgatory great joy and great suffering  
do not exclude one another.<sup>40</sup>

Miller observes that for Catherine, ‘the imagery and rhetoric of pain and love, rape and eros become intricately intertwined, so much so that they appear to become constitutive of each other’.<sup>41</sup> The most famous mystical vision of penetration is this one by Teresa of Ávila:

It seemed the angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep inside within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away, nor is the soul content with less than God.<sup>42</sup>

Bernini’s well-known statue in Rome of this particular vision has been seen as one of the greatest artistic depictions of female orgasm, as for example by Jaques Lacan: ‘it is the same as for Saint Theresa – you only have to go and look at Bernini’s statue in Rome to

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<sup>38</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 180.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, ‘Eroticized Violence’, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life*, in *Collected Works*, tr. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 1:252, quoted in Miller, ‘Eroticized Violence’, p. 34.

understand immediately that she's coming, there's no doubt about it'.<sup>43</sup> Jantzen points out, quite rightly, that the statue should not be taken as the sole evidence of whether or not Teresa's vision is actually orgasmic, and that reading her books might be more helpful,<sup>44</sup> but it nevertheless seems that sexual imagery is at least part of what is going on here. Maitland writes that Teresa,

a sturdy, humorous woman in her daily dealings, changes completely when speaking of her mystical experience and describes her relationship with God in terms of 'Love's dart that wounds but never kills', of the passion that sets the lover apart from the world and from all other beings; of the 'struggle of love' in which it is necessary to be defeated; of the 'stolen heart', 'the ravished understanding' and the 'rape of love'.<sup>45</sup>

The metaphor of God as the lover of the soul seems to contain within itself the provision that sometimes he has to take her against her will, or at the very least without her explicit consent. There are, especially in the writings of the Beguines, exceptions to this gendering of God as masculine and the soul as feminine; especially when the God role is occupied by 'Love';<sup>46</sup> however, this does not appear to affect the submissive role the soul plays in relation to the God/Christ/Love/Angel/Queen figure, as in this example from Mechthild:

O lady love, cast me beneath your feet!  
I delight when victorious you vanquish me  
And through you my life is destroyed

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<sup>43</sup> Jaques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jaques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p. 147, quoted in Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 53. See also Susan McCaslin's poem, 'I Have a Few Words to Say to the Freudians':

I have a few words to say to the Freudians  
about the event in my story  
referred to as the 'Transverbation,'  
the 'flaming heart' Crashaw in his poem  
misunderstood over 200 years afterward.  
I mean, that angelic piercing,  
those darts of core-driven light,  
all that fusion of pleasure and pain.  
You might as well know,  
there are some ecstasies  
having little to do with sex,  
though we steal whatever analogies we can,  
and sex is sometimes a whisper  
of what I'm talking about.  
Erotics within erotics,  
bodies in bodies, sheaths in sheaths,  
touches of union everywhere so delicate  
they imprint the soul with longing.  
Yes, there are submissions, Freud,  
having nothing to do with repression,  
as the open mouth and the half-closed eyes  
of the Bernini in Rome only half suggest.  
But you have to try them to know them.

Susan McCaslin, 'From *The Teresa Poems*', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15/2 (1999), pp. 104-105.

<sup>45</sup> Sara Maitland, 'Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience', in Linda Hurcombe (ed.), *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 134-135.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 31, n. 22.

For in that, O lady, lies my true safety.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of the gendering of the involved parties, this forced submission is understood as natural and necessary and experienced as pleasure:

Medieval mystics readily turn to the discourse of violence and torture to frame their experience. They speak of being repeatedly scourged, scolded, slapped, assailed, buffeted, beaten, wounded, and tormented. Love appears to be a cruel suitor indeed. Yet, all the while, they intertwine this discourse with that of erotic love and delight, insisting that such violence does not extinguish but rather inflames the soul's ardor for the divine. In the end, they eagerly await the sweet and blissful blow of Love's fiery, violent kiss.<sup>48</sup>

It is possible, of course, that this – pain and violence accompanied by intense erotic love and delight – is an accurate reflection of at least some sexual experience. Mary Pellauer identifies a number of problems in giving any account of orgasms: their ephemeral nature, the difficulty of remembering them and describing them in words, the fact that they are not all alike and the fact that different people experience them in different ways.<sup>49</sup> She argues that 'Celebrating women's sexuality is key to good sexual ethics, feminist or not ... [and] requires a many-meaninged, many-valued, many-voiced complexity that can rejoice in the fact that we are many and not one'.<sup>50</sup> Given this, and given, for example, Marcella Althaus-Reid's use of diverse categories of sexuality and sexual practice to challenge mainstream 'heterosexually-based theology'<sup>51</sup> and develop a feminist liberation theology, we should not be too quick to dismiss such accounts of pleasurable pain as straightforwardly illegitimate or dangerous. Nevertheless, we should pay attention to the relationship for many of the mystics between pain/pleasure and the annihilation of self.

## Annihilation

The result, for many mystics, of the violent action of God on the soul is the annihilation of self, the absorption of the soul into God so that, in Catherine of Genoa's words, it 'rests in God, with no characteristics of its own, since its purification is the

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<sup>47</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 5:30, tr. Oliver Davies, in Fiona Bowie (ed.), *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 76. The idea of a 'Queen' or 'Lady' figure playing a dominant, 'masculine' role should be familiar from the contemporary courtly love tradition, and is itself not free from problematic gender assumptions or indeed from downright obfuscation of the reality of male-female power relations. It is likely that many mystics were familiar with the courtly love tradition: see Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 30, n. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> Mary D. Pellauer, 'The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality', in James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (eds.), *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (London: Mowbray, 1994), p. 153.

<sup>50</sup> Pellauer, 'The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm', p. 163.

<sup>51</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 87.

stripping away of the lower self. Our being is then God'.<sup>52</sup> This constitutes a complete loss of personal autonomy in which 'The soul, for its part, no longer has a choice of its own. It can seek only what God wills, nor would it want otherwise'.<sup>53</sup> The equation of perfect obedience with perfect freedom is a commonplace in Christian, especially medieval Christian, theology, however alien to each other the two concepts might appear to modern eyes: for Anselm, for example, 'freedom is the power of not being free to sin. It is therefore indistinguishable from obedience'.<sup>54</sup> The understanding of due service to God involved in much medieval theology, including this aspect of the writings of the mystics I am discussing here, however, is the product of a deeply hierarchical feudalistic understanding of the nature of the world, and by extension of the relationship of the world to God. As R.W. Southern says, Anselm's work 'bears the marks of this rigorous and – if the word can be used without blame – repressive regime';<sup>55</sup> whatever else we may want to say about them, we can say much the same thing about the writings of the mystics. But the annihilation some mystics describe seems to go rather further than Anselm's perfect obedience: Marguerite Porete says that annihilated souls become 'folk with feet but no path, hands but no work, mouth but no words, eyes but no vision, ears but no hearing, reason but no reasoning, body but no life, and a heart but no intellect, as long as they are [annihilated]'.<sup>56</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth says of the soul:

Love's beauty has consumed it.  
 Love's strength has eaten it up.  
 Love's sweetness has immersed it.  
 Love's greatness has absorbed it.  
 ...  
 So conquered is it by love that it can barely sustain itself,  
 And loses its power over its members and senses.<sup>57</sup>

For John of the Cross, the ultimate goal is 'to be annihilated and not to realise that one has been annihilated'.<sup>58</sup>

The spiritual and sensual appetites are put to sleep and mortified, so that they can desire nothing, either divine or human; the affections of the soul are oppressed and constrained so that they can neither move nor find support in anything; the imagination is bound and can make no useful reflection; the

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<sup>52</sup> Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, p. 80, quoted in Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his Biographer: A Study of Monastic Life and Thought 1059-c.1130* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 105.

<sup>55</sup> Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 222.

<sup>56</sup> Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, tr. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 161. The striking parallel here with the denunciation of idols in Ps 115.5-7 ('They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat') is presumably unintended.

<sup>57</sup> Beatrice of Nazareth, *The Seven Manners of Holy Love*, in *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, tr. Roger De Ganck (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), p. 305, quoted in Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> John of the Cross, *Noche oscura*, II, 8, quoted in Flynn, 'The Spiritual Uses of Pain', p. 271.

memory is gone; the understanding is in darkness, and the will likewise is arid and constrained, and all the faculties are void and useless.<sup>59</sup>

Catherine of Siena writes to a friend describing what such a feeling of annihilation would be like: 'I long to see you set afire, swallowed up and consumed in his blazing charity, for we know that those who are set afire and consumed in that true charity lose all self-consciousness. That is what I want you to do'.<sup>60</sup>

The state of self-loss desired and achieved here is accompanied by, and indeed created by, various forms of self-abasement and self-punishment which are sought and welcomed as a means to the desired end. For Catherine of Siena, this state is so desirable that 'we don't care what sort of abuse or injury or pain we might have to endure'<sup>61</sup> to get there. Angela of Foligno describes her desire for a form of *imitatio Christi*, but one which explicitly requires a greater abjection than that suffered by Christ or the saints:

then I would beg him to grant me this grace, namely, that since Christ had been crucified on the wood of the cross, that I be crucified in a gully, or in some very vile place, and by a very vile instrument. Moreover, since I did not desire to die as the saints had died, that he make me die a slower and even more vile death than theirs. I could not imagine a death vile enough to match my desire.<sup>62</sup>

Angela's meditation on the fragments of Christ's tortured body enables her to identify with his suffering, leading to her joyful ecstasy.<sup>63</sup> Maureen Flynn describes the bodily tortures inflicted on herself by Teresa of Ávila in an effort to fix herself exclusively on the object of her desires:

St Teresa marvelled that during the height of rapture, spiritual longing became so great that she could raise neither hands nor feet, nor feel herself breathing. To sustain such longing and keep her mind on Christ, she sought reminders of her sentient nature, picking up a scourge and flagellating her flesh ever more violently. Her hope was that this distraction would help her endure longer the spiritual tenure of desire.<sup>64</sup>

When, therefore, Teresa tells us that 'This love of God becomes so intense that I know of no bodily torture which can drown it',<sup>65</sup> we should take her seriously – she is in a position to know. Flynn argues that the deliberate self-infliction of ever-increasing pain by the mystics was part of a strategy of self-annihilation which facilitated the entry of the divine:

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<sup>59</sup> John of the Cross, *Noche oscura*, II, 9, quoted in Flynn, 'The Spiritual Uses of Pain', p. 272.

<sup>60</sup> *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, tr. Suzanne Noffke (Binghampton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1988), 1:98, quoted in Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', pp. 38-39.

<sup>61</sup> *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, 1:89, quoted in Miller, 'Eroticized Violence', p. 39.

<sup>62</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, tr. Paul Lachance (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 128, quoted in Amy Hollywood, "'Beautiful as a Wasp": Angela of Foligno and Georges Bataille', *Harvard Theological Review* 92 (1999), p. 232.

<sup>63</sup> Hollywood, "'Beautiful as a Wasp'", p. 230.

<sup>64</sup> Flynn, 'The Spiritual Uses of Pain', p. 275.

<sup>65</sup> Teresa of Ávila,  *Vida* XXIX, quoted in Flynn, 'The Spiritual Uses of Pain', p. 276.

This is why we see the mystics conscientiously intensifying pain, on the surface of their bodies through vigorous scourging and within their bodies through concentration on the Crucifixion, until finally the contents of the world were cancelled out in their minds. Pain destroyed for them pretensions to extend control over the environment. It shattered for them any illusions of human potency by paralyzing the faculties of the outer soul and leaving the inner soul vulnerable, humble, and absolutely empty, the conditions required for entry of an unworldly, divine presence.<sup>66</sup>

Mortification functions ‘as a focal point of imagination and thought’,<sup>67</sup> the goal of which is complete powerlessness, submission and absorption into God.

The love of God as described by the mystics is at once sexual and violent, joyful and agonising; its goal is the annihilation of the soul and its assimilation into God, achieved through imagined and performed self-abasement, through self-torture, visions of torture, pain and submission, including submission to sexual violence; it is experienced as simultaneously excruciatingly painful and intensely pleasurable; indeed, as pleasurable *because* it is painful, because the pain is understood as the physically experienced guarantee of the reality of the experience of the presence of God, into whose being the mystic is subsumed and, through being subsumed, annihilated. Rather than continuing to stand apart as opposites, or losing their meanings altogether, concepts of ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’ shift, assimilating each other’s meanings and incorporating themselves into each other, creating new categories and new understandings of what each consists of.

Miller argues that

medieval women mystics consistently use binary concepts such as pain and pleasure to describe their experience, but the concepts now incorporate rather than exclude their ‘opposites’. They have taken on a whole new meaning. Pain is that which is also delightful; pleasure is that which results from excruciating pain. While this ambiguity and conflation of terms may certainly ‘disrupt’ the boundaries of dualistic categories, this disruption is not necessarily subversive. Instead, it may open up an avenue for the creation of new and even more insidious ideological constructs – such as the notion that the female/feminine desires and even requires violence and pain to achieve its ultimate pleasure – constructs which ultimately serve the same patriarchal purpose.<sup>68</sup>

The intermingling of pleasure and pain is not a theme on which medieval mystics have a monopoly, as the categories Miller uses here, which are familiar from feminist criticism of contemporary culture, should make clear. Miller wants to argue that the implicit legitimisation of sexual violence, indeed, the apparent divine sanction given to such sexual violence, in the kind of mystical discourse she presents is an important causal

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<sup>66</sup> Flynn, ‘The Spiritual Uses of Pain’, pp. 274-275.

<sup>67</sup> Flynn, ‘The Spiritual Uses of Pain’, p. 275.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, ‘Eroticized Violence’, p. 45.

strand in the eroticisation of dominance and submission – making violence sexy<sup>69</sup> – which radical feminists identify as central to the construction of gender.<sup>70</sup> As Maitland puts it:

What the hell is going on here? What can possibly lead women to believe that they are more ‘conformable’, more lovable to the God of creation, love and mercy, bleeding, battered and self-mutilated, than they would be joyful, lovely and delighted? What is going on is an open expression of something that exists less consciously and concretely in a great many Christian women: a sado-masochistic relationship with God ... [which] gives a subliminal justification to every wife-batterer, every rapist, every pornographer and every man who wishes to claim ‘rights’, the rights to abuse, over women.<sup>71</sup>

Maitland’s anger seems well-directed. It does not seem unreasonable to see the mystical literature referred to here as something which deserves to be challenged, and as part of a matrix of cultural, literary and linguistic misogyny which has undoubtedly had far-reaching and damaging effects.

### Rape as Sex, Spiritual Union as Rape

Looking at the different meanings which can be held by certain words, and the way in which some meanings come to replace others, can tell us much about the way in which different (to us) concepts can interrelate in a different historical or cultural context, and therefore alert us to conceptual associations which we might not be inclined to make ourselves – both when discussing the culture in question and, especially where there are historical, linguistic and cultural links between that culture and ours, when discussing our own. One good example of this is in Kathryn Gravdal’s examination of medieval French literature and law to chart the shifting meaning of the French verb *ravir*:

When it first appears, *ravissement* means the action of carrying off a woman, but by the fourteenth century it comes to have a spiritual or religious sense: the action of carrying a soul to heaven. From this religious meaning develops a more secular, affective one: the state of a soul transported by enthusiasm, joy, or extreme happiness. *Ravissement* now, in the fourteenth century, refers to the state of being ‘carried away’ emotionally, a state of exaltation. From this psychological troping comes a sexual trope: the state of sexual pleasure or rapture. *Ravir* is to bring someone to a state of sexual joy.<sup>72</sup>

The other side of the same linguistic coin is that *fame esforver*, the most common French medieval locution for rape, is cognate with the adjective *esforçible* – ‘valiant, formidable,

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<sup>69</sup> Miller, ‘Eroticized Violence’, p. 49.

<sup>70</sup> See for example MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 5-10.

<sup>71</sup> Maitland, ‘Passionate Prayer’, pp. 127-128.

<sup>72</sup> Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 5.

powerful' – and 'esforcement, denoting effort, power, military force, bravura and rape'.<sup>73</sup> As with *ravir*, the sexual meaning of *esforcer* drops away over time so that by the sixteenth century only 's'efforcer à: to strive mightily to do something, or to do violence to oneself (in a figurative or moral way)<sup>74</sup> remains. Gravdal notes the linguistic inversion by which the word 'ravishing' is even today a compliment in English for a beautiful woman (the modern French *ravissement* is an exact parallel), implicitly transferring the responsibility for any unwanted sexual attention from the male admirer to the object of his interest, so that 'The moving force behind rape becomes the beautiful woman'.<sup>75</sup> MacKinnon argues that sexual objectification, by which she means 'having a social meaning imposed upon your being that defines you as to be sexually used, according to your desired uses, and then using you that way',<sup>76</sup> makes it difficult for women credibly to withhold consent to sex:

The appearance of choice or consent, with their attribution to inherent nature, is crucial in concealing the reality of force. Love of violation, variously termed female masochism and consent, comes to define female sexuality, legitimating this political system by concealing the force on which it is based.<sup>77</sup>

A modern example can serve to illustrate the way in which rape can be disguised so effectively that it is invisible to the rapist himself; this comes from Alex Comfort's best-selling sex manual *The Joy of Sex*:

Gagging and being gagged turns most men on – most women profess to hate it in prospect, but the expression of erotic astonishment on the face of a well-gagged woman when she finds she can only mew is irresistible to most men's rape instincts.<sup>78</sup>

This seems almost too convenient to be true as evidence for the feminist claim that certain sexual expectations can be institutionalised to the extent that the word 'No' loses its illocutionary force as a withholding of consent to sex, so that men can rape without even knowing it<sup>79</sup> – and note that Comfort, while he would presumably deny that he intends to defend rape, actually *appeals* to 'men's rape instincts', which he does not appear to see as problematic, as the explanation of what it is that makes this particular act attractive.

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<sup>73</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, p. 140.

<sup>77</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, p. 141.

<sup>78</sup> Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* (London: Quartet, 1979), p. 126, quoted in Sheila Jeffreys, *Antichmax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p. 121.

<sup>79</sup> Rae Langton, 'Pornography, Speech Acts, and Silence', in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 345-346.

Rape is important to this discussion partly because, as we have seen, various mystics' accounts of their union with the divine include images of what looks like violent forced sex, and also because the motif of attempted rape of female saints is a common one in medieval hagiography, and this frequency, along with the manner of the portrayal of attempted rape, are significant. As I argued above, the fact that accounts of medieval and pre-medieval saints' lives cannot be regarded as strictly historically accurate means that their value lies not in their literal truth but in what they tell us about what were regarded as marks of sanctity in the cultural surroundings the saints inhabited. Gravdal describes the importance of sexual violence, and the successful resistance by female saints of sexual assault, which 'runs through hagiography like a shining thread in a tapestry, highly valued and useful'.<sup>80</sup> She argues that part of the attraction of such stories lay in the voyeuristic opportunity they provided to writers and audiences, rather as the spiritualization of the Song of Songs to refer to the marriage of Christ and the soul allowed the Fathers and their readers, as Ruether puts it, 'to dwell in the most pictorial detail upon the sensations of the sexual act while fantasizing this as a spiritual relationship'<sup>81</sup> – calling to mind Mary Daly's contention that hagiography and pornography amount to the same thing.<sup>82</sup>

The *vitae* authors do not hesitate to indulge in descriptions of the nubile attractiveness of thirteen-year-old virgins; their smooth, tender flesh as they are stripped bare in public before a crowd; the debauched but beautiful prostitutes who seek to tease young maidens into licentious acts; or the sight of snow-white female breasts being twisted and pulled by heathen torturers. Hagiography affords a sanctioned space in which eroticism can flourish and in which male voyeurism becomes licit, if not advocated.<sup>83</sup>

The sexual content which makes such stories popular does not undermine their theological usefulness; sexual episodes are not tacked on to otherwise wholesome and improving Christian stories to pull audiences in, although this is an obvious apologetic benefit: they *are* the wholesome and improving Christian stories. The hagiographer is able simultaneously to write sex and glorify virginity, as well as affirming God's justice: 'In hagiography, no rape is ever completed. Even if the saint dies, she dies sexually pure. The wicked seducers are always thwarted and punished, the faithful protected and rewarded'.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, as she is resisting her seducer, 'the female saint may indulge in sensual love language, expressing her desire to be held in Christ's arms or her yearning to

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<sup>80</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 22. See also Innes-Parker, 'Sexual Violence and the Female Reader: Symbolic "Rape" in the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group', *Women's Studies* 24 (1995), pp. 205-217.

<sup>81</sup> Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism', p. 167.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Spitting at Dragons*, p. 24.

<sup>83</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 24.

<sup>84</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 24.

receive his kisses',<sup>85</sup> at the same time as she is in the process of being beaten by a violent assailant. Of course, in many of the mystics' own accounts of their visions, they really do receive Christ's kisses – and they get beaten by Christ at the same time.

Female saints were therefore portrayed as sexual beings by their hagiographers even as their chastity was being affirmed. The alternative to physical sexual violation in such accounts is spiritual union with Christ described by hagiographers in explicitly sexual terms – explicitly sexual terms which are paralleled in many of the mystics' own accounts of their union with the divine. Most female saints were, of course, celibate, often through their membership of religious orders – a way in which they could avoid physical sex, but in which they were regarded as 'brides of Christ'. Looking at the theology behind this description indicates that it would be a mistake to regard it as purely metaphorical: Christ is seen as master in the same way as a husband is seen as a master, and the love in both cases is understood as hierarchical. Rose of Lima's hagiographer describes Rose's guilt at desiring a 'mystical marriage' for which she is unworthy: 'And this humility, which made her judge herself unworthy of it, was the precious portion which captivated the heart of the Son of God'.<sup>86</sup> In this light, and in the light of the discussion of virginity, above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the sexual images we find in mystical literature are hierarchical ones in which power and control are emphasised, and in which sexual and spiritual union, however welcome it may be, is violent, painful, perceived as a violation of boundaries, accompanied by real and imagined torture, including crucifixion, and resulting in the annihilation of the self, the dissolution of personal identity and absorption into the divine. Is this a good description of sex? Is it good theology? We cannot simply conclude from the fact that such visions look unpleasant to us that the correct answer to either or both of these questions, so far as the mystics are concerned, is 'No'.

For example, Althaus-Reid, in the course of developing her own feminist liberation theology, seeks to engage positively with fetishistic and sadomasochistic sexual categories, and notes that while these might be seen as shocking and indecent by mainstream Christianity, they have a precedent in accounts of pain, violence and torture experienced by the saints and by Christ himself. She argues that in the context of 1970s Latin America, in which 'Sado/masochistic practices in the terrorism of the state in alliance with the church became torture and infinite forms of human pain inflicted on the

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<sup>85</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, p. 24.

<sup>86</sup> Faber, *The Saints and Servants of God*, p. 53, quoted in Maitland, 'Passionate Prayer', p. 136. It is difficult not to sympathise with Maitland's outraged comment on this passage: 'He likes you grovelling. It turns him on???'

people’,<sup>87</sup> a recognition of the violence contained the lives of the saints could be a helpful theological resource: ‘The narrative of the punishment of the bodies of the saints was a divine pedagogy to understand reality’.<sup>88</sup> Their willing submission, and the willing submission of participants in ‘indecent’ sexual practices, can serve as a model for salvation: ‘A consensual salvation is always risqué, unsafe, unsettled but meaningful because it recognises the body as the space of salvation. Eroticism and hunger are sites of pain and liberation’.<sup>89</sup> For Althaus-Reid, rejecting such possibilities ‘ignores the historical links between spirituality and sexual options, or between bondage and Christianity, or fetishism and the doctrine of salvation’.<sup>90</sup> Even if we have difficulty seeing the willing submission of the saints to torture, violence and pain as theologically positive, even if we want to problematise the results the exaltation of such behaviour has had, we have to accept that problematising it reflects our own concerns more than they do the concerns of the saints themselves, or of their contemporaries. In her discussion of Rose of Lima, Maitland points out that any negative reaction we might have to Rose’s extraordinary self-inflicted penances are *our* reactions, and should not be transformed into an automatic assumption that she herself was unhappy or oppressed:

Quite simply, there is no evidence that this young woman had a problem as we would define it. She was not miserable; she certainly was not coerced into her life style (quite the contrary, her family made considerable effort to dissuade her, and even the Church authorities of the time were not encouraging); she was not psychopathic, in the sense that she did not inflict sufferings on other people; she was the recipient of quite remarkable consolations, including the highest of all delights, the conviction of the ‘mystical marriage’, in which Christ takes the soul directly as his spouse, and a loving one at that ... Moreover she had the real comfort of knowing that her community appreciated what she was doing.<sup>91</sup>

We could say similar things about many of the other mystics discussed here. Yet both in terms of theology and in terms of our understanding of sexual pleasure, what are we to make of the fact that ‘many medieval women mystics were apparently convinced that the only path to passionate union with the beloved was a path of violence and pain, abuse and injury’?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 153.

<sup>88</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 153.

<sup>89</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 154.

<sup>90</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 151.

<sup>91</sup> Maitland, ‘Rose of Lima’, p. 63.

<sup>92</sup> Miller, ‘Froticized Violence’, p. 39.

## Weil and the Wittgensteinians

Questions like this bring us back to our investigation of the Wittgensteinians, and in particular to Phillips' heavy reliance on the work of Simone Weil as exemplifying those elements within Christianity which he identifies as authentic and as lacking in superstition, false consolation and wishful thinking. Before moving on to discuss those aspects of Weil's life and thought which have been identified as problematic by some of her critics, I want to review briefly what it is about her which makes her so important to the Wittgensteinians. In the first place, her value is simply in the fact that she exists, and challenges certain dominant strands of thought in the philosophy of religion. This is evidence for the Wittgensteinian contention that within the same cultural context there is a possibility of a variety of approaches, some of which may challenge dominant strands of thought:

varieties of inner life are not simply found by comparing cultures, but also by comparisons within our culture. Simone Weil wrote within that culture and takes herself to be throwing light on possibilities of religious sense which she did not create. That this is so does not show that the perspective she talks of is right and that [Bernard] Williams' is wrong. What it does show, however, is that his confident use of the 'plural' in relation to what *we* can believe today is, at best, premature.<sup>93</sup>

What, then, does Weil represent which challenges dominant strains of thought? This can perhaps be stated most briefly as: a refusal to place the self at the centre of moral and religious concerns. We can see this in her attitude to power, justice, immortality, prayer and consolation. In all of these, Weil's attitude can be summed up as rejecting any possible interpretation which might benefit the self, and this coincides nicely with what I have already described as the most important element of the Wittgensteinian approach to moral philosophy and the philosophy of religion. Phillips relies heavily on Weil, as we saw, in his understanding of immortality:

Belief in immortality is harmful because it is not in our power to conceive of the soul as really incorporeal. So this belief is in fact a belief in the prolongation of life and it robs death of its purpose.<sup>94</sup>

Whatever immortality means, what it cannot mean is a continuation of life after death. Such a belief tricks us into thinking that we are important – that immortality is essentially about us, not about God. Weil rejects the idea that God's creation is an act of power:

It is an abdication. Through this act a kingdom was established other than the kingdom of God. The reality of this world is constituted by the mechanism of matter and the autonomy of rational creatures. It is a kingdom from which God has withdrawn. God, having renounced being its king, can enter it only as

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<sup>93</sup> Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 43.

<sup>94</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 33, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 153.

a beggar. As for the cause of this abdication, Plato expressed it thus: 'He was good'.<sup>95</sup>

This means that God's power is not expressed by favouring one party over another, or by bringing one course of events into being rather than another, but through love – and participation in that love on the part of human beings takes the form of compassion, of renouncing human power and realising that life itself is a grace.<sup>96</sup> This, as we saw above, is closely linked to Phillips' interpretation of prayer: prayer cannot be a demand for one thing rather than another, but an expression of the believer's submission of her own will to God, her renunciation of her own autonomy and acknowledgement of her total dependence on God. The alternative to this understanding of the relationship between the believer and God is, for Weil and Phillips, an idolatrous conception of God as 'a policeman in the sky'<sup>97</sup> who watches over us and whose watching over us affects the way we behave because we want to avoid being seen to behave in ways of which he would disapprove – because we are afraid of him, afraid of his power. This is related to Weil's distinction between supernatural and natural justice,<sup>98</sup> which Phillips often illustrates with reference to Weil's discussion of the Melian Dialogue, from Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. The Athenians justify their attempt to bully the Melians into joining an anti-Spartan alliance with an appeal to the fact that 'As touching the Gods we have the belief, and as touching men the certainty, that always by a necessity of nature, each one commands when he has the power'.<sup>99</sup> Weil says of this:

The first proof that they were in the wrong lies in the fact that, contrary to their assertion, it happens, although extremely rarely, that a man will forbear out of pure generosity to command where he has the power to do so. That which is possible for man is also possible for God.<sup>100</sup>

Forbearance, then, is what Weil sees as the appropriate response to the exercise of power by others, including the unjust and illegitimate exercise of power. Forbearance is difficult, but it is possible and therefore not to be ruled out simply because it is too demanding. Weil's writing places great emphasis on the imitation of God, of setting high standards for oneself – the extraordinary demands Weil places on herself, and the results of such demands in her own life, are not seen by Phillips as reasons to be suspicious of

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<sup>95</sup> Weil, 'Are We Struggling for Justice?', tr. Marina Barabas, *Philosophical Investigations* 10 (1987), p. 3, quoted in Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>96</sup> Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, p. 63.

<sup>97</sup> Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, tr. H.S. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 171, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 181.

<sup>98</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>99</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 98.

<sup>100</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 101. See Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, pp. 159-160; *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 249; *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, p. 52.

the coherence of her thought. Phillips draws a further connection between Weil's natural/supernatural distinction and her discussions of God's existence and 'purifying atheism':

Simone Weil says that anything that exists is unworthy of absolute, unconditional love. In saying this she believes religion is rescued from anthropomorphism and idolatry; a god who is no more than man writ large, a natural god. She says that we need a purifying atheism. In loving God, she concludes, we love something that does not exist. God is more important than anything that exists.<sup>101</sup>

This rejection of any conception of God which could be seen to affirm the self in any way – by being able to act on behalf of the self, for example, or even by being something with which the self can interact – is related to Weil's rejection of all forms of false consolation; the absence of God, like the absence of the dead, is something which has to be faced and not masked with illusion:

To lose somebody: we suffer at the thought that the dead one, the absent one should have become something imaginary, something false. But the longing we have for him is not imaginary. We must go down into ourselves, where the desire which is not imaginary resides ... The loss of contact with reality – there lies evil, there lies sorrow. There are certain situations which bring about such a loss: deprivation, suffering. The remedy is to use the loss itself as an intermediary for attaining reality. The presence of the dead one is imaginary, but his absence is very real; it is henceforth his manner of appearing.<sup>102</sup>

This willingness to face the reality of the void left by the absence of those we love – as Winch puts it, 'what *is* real in my situation ... is to be found in my very loss, my longing, in the void created by the beloved's absence'<sup>103</sup> – is contrasted by Phillips with attempts to fill the void with supernatural (and false) alternatives to absence: belief in heaven, perhaps, or belief that the beloved continues to watch over and protect us. Weil insists on facing the reality of her own powerlessness, and on refusing to use God to diminish that powerlessness. Yet it is precisely the qualities which make Weil so useful to Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion – powerlessness, forbearance, self-denial, self-renunciation – which create what many other commentators regard as an imperative to treat her with considerable caution.

### Susan Sontag: Weil's 'Exemplary' Life

When Weil is used, as she is by the Wittgensteinians, as ammunition against a more dominant current in philosophy of religion, there is no necessary requirement on

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<sup>101</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> Weil, *The Notebooks*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1956), p. 29, quoted in Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, p. 121.

<sup>103</sup> Winch, unpublished manuscript quoted in Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, p. 121

the part of the user to *agree* with anything she says (this is distinct from seeing her work as powerful or challenging, or admiring its austerity, integrity and relentless commitment to what Weil sees as the truth). Susan Sontag says of Weil that 'I cannot believe that more than a handful of the tens of thousands of readers she has won since the posthumous publication of her books and essays really share her ideas'.<sup>104</sup> There are reasons for this. Weil (really) is a good example for the Wittgensteinians to use, but hers (really) is not an exemplary life – and Sontag is surely right to describe Weil's person as 'excruciatingly identical with her ideas'.<sup>105</sup> She is worth quoting at length on the relationship between the compelling nature of Weil's work and the often appalling nature of her life:

Some lives are exemplary, others not; and of exemplary lives, there are those which invite us to imitate them, and those which we regard from a distance with a mixture of revulsion, pity, and reverence. It is, roughly, the difference between the hero and the saint (if one may use the latter term in an aesthetic, rather than a religious sense). Such a life, absurd in its exaggerations and degree of self-mutilation – like Kleist's, like Kierkegaard's – was Simone Weil's. I am thinking of the fanatical asceticism of Simone Weil's life, her contempt for pleasure and for happiness, her noble and ridiculous political gestures, her elaborate self-denials, her tireless courting of affliction; and I do not exclude her homeliness, her physical clumsiness, her migraines, her tuberculosis. No one who loves life would wish to imitate her dedication to martyrdom nor would wish it for his children nor for anyone else whom he loves. Yet so far as we love seriousness, as well as life, we are moved by it, nourished by it. In the respect we pay to such lives, we acknowledge the presence of mystery in the world – and mystery is just what the secure possession of the truth, an objective truth, denies. In this sense, all truth is superficial; and some (but not all) distortions of the truth, some (but not all) insanity, some (but not all) unhealthiness, some (but not all) denials of life are truth-giving, sanity-producing, health-creating, and life-enhancing.<sup>106</sup>

Weil's life, indeed, might be one to which 'What do we want to say about this?' is a more appropriate response than 'Go thou and do likewise', and perhaps this is why Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, with their denial of the need for universalisability and their willingness to take various forms of discourse on their own terms, have found it easier than many other critics to make use of her work in a convincing and constructive way. Nevertheless, the fact that for the Wittgensteinians Weil is paradigmatic rather than exemplary, a case-study rather than a life-model, should make us pause and look at what it is that makes her work difficult for other writers, who

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<sup>104</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Simone Weil', review of Weil, *Selected Essays*, ed. and tr. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), *New York Review of Books* 1/1 (1 February 1963), p. 22

<sup>105</sup> Sontag, 'Simone Weil', p. 22.

<sup>106</sup> Sontag, 'Simone Weil', p. 22.

are philosophically less equipped, or perhaps morally less inclined, to make such distinctions, to be quite so comfortable about using her.

### **‘I Need God to Take Me by Force’: Weil’s Life and Death**

Weil’s profound sense of her own unworthiness before God, her humility, is part of what gives her such an acute ability to articulate precisely what the Christian belief in the love of God for his creation can and cannot mean, and what lessons believers can and cannot draw from their suffering. It is also related to her reflections on power, both divine and political, on its purposes and on the role of the individual as a medium and focus of divine and political power. Biography, while an important part of the make-up of any thinker, can sometimes get in the way, for better or worse, of our appreciation of their work which, we are often encouraged to believe, should stand or fall on its own merits. But for every reader of Weil there is, or should be, no escaping the fact that she lived what she wrote – as her biographer David McLellan puts it, there is ‘a deep coherence, more than with most writers, *between* her work and her life’.<sup>107</sup> And there is, or should be, no escaping the fact that for much of her writing life she was sick. There is more to this than the simple fact that Weil suffered from various health problems throughout her life, including violent headaches.<sup>108</sup> In Loades’ words, ‘A particular kind of Christianity allied itself with her own problems of self-perception and the constrictions that her own society seemed to place around her, and she reached the point when she could not control her body, when her asceticism took her to the point from which there could be no return’.<sup>109</sup> Weil died in a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent, in 1943, ‘of failure of the heart muscles following on starvation, tuberculosis and what the coroner called the refusal to eat while the balance of her mind was disturbed’.<sup>110</sup> Her stated motivation for this self-starvation was that she restricted herself, despite her ill-health and the fact that she was encouraged to eat more, to eating no more than the ration available to the people of Nazi-occupied France: ‘she was unwilling to eat when, as she thought, so many in France were starving. Even this was not an act of deliberate privation but more a communion with France by natural abstention’.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 30.

<sup>109</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 46.

<sup>110</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>111</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 263.

It is clear that, whatever her qualities and the value of her thought, Weil was not an easy person to get close to. She had difficulties forming personal relationships and ‘could only conceive of the possibility of physical love if it were devoid of desire’:<sup>112</sup>

She was notoriously ‘touchy’ about any physical contact or expression of affection, and her asceticism may well have been one way of trying to get control of her formidable talents and personality in a society which would have been more comfortable for her had she continued to work as a teacher, or at any rate fulfilled some other socially acceptable role. Her determination to push herself to the limits of her endurance was another disastrous trait in a person who apparently took to asceticism so easily, eating all too little and smoking incessantly – a necessary stimulant despite its being the Achilles heel of her asceticism.<sup>113</sup>

Pushing herself to the limits of her endurance took the form, for Weil, of a wilful disregard for the types of work to which she was physically and intellectually suited – she was an extraordinarily high-achieving student, a gifted and inspiring (if somewhat unconventional) teacher and a profound thinker and writer, but constantly sought alternative ways to express her commitment to truth and justice. She spent a year as a factory worker in 1935-6 in order to experience the reality of manual labour and to understand the organisational processes behind factory work. This was particularly difficult for her as ‘she was naturally clumsy, as she had abnormally slow reflexes, her health was never good, and her headaches were getting worse’.<sup>114</sup> The experience gave her a ‘direct contact with life’ which gave her ‘the feeling that I do not possess any right whatever of any kind’ and taught her ‘the ability to be morally self-sufficient, to live in this state of constant latent humiliation without feeling humiliated in my own eyes’.<sup>115</sup> In 1936 she joined the anarchist militia fighting the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War. Military life did not suit Weil; her short-sight and clumsiness militated against effective marksmanship, and she was soon injured in an accident with a pot of boiling oil in which her left leg was badly burned; she returned to France.<sup>116</sup> Following the fall of France in 1940 Weil joined the Resistance in Marseille and wrote plans for a front-line female nursing squad whose courage would capture the public’s imagination and which would increase troop morale; later, when she joined the provisional French government in London, General de Gaulle read them and said she was mad.<sup>117</sup> She continued to try to get herself selected for sabotage missions behind enemy lines in France, and in a letter to

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<sup>112</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 94.

<sup>113</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 51.

<sup>114</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 94.

<sup>115</sup> Weil, *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*, tr. D. McFarland and W. Van Ness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 225, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 104.

<sup>116</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, pp. 119-123.

<sup>117</sup> Siân Miles, ‘Introduction’ in Miles (ed.), *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (London: Virago Press, 1986), pp. 45-46.

Maurice Schumann in 1943 'rehearsed her tactics for resisting torture and her readiness to offer her life unconditionally for any service'.<sup>118</sup> The refusal of the Free French to employ Weil as a saboteur cannot be faulted from a military perspective, but it thwarted her desire to achieve 'the attainment of truth through total sacrifice'<sup>119</sup> and the depression this caused almost certainly contributed to her ill-health; she died later that year.

Some of Weil's writings are profoundly disturbing and problematic. Loades quotes part of a 'truly appalling' prayer Weil wrote in 1943:

Father, in the name of Christ grant me this, That I may be unable to will any bodily movement, or even any attempt at movement, like a total paralytic. That I may be incapable of receiving any sensation, like someone who is completely blind, deaf, and deprived of all the senses. That I may be unable to make the slightest connection between two thoughts, even the simplest, like the total idiots who not only cannot read or count but have never learned to speak. That I may be insensible to every kind of grief and joy, and incapable of any love for any being or thing, and not even for myself, like old people in the last stage of decrepitude. Father, in the name of Christ, grant me all this in reality.<sup>120</sup>

Loades describes this as 'just one example of what are monstrous images by which to conceive of the deity's dealings with human creatures, images which, for their violence, are among the most perplexing features of her writing, and which were, in their employment, disastrous for her personality'.<sup>121</sup> This desire to be entirely helpless, to be out of control, might be seen as the other side of the dependence on God expressed elsewhere in her writings, of which the Wittgensteinians make so much use in their philosophical account of a Christianity which avoids confusion. Weil writes, 'I need God to take me by force, because if death, doing away with the shield of the flesh, were to put me face to face with him, I should run away'.<sup>122</sup> How well does this sit with the Wittgensteinian admiration for Weil's commitment to a self-renunciatory dependence on God and denial of her own autonomy? Too well?

The repetition by certain Weil scholars of the disparaging nickname 'the Red Virgin', which was used to describe Weil by the end of her student days<sup>123</sup> suggests an element of sexist prurience, perhaps not entirely remarkable in the study of a woman who remained single throughout her life. There is certainly a striking parallel between some contemporary attitudes to Weil and the medieval attitude to female asceticism and virginity discussed above in the fact that 'Many of her most ardent champions have

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<sup>118</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 260.

<sup>119</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 260.

<sup>120</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, tr. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 243, quoted in part in Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 48.

<sup>121</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 48.

<sup>122</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 52.

<sup>123</sup> McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 31.

bestowed upon her the ultimate accolade (“Donna Quixote”, *Brave Men*) of honorary male status’.<sup>124</sup> Whatever Weil’s own experiences of sex, and whether or not they are accurately reflected in her writings, it is difficult not to be disturbed by some of the links she makes between sex and the relationship between God and the soul. Consider, for example, ‘Death and rape – two metaphors for describing the action of the Holy Spirit on the soul. Murder and rape are crimes owing to the fact that they constitute illegitimate imitations of God’s actions’.<sup>125</sup> Weil expands on this later on in the *Notebooks*, saying, ‘Slavery is a crime in just the same way as are murder and rape, because it sets up a relationship between men which is only appropriate between God and man. God alone has the right to kill, violate, reduce to slavery the souls of men. And it is a violence which is to be desired above all possible forms of good’.<sup>126</sup> It goes without saying that this is a somewhat unconventional account of what it is about murder, rape and enslavement that makes them morally problematic, and one which for most people would be incompatible with their understanding of God’s goodness. The same would presumably go for Weil’s claim that ‘tearing a girl away from her mother’s side, against her will – the greatest and most painful form of violence that it is possible for men to commit – is what serves for us as an image of grace’.<sup>127</sup> Weil’s writings contain plenty more of these violent and sexual images for the relationship between God and the soul. It is like the ‘relation between a bridegroom and a still virgin bride on their wedding night. Marriage is consented rape. And so is the soul’s union with God. The soul feels cold and is not aware of loving God. It does not know, of itself, that unless it loved it would not consent’.<sup>128</sup> And ‘there is a resemblance between the lower and the higher. Hence slavery is an image of obedience to God, humiliation an image of humility, physical necessity an image of the irresistible presence of grace ... On this account, it is necessary to seek out what is lowest as an image’.<sup>129</sup> It is difficult to miss the similarity between this kind of discourse and the mystical visions of union with God given by some of the medieval mystics discussed above – with the important distinction that the mystics are describing experiences and visions they claim to have had, while in Weil there is a simultaneous sense of desire for a similarly violent consummation of her love for God and a fear that she may never be worthy of it.

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<sup>124</sup> Miles, ‘Introduction’, p. 65.

<sup>125</sup> Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 390, quoted in Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 48.

<sup>126</sup> Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 504.

<sup>127</sup> Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 401, quoted in Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 48.

<sup>128</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 244, quoted in Judith van Herik, ‘Simone Weil’s Religious Imagery: How Looking Becomes Eating’ in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 275.

<sup>129</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 80-81, quoted in van Herik, ‘Simone Weil’s Religious Imagery’, pp. 275-276.

## Joyce Carol Oates: Weil's 'Pernicious Kind of Madness'

In a highly critical essay, Joyce Carol Oates wonders 'if both Weil and her numerous admirers are not touched by a pernicious kind of madness: mad because Weil's "ideas" are so clearly without substance, mere vaporous and platitudinous musings; pernicious because, couched in an archetypal (or stereotypical) religious vocabulary, they cannot fail to exert a powerful appeal, even to the skeptic'.<sup>130</sup> Oates protests at Weil's characterisation of herself as being 'more reprehensible than the greatest of criminals, for reasons that are not altogether clear'<sup>131</sup> and suggests a pathological origin for her asceticism, arguing that her 'instinct to die clearly preceded theory'.<sup>132</sup> There is no getting away from the central problem of the relationship between Weil's writings and her life, and death:

the puzzled reader thinks, is Weil speaking in parables? And is the body of her multifarious prose pieces really a kind of poem or extended metaphor, not to be taken literally? Weil herself, however, took it literally, and fasted to death in 1943, at the age of thirty-four, for political and religious reasons.<sup>133</sup>

It is this stark fact which, so far as Oates is concerned, justifies the polemical tone of her essay, and which arouses her suspicions of Weil's admirers – Oates' anger at both Weil's thought and at people who 'seem willing to accept her at her own estimation'.<sup>134</sup> Oates protests at the results of Weil's examination of her own conscience, which causes her to conclude 'that she, more than any criminal, has just cause to fear God's wrath; for that [which] would be a trivial sin in another person is a mortal sin in Weil'.<sup>135</sup> Despite the Wittgensteinian consideration of 'the radical distinction in significance for a man of his own acts as distinct from those of others'<sup>136</sup> the fact remains, for Oates, that not only is Weil profoundly wrong in her own self-assessment – 'after rigorous self-examination, she cannot discover any particular, *serious* faults in her behaviour'<sup>137</sup> – but it betrays a 'curious self-inflation',<sup>138</sup> an egoism which, in its desire to renounce the self, suggests a particular concern for it: 'What more "saintly" project than to starve oneself to death in the ostensible service of a religious ideal?'<sup>139</sup> Weil's conviction of her own sinfulness may, if read suspiciously, as in this case, look less like humility than a perverted sense of her own importance. Oates claims that Weil's asceticism and humility are, in effect, tools to give

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<sup>130</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, *The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1983), p. 148.

<sup>131</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>132</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 148.

<sup>133</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 149.

<sup>134</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 151.

<sup>135</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 151.

<sup>136</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 6.

<sup>137</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 151.

<sup>138</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 151.

<sup>139</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 148.

her pronouncements greater authority – by emptying herself to let God in, we might say, her thoughts and words become God’s; what looks like self-renunciation is in fact self-affirmation. Oates quotes a 1942 letter of Weil’s in which she says ‘I would never dare speak to you like this if all these thoughts were the product of my own mind’<sup>140</sup> – by claiming to withdraw, Weil imbues her own words with a significance they would not otherwise possess. In chapter 6, we saw that early Christian ascetics such as the desert fathers gained power and influence through their extraordinary and admirable behaviour; Oates seems to be accusing Weil of trying to do something similar – she refers to Nietzsche’s speculation ‘that the humble in spirit, the most adamantly “Christian” of persons, secretly wish to be exalted above their fellows and that their public humility is an inversion of their own thwarted will to power’<sup>141</sup> – but Weil herself seems to have been aware of the possibility of such a charge, and to have rejected it. As she wrote to her friend Maurice Schumann, ‘I don’t want you to do me the injustice of imagining that I affect saintliness. Above all I don’t want at any price that you should think better of me than the truth allows’.<sup>142</sup> Weil set herself very high moral standards and, so far as she was concerned, failed to live up to them; the fact that almost everyone else falls even shorter was, so far as Weil was concerned, irrelevant. Charging Weil with an egoistic self-concern misses the fact that the only person in whom Weil identified shortcomings was the only person – Weil herself – of whom she felt absolutely entitled to be critical.

Much of Oates’ essay functions as an attack on Weil’s integrity as well as her authority, and although from Oates’ perspective this makes sense, there is an unhelpful lack of critical nuance to much of her essay, with its allegations of ‘unabashed masochistic fantasy’<sup>143</sup> and her theologically suspect claim that ‘Now that much is known of Weil’s life and her obsession with the mortification of the flesh (primarily by way of fasting) it is difficult to take her “visions” seriously’<sup>144</sup> – as if we should disregard any vision which could be shown to have taken place in an altered state of consciousness (or, to put it another way, as if we could find a vision which could be shown not to have taken place in such a state). Oates, quite simply, does not appear to like Weil or her writings very much – ‘Since Weil is no poet, and evidently possessed a fairly limited

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<sup>140</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 151.

<sup>141</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, pp. 149-150. I will consider Nietzsche’s critique of the ‘slave morality’ he identifies with Christianity in more detail in chapter 7.

<sup>142</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, tr. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 175, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, p. 272.

<sup>143</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 157.

<sup>144</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 156.

imagination, her mystical writings are curiously argumentative and flat<sup>145</sup> – and finds it difficult to account for her popularity except in terms of ‘the spiritual vacuum of our century: the hunger to believe in virtually anyone who makes a forthright claim to be divinely guided’.<sup>146</sup> Oates shows in so much convincing detail why Weil’s writings are problematic that she finds it hard to account for her popularity: there is a danger that the complex motives and reactions of Weil herself, and of those who have found her work powerful, inspiring and compelling, are reduced to little more than a mixture of egoism, self-loathing, misogyny and religious obsession. But it is possible to bring greater theological subtlety to bear on Weil’s work while retaining the critical edge which we can see in Oates – an edge whose vital importance is demonstrated by her urgent closing question about Weil’s admirers:

Do they so crave ‘saintliness’ (in others, if not in themselves) that they will transform a sick, desperate, broken woman into a model of spiritual health; do they so crave ‘wisdom’ that they will accept the speculations of a greatly troubled mind as if these speculations were superior, in fact, to their own?<sup>147</sup>

### **Ann Loades: Placing Weil in the *Imitatio Christi* Tradition**

Ann Loades, in an essay subtitled ‘Why certain forms of holiness are bad for you’ engages with Oates’ question without resorting to an attack on Weil, and with a plea that we should recognise her work’s importance ‘for a critique of the egocentrism which infects our culture, and which is at odds with some Christian doctrines of coinherence, and for her unease with mere materialism and her hunger for elements of transcendence’.<sup>148</sup> Loades places Weil in the context of the *imitatio Christi* tradition in Christian theology, a contextualisation which functions simultaneously to help us to make sense of Weil’s life and work – by making links between it and more mainstream theology – and to call that tradition into serious question, simply by placing Weil, with all that we know about her life, within it. It is worth noting that this process of concurrent legitimisation and delegitimisation has, if successful, implications for the Wittgensteinians’ use of Weil too, validating their use of her work as source material for an account of what Christianity says about itself and, in the process, raising objections which they do not raise themselves to a religion which can be expressed in work like Weil’s. Although Loades’ treatment of Weil is more sympathetic than Oates’, she draws attention to similar problematic areas of her work, including some of the ‘rape’ passages

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<sup>145</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 156.

<sup>146</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 158.

<sup>147</sup> Oates, *The Profane Art*, p. 158.

<sup>148</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 46.

quoted above. While acknowledging the horror we should feel at such images, Loades describes them as examples of ‘the metaphors she had learned from a strand of the Christian tradition’,<sup>149</sup> metaphors which may enable the rationalisation of the kind of behaviour which Oates dismisses – too complacently, perhaps – as purely pathological, but which Loades points out ‘enabled her to inflict on herself, by accident, the kind of death she might have come to in a concentration camp’.<sup>150</sup> Loades is referring to a development of the Christian tradition which she describes as ‘a morbid over-identification with Christ as suffering victim’.<sup>151</sup> I have given numerous examples in this and the previous chapter of Christians, women in particular, who, like Weil, have drawn on the resources of the Christian tradition to read the commands of Jesus, and to understand the imitation of Christ, as requiring fasting, chastity, self-mortification, humility – in short, as requiring self-renunciation – and who have been honoured within the tradition as a result. Weil is not by any means alone in the Christian tradition in the way she describes her relationship with God, even if the role she plays in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, where the kind of Christianity she exemplifies is so often presented without a theological or historical context, might sometimes imply that she is. Loades writes, echoing Oates, that:

What seems astonishing is how the particular kind of Christianity that she represents can still be commended, not least by men, partly because she, as with other women, represents yet another idealization, this time of one who apparently succeeds in the attempt to kill off the ‘self’ that is supposed to stand in the way of union with God, the death of the self so that true life may begin.<sup>152</sup>

It is important to recognise that Weil really does represent a ‘particular kind of Christianity’ which has been widely influential, and widely followed. It is one in which pain and debasement are understood not as hardships to be avoided but, as in the lives of many of the mystics described here, as ways of achieving union with Christ through the death of the self. This union with Christ is frequently described in sexual terms in which submission to Christ is understood in terms of violent penetration and sexual submission to the bridegroom, resulting in the annihilation of the self. Loades comments that ‘Of the “imitation of Christ” tradition as it can sometimes be lived and died, I would want to say that it may be the last kind of Christianity that women are likely to need’.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 49.

<sup>150</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 49.

<sup>151</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 41.

<sup>152</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>153</sup> Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins*, p. 57.

## Phillips on Mysticism

The Wittgensteinians, and Phillips in particular, seem largely oblivious to these issues. I want to draw attention to a striking remark by Phillips, in *Religion Without Explanation*, which highlights his lack of interest in some of the issues arising from mystical visions which I have discussed in this chapter. He quotes the famous vision of Teresa of Ávila, quoted above, in which she is penetrated by a 'long golden spear' held by an angel, causing her pain 'so sharp that it made me utter several sharp moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it'.<sup>154</sup> Phillips describes this as 'but one instance, and a rather remarkable one, of what religion can make of the sexual in a person's life'.<sup>155</sup> He is certainly not wrong, but his use of Teresa's vision in a discussion of how best 'to understand how religions have transformed the lives of men [*sic*]'<sup>156</sup> seems to ignore a great deal of what is going on in the passage, not least some elements which might make us uneasy. If Phillips sees anything problematic in Teresa's vision, he does not say so. In this chapter I have been arguing that there is more to be said about Christian mystical visions with explicitly sexual content – particularly when that sexual content incorporates violence, coercion, pain and submission – than simply that they are interesting or remarkable. They have to be seen as problematic, both in the sense that they are symptomatic of frankly harmful approaches to theology and sexuality on the parts both of those who have such visions and of those who are happy to use them as devotional texts, and in the sense that the widespread Christian acceptance of such visions as theologically sound, or indeed as evidence of sanctity, is one part of a matrix of causal factors in perpetuating mainstream acceptance of female submissiveness in various areas of life, including sexuality. The Wittgensteinians do not so much oppose this contention as show no interest in it whatsoever. This may be an excusable omission so far as the mystics are concerned – I have discussed already the fact that the Wittgensteinians show little interest in Christian history, and argued that taking such an interest would give them valuable ammunition against those of their critics who complain that their account of authentic Christian belief bears little resemblance to Christianity in the real world. But similar issues are of course raised by the life and work of Simone Weil, a writer in whom Phillips can hardly be accused of showing insufficient interest, given that he uses her work to exemplify those elements within Christianity which he identifies as authentic and as lacking in

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<sup>154</sup> Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation*, p. 53.

<sup>155</sup> Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation*, p. 53.

<sup>156</sup> Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation*, p. 54.

superstition, false consolation and wishful thinking. The reason Phillips is not more sensitive than he is to the effects on Weil of her own commitment to a self-renunciatory Christianity – and therefore, by implication, to the effects of the kind of religious belief and practice his philosophy of religion presents as authentic – seems to be that evaluating particular religious and moral commitments in terms of their effects is ruled out by the Wittgensteinian method. Yet this refusal to consider such questions would be, to those who consider the effects of religious beliefs on those who hold them to be important, a significant weakness of the Wittgensteinian approach.

# III

## SAINTLINESS

# 7

## Saints, Self-Renunciation and Ethics

### Overview

I presented in part II some evidence in favour of taking Phillips' Wittgensteinian account of the content of religious belief and practice more seriously than many philosophers of religion have done, and also drew attention to some highly problematic issues raised by certain manifestations of self-renunciation within the Christian tradition – issues which have been of particular interest to feminist commentators. In this chapter I want to discuss the impact this evidence might have on our evaluation of the Wittgensteinian approach. Phillips himself, given the limitations imposed by his own methodology on the kinds of critical strategy which he himself deems legitimate, might well be able to reject the premises of the criticisms of those feminists and others who might see the manifest harms of some Christian renunciation of the self, discussed in chapters 5 and 6 in particular, as the basis for calling aspects of the Christian tradition into question. Yet this ability to reject such criticisms can help to bring out some of the less instantly apparent implications of Phillips' position, especially the relationship between the absolute and thoroughgoing nature of the demands made by morality and religion, and the absolute and thoroughgoing acceptance of those demands by many of those saints discussed in chapters 5 and 6. There are a number of ways in which this interpretation of the absolute demands of morality and religion might be called into question, and in this chapter I consider three. Firstly, from a virtue ethics perspective, Susan Wolf asks whether striving for sainthood is really desirable, in terms of the ability of the 'moral saint' to develop what we might describe as a healthily well-rounded character. Secondly, from a utilitarian perspective, the fact that personal self-renunciation can be harmful not only to the self-renouncing individual but to those around her may have an impact on the way we assess the behaviour of self-renouncing individuals. Thirdly, Friedrich Nietzsche gives an account, intended as a critique, of what he calls 'slave morality' and presents as central to Christian morality; there are some connections between Nietzsche's 'slave morality' and Phillips' account of authentic, self-renunciatory, morality and religious belief and practice. Where do these criticisms of self-renunciation leave the key Wittgensteinian claim that morality and religion should have nothing to do with self-interest? In order to discuss this question, I consider Zygmunt Bauman's account of

ethics in modernity, which links ethical theories based on self-interest with the removal of individual moral responsibility. While Phillips' mistrust of self-interest leads him to an emphasis on self-renunciation, Bauman's 'postmodern ethics' replaces self-interest with other-directedness. Bauman, like the Wittgensteinians, offers no detailed theoretical account of what this other-directedness might consist of; instead, he is content to trust the moral intuitions of 'ordinary people'. The work of Iris Murdoch, which shows a similar rejection of self-interest in morality and a similar willingness to trust in moral intuitions over ethical theory, has much in common with that of the Wittgensteinians, and Murdoch's explicit approval of Moore helps to strengthen my characterisation of the Wittgensteinian approach as having important connections with intuitionism. A Wittgensteinian willingness to trust in moral responses leads to a focus on the resources which go into building such moral responses, and in particular on those resources which might encourage a self-renunciatory approach to morality and religion.

### Evaluating Forms of Life

According to Phillips, and to the Wittgensteinians, we should beware of any assessment of any form of life or moral practice which seeks to impose external evaluative criteria (whether we do this to attack or to defend) rather than letting that form of life speak for itself. As Phillips says, 'the criteria of truth and falsity in religion are to be found within a religious tradition'.<sup>1</sup> If certain questions which seem obvious to us as outside observers are questions which do not make sense within the form of life which we are evaluating, then asking them is illegitimate within that form of life – they are evidence that what we are investigating does not fit into our evaluative categories. This does *not* mean, as Mark Addis thinks, that Phillips 'wishes to claim that an atheist could not find religious language comprehensible'<sup>2</sup> (on the contrary, in *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* Phillips explicitly rejects 'the thesis that religious belief can only be understood by religious believers'<sup>3</sup>); it does mean that an atheist's criticisms of religion, if made in atheistic terms, will not be compelling for the religious believer, and vice versa. The other side of this coin is that it *is* legitimate to make assessments of those who participate in particular forms of life using the criteria which are contained within those forms of life – even if these are criteria which we would not apply to our own lives or to the various forms of life in which we participate. Phillips therefore writes off certain

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Addis, 'D.Z. Phillips' Fideism in Wittgenstein's Mirror', p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, p. 11.

religious beliefs and practices as superstitious not because they are false in absolute terms (although they may be) but because they are not consistent with other beliefs held within the form of life of which they purport to be a part. There are two important consequences of this approach in terms of the evaluation of religion, as we saw in the discussion in chapter 5 of Phillips' paper 'Religion in Wittgenstein's Mirror'. The first is that it enables Phillips to construct what he sees as a consistent account of what authentic religious (in Phillips' work, specifically Christian) belief and practice consist of which, he can argue, because it is a philosophical rather than a sociological account, still stands irrespective of whether it reflects the belief and practice of most self-identified Christians. The second is that this account is immune from criticism which comes from outside Christianity – or rather, immune from criticism which is not conducted in Christian terms, whether or not it is Christians who are making those criticisms. Any attempt to attack Phillips' account of Christian belief in terms which do not play a part in that account, for example by arguing that Christians do expect God to grant them what they pray for, is of little interest to Phillips himself, and is not seen as a relevant or compelling criticism. And any attempted philosophical or scientific investigations of key Christian beliefs, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul or the possibility of miracle, are also irrelevant, since they fail to pay attention to the role such beliefs play in the Christian believer's life – a role which means that they are not treated as facts susceptible to philosophical or scientific investigation. As Phillips says approvingly of Wittgenstein, 'Wittgenstein's interest is in "practice", in the grammatical sense, not with how extensive practice (in the sociological sense of "what goes on") may be'.<sup>4</sup> Various philosophers of religion, as we have seen, have attempted this kind of sociological or philosophical debunking of Phillips' position, prompting the response that his position is not affected by their conclusions. Less common, however, have been attempts to criticise Phillips' account of religion in *moral* terms, such as Brian Clack's question, 'might not the ideal of dying to the self lead to a denial of all that is valuable about our lives?'<sup>5</sup> Grace Jantzen gives a sketch, without any detailed discussion, of what such an attempt might look like:

Phillips' appeal to the form of life of a community remains concerned only with how that form of life renders religious *beliefs* meaningful. For all that he offers a different account of how meaning and truth should be construed, he is at one with the rest of traditional philosophy of religion in its fixation on beliefs. The appeal to community is not in relation to a struggle for liberation and flourishing, but only in relation to the context of particular 'utterances' of

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<sup>4</sup> Phillips, 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism, and magic: a philosophical tragedy?', p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 102

religious believers. Although Phillips' approach offers him the opportunity to think differently of the religious symbolic as related to forms of life, he does not in fact do so.<sup>6</sup>

The focus in this thesis on the importance of self-renunciation in Phillips' account as a centrally constitutive and defining feature of authentic religious and moral belief and behaviour is intended to draw attention to the moral questions it raises – moral questions which are just as ruled out of consideration by Phillips as are the more common objections to his work, but which must matter if what Jantzen means by 'liberation and flourishing', or what Clack means by 'all that is valuable about our lives', are considered important.

Phillips can rule out moral critiques of his position on the same grounds that he rejects other critical strategies: while we, as outsiders, might see Christian self-renunciation as morally problematic, it is part of a form of life which, if we are not Christians (or even if we are self-identified Christians who disagree with Phillips' interpretation of Christianity), we do not inhabit. Christianity has its own internal morality which judges the believer; it is misleading to say that the believer can make moral judgements about her religion using external criteria while remaining within that religion: 'the believers wish to claim that it isn't they who measure the pictures, since in a sense, the pictures measure them; they are the measure in terms of which they judge themselves. They do not judge the picture'.<sup>7</sup> Criticising Christianity as harmful is just as irrelevant to Phillips as criticising Christianity on the basis that on the balance of probabilities it is likely that God does not exist. I noted in chapter 2 the four counterexamples Phillips brings to Foot's claim that 'the proper use of his limbs is something a man has reason to want if he wants anything';<sup>8</sup> physical harm is irrelevant to the Christian who takes seriously her duty to submit to God, and to her, what Clack sees as 'all that is valuable about our lives' is superficial, implying a concern for the self which is incompatible with a proper regard for God. Within the context of Christianity it does not make sense, so far as Phillips is concerned, to appeal to methods of moral reasoning which do not have a place in Christian discourse. As Brian Clack puts it:

If someone feels, say, that the symbolism of religion portrays women in a negative light, or that it is somehow morally unsound, that person is, according to the Wittgensteinian, in the position of Job, challenging the righteousness of the Lord, and to whom the Lord responded: 'Who is this that darkeneth

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<sup>6</sup> Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 122; see Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, pp. 9-10.

counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?<sup>9</sup>

This means that it is illegitimate to criticise Christians who appear to embrace the kind of self-renunciation Phillips describes as authentically Christian – most obviously, many of the saints, along with Simone Weil – from perspectives which do not accept the terms which those Christians would accept themselves. A good example of the ability of Christians to reject non-Christian criticism of saintly behaviour as failing to appreciate the internal logic of the Christian position or the self-understandings of those who subscribe to it can be found in a recent article by James Keating and David McCarthy:

St Rose of Lima and Martin de Porres, for example, are not happy in an Aristotelian sense, nor moral in Kantian or Utilitarian terms. The self-imposed suffering of Rose would be considered immoral, and much of Martin's concerns, for the health of vermin for example, would be considered wildly misguided. More damning for moderns, both look to a personal power that is not their own.<sup>10</sup>

For Keating and McCarthy to refer in a footnote at this point to Sara Maitland's essay 'Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience', which I discussed in chapters 5 and 6, is, given their argument here, quite astonishing. Maitland presents an angry indictment of the 'sado-masochism'<sup>11</sup> of a religious understanding which sees nothing wrong with, indeed glorifies, the behaviour of a young woman who abases and tortures herself in order to be worthy of being God's spouse. To characterise this as nothing more than a Kantian or utilitarian distaste for self-imposed suffering coupled with a (rather archly dismissed) modern atheistic individualism is at best a glib oversimplification and at worst a wilful refusal to take seriously feminist disquiet over the nature of the lives of certain saints and the implications of taking them as role models. Phillips' method similarly allows him to write off much of this kind of criticism as missing the point. And, we might ask, if reacting with horror to an interpretation of religion which appears to legitimise or even encourage self-abasement and self-torture is missing the point, what is the point?

### Phillips and Saintliness

A recurring argument in this thesis has been that there is very little to separate Phillips' moral philosophy from his philosophy of religion, either methodologically or in his conclusions. Phillips' method, despite an avowed commitment to leaving everything

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 115, quoting Job 38.2,4.

<sup>10</sup> James Keating and David M. McCarthy, 'Moral Theology with the Saints', *Modern Theology* 19 (2003), p. 211

<sup>11</sup> Maitland, 'Passionate Prayer', p. 137.

as it is, does leave the reader in no doubt that, so far as he is concerned, some ways of thinking morally and religiously are preferable to others, in that they make more sense – as opposed to being preferable because they are more comforting, say, or because they make life easier. Phillips’ objection in philosophy of religion to ‘false consolation’ (consisting, of course, of such illusions as a belief in the reality of reward or punishment in heaven or hell after death), the belief that religious belief is a good bet, has its counterpart in moral philosophy in his objection to the widely held belief that moral behaviour is good for you, in the sense that the agent will benefit in the long run from being good. Ways of thinking that make sense are those that do not place the agent’s benefit at the centre of the agent’s concerns when thinking morally and religiously. The true character of a religious outlook on life, or of a properly moral outlook on life, is self-renunciatory – and ‘moral’ and ‘religious’ seem, on this point, to be more or less interchangeable. This comes out well in the following comment by Phillips on the contemporary philosophical reception of the religious beliefs that we are all sinners, that we are all in need of grace, that the final judgement on where we stand must be left up to God:

We can see how difficult such an ethico-religious belief will seem to those who analyse morality in terms of what is required for successful co-existence. On this secular view, what is required of us is seen in terms of what is regarded as an average decency. The extraordinary, that which is found in saints and heroes, is thought of as supererogatory [*sic*]. In the religious case, what we are judged in terms of is a holiness that no one attains in its absolute purity. On one view, the good is what we, collectively, are said to need for social civility. On the other view, only God is called ‘good’.<sup>12</sup>

The key point is that according to the outlook against which Phillips consistently sets himself,<sup>13</sup> it does make sense both to place limits on what can reasonably be expected of human beings in both moral and religious endeavour and to think of that endeavour as aiming at certain consequences. Morality and religion place no such limits and have no such aims: they are not pragmatic; they have no thought for the morrow. It is notable that Phillips cites ‘saints and heroes’ as possessing qualities which are thought of as supererogatory on a secular view but as insufficient, however extraordinary they may be, within the ethico-religious approach to which he draws attention. This is an important point, because it gets to the heart of the argument which I discussed at the beginning of

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<sup>12</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 257.

<sup>13</sup> According to Phillips, he is merely in the business of elucidating, not of setting himself against anything of the passage I have just quoted, he says, ‘I may have a view as to whether the secular or the religious conception is the higher one, but, in advancing it, I would be speaking for myself’ (Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 257). It does seem fairly clear from Phillips’ writings, however, which conception he thinks is the higher one, and any claim to the contrary looks somewhat disingenuous.

chapter 5 between Phillips and his critics such as Swinburne and Tilley. Their claim was that Phillips' account of 'authentic' Christian belief and practice bears little relation to Christianity as it is believed and practised in real life. My defence of Phillips' position was, in essence, that even if it is true that the majority of Christians have not possessed the kind of self-renouncing faith that Phillips describes, nevertheless those Christians who have historically been, and continue to be, held up within institutional Christianity as exemplary believers – not just Weil and Kierkegaard and other 'odd ducks'<sup>14</sup> but, not to put too fine a point on it, the saints – do come close to embodying what Phillips argues for. It seems reasonable to argue that those who are venerated as saints are understood to be admirable and exemplary followers of the religion in which they are thus venerated, even if their special status points to the fact that most believers do not reach their level of devotion; we might say that the difference between saints and ordinary believers is, or at least ought to be, one of degree, not of kind.

The reason the saints – a category which may include some who are honoured as saints in religions other than Christianity, along with certain fictional characters and those whom John Coleman describes as 'uncanonized saints'<sup>15</sup> – are the aptest models of what Phillips seems to be describing as what proper moral and religious belief and practice amount to is that, for Phillips, there are no limits to the demands of morality and religion. One way of reading saintliness, I want to argue, is as a thoroughgoing acceptance of, and attempt to conform to, the logic of those demands, regardless of the consequences this may have both for the saint herself and for others. For Phillips, being good is not about being 'good enough' because nothing and nobody can ever be good enough to meet the standards we must set ourselves if we take morality seriously. This seems consistent with what saintliness involves: a refusal to see as decisive any pragmatic objection to doing one's moral and religious duty, coupled with a refusal to recognise one's extraordinary performance of one's moral and religious duty as worthy of particular praise. Self-satisfaction is not a mark of sanctity; if you think you deserve to be a saint, then you don't. To the saint, the fact that the duties morality and religion impose on us are in principle limitless means that we cannot pass those duties on to others, either by requiring others to act morally on our behalf or by making the duties we recognise as

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<sup>14</sup> Tilley, 'The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion', p. 351.

<sup>15</sup> Coleman includes Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Dag Hammarskjöld, Simone Weil and Etty Hillesum in this category of 'uncanonized saints', cites Graham Greene, George Bernanos, Flannery O'Connor and Ignazio Silone as examples of modern fiction writers who 'have provided us with hints of what ... hidden saints, revealing the work of the hidden God, might look like', and mentions Gandhi and Sathya Sai Baba as non-Christians who 'may be saints for modern Westerners'. John A. Coleman, S.J., 'Conclusion: After Sancthood?' in John Stratton Hawley (ed.), *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 222-223.

binding on ourselves into universal duties and therefore enabling us to see ourselves as morally superior to those who fail to meet them. Our own moral responsibility is limitless, and it does not depend on the attitude of others. The fact that we are unavoidably responsible for the results of our actions means that the saint refuses to recognise harm to the self, as opposed to harm caused to others, as real harm – one potential criticism of sainthood is of its inconsistency, as in this observation about Weil, whose attitude to herself differs so strongly from her attitude to others that it might be described as a form of hypocrisy, albeit not a remotely self-serving hypocrisy:

What she argues for in defense of ‘man’ she very rarely accords herself. She takes great pains to deny herself the duties that we owe every living being, duties that she actually catalogues in ‘Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations’.<sup>16</sup>

This inconsistency is not sanctioned by approaches to moral philosophy which rely on universalisability, but it might be seen as a form of what Michael Slote calls ‘self-other asymmetry’.<sup>17</sup> Such asymmetry ordinarily consists of the belief that ‘one may to a certain extent permissibly favour one’s own interests over those of other individuals’,<sup>18</sup> but in the case of saints it appears to work the other way: one can favour the interests of others over oneself, but one must not work for one’s own advantage. And a refusal to pursue ends other than the strict requirements of morality may have implications, in terms of virtue ethics, for the life of the individual and for the way we perceive the individual’s character.

### **Self-Renunciation and Virtue Ethics: Moral Saints**

The fact that a focus on individual personal rightness may not always make one a full participant in the life of the wider community in which moral life is lived is part of what leads Susan Wolf, in her article ‘Moral Saints’, to argue that ‘moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being towards which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive’.<sup>19</sup> Wolf describes a moral saint as one whose life is ‘dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole’.<sup>20</sup> This could be something which the saint enters into through genuine love of others (the ‘Loving Saint’), or it could be that ‘this person sacrifices his own interests to the interests of others, and feels the

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<sup>16</sup> Françoise Meltzer, ‘The Hands of Simone Weil’, *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001), p. 611.

<sup>17</sup> Slote, ‘From Morality to Virtue’, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Slote, ‘From Morality to Virtue’, p. 130.

<sup>19</sup> Wolf, ‘Moral Saints’, p. 419.

<sup>20</sup> Wolf, ‘Moral Saints’, p. 420.

sacrifice as such' (the 'Rational Saint').<sup>21</sup> In both cases the moral virtues the saint possesses 'are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character'.<sup>22</sup> And in both cases the failure to have or to respond to non-moral desires has a negative impact on our assessment of the saint's character:

The Loving Saint one might suspect of missing a piece of perceptual machinery, of being blind to some of what the world has to offer. The Rational Saint, who sees it but forgoes it, one suspects of having a different problem – a pathological fear of damnation, perhaps, or an extreme form of self-hatred that interferes with his ability to enjoy the enjoyable in life.<sup>23</sup>

Either way, we want to describe the saint as being deficient, as missing out on some of the most important aspects of being human – Wolf quotes George Orwell, in his 'Reflections on Gandhi', as saying that 'Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, there are qualities which we think it is good for human beings to have – a moral judgement, we might say – which are nevertheless not consistent with concentrating on being morally good to the exclusion of all other considerations. There is a parallel here with Sontag's distinction, mentioned in chapter 6, between exemplary lives 'which invite us to imitate them, and those which we regard from a distance with a mixture of revulsion, pity and reverence'<sup>25</sup> – Sontag places the lives of saints firmly in the latter category. We do not have to disagree with Wolf about the attractiveness of the moral saint's way of life to find something admirable about many who might qualify as moral saints. Indeed, part of what makes the moral saint's way of life admirable is its very unattractiveness – we can see that the moral saint is good, and can nevertheless see that the way in which that goodness is manifested necessarily rules out other goods, which might (or might not) make other ways of living preferable. A belief that Mother Teresa's life was admirable does not automatically commit us to going to work in the slums of Calcutta, or mark us out as hypocrites if we do not. Likewise, a decision not to go and work in the slums of Calcutta does not commit us to saying that there is something wrong with people who do. Much rule-based moral philosophy, though, can make it look as if there is an inconsistency here.

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<sup>21</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 420.

<sup>22</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 421.

<sup>23</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 424.

<sup>24</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 436 n. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Sontag, 'Simone Weil', p. 22.

Wolf's argument is directed against Kantian and utilitarian conceptions of ethics, which she claims both imply that we should aim to be moral saints of the type she criticises rather than well-rounded individuals. She argues that the strict utilitarian would be duty bound to do as much as possible to increase the general happiness through helping others, and able to justify pursuing non-moral interests only for as it were tactical reasons, insofar as those interests produced 'a more bearable public personality'<sup>26</sup> which would make her efforts in increasing the general happiness more successful. The saintly utilitarian's description of her non-moral interests as "a contribution to the general happiness" ... is to be contrasted with the various ways in which these aspects of life may be valued by non-utilitarians<sup>27</sup> – a contrast in which it is the non-utilitarians who appear to understand what it really means to value these aspects of life. Meanwhile, Kantianism seems to mandate a similarly perfectionist approach which similarly fails to do justice to the pursuit of non-moral qualities for motives other than duty:

Though the Kantian saint may differ from the utilitarian saint as to *which* actions he is bound to perform and which he is bound to refrain from performing, I suspect that the range of activities acceptable to the Kantian saint will remain objectionably restrictive. Moreover, the manner in which the Kantian saint must think about and justify the activities he pursues and the character traits he develops will strike us, as it did with the utilitarian saint, as containing 'one thought too many'.<sup>28</sup>

The result of this, for Wolf, is not necessarily a rejection of Kantianism or utilitarianism, but an acknowledgement that 'we have reason to want people to live lives that are not morally perfect' and that therefore 'any plausible moral theory must make use of the concept of supererogation'.<sup>29</sup> I noted above that according to the religious view outlined by Phillips – a view which is not presented as a moral theory – there is *no* act so good that it can be described as supererogatory. Wolf also concludes that any moral theory is, in itself, inadequate to give us complete and perfect guidance on our behaviour, and says that her argument suggests

a commitment to what seems to me to be a healthy form of intuitionism. It is a form of intuitionism which is not intended to take the place of more rigorous, systematically developed, moral theories – rather, it is intended to put these more rigorous and systematic theories in their place.<sup>30</sup>

There is a parallel here with the Wittgensteinian approach; in chapter 1 I described Wittgensteinian moral philosophy as a form of intuitionism. The denial of the need for

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<sup>26</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 428.

<sup>27</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 429.

<sup>28</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 431.

<sup>29</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 438.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 439.

universalisability is an important Wittgensteinian theme. It is one thing to say 'This is what I would do in this situation'. It is another, at least so far as the Wittgensteinians are concerned, to say 'This is what anyone should do in this situation'. This, of course, is what critics like O'Neill attack as missing the point of moral reasoning,<sup>31</sup> and what we saw in Winch's refusal to universalise moral judgements, arguing that he himself would not have condemned Billy Budd to death but that nevertheless Vere was right to do so.<sup>32</sup> This kind of strategy can be used, as it is by Winch, to make sense of different moral responses made in different cultural surroundings – in this case, one in which the death penalty is understood as a central means of maintaining military discipline, and one in which it is seen as disproportionate. But the strategy is also used, by Phillips, to defend a thoroughly selfless, self-renunciatory moral and religious outlook. Indeed, Phillips characterises such an outlook as possessing a proper understanding of the demands of morality and religion, unlike most contemporary ethicists and philosophers of religion. Phillips does not attempt to build a rigorous theoretical base for a moral philosophy which effectively demands sainthood – his preferred language is of 'conception' and 'picture' and 'opinions';<sup>33</sup> in his response to O'Neill's criticisms, discussed in chapter 1, he argues that 'the presumption of theory distorts and obscures the nuances and complexities involved in moral considerations'.<sup>34</sup> However, Wolf's intuitionism allows her to reject some of what she sees as the excesses of approaches to morality which seem to recommend forms of saintliness which ought not to be recommended. Phillips does not seem to have a problem with the fact that the outlooks he describes appear to see the extraordinary as normative and the ordinary as inadequate.

### **Self-Renunciation and Utilitarianism: The Case of Non-Violence**

There are various grounds for believing that the kind of saintly goodness described by Phillips as being a requirement of any morally serious attitude may well be called into question by its results – that the results of such an attitude might be harmful to those around the saint, and not just to the saint herself who is, of course, uninterested in personal prudential considerations. Coleman is surely right to observe that 'Despite William James' best efforts, saints do not quite pass any utilitarian test. Holiness is never really justified by its results'.<sup>35</sup> One way of exploring this is to return to Foot's claim,

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<sup>31</sup> O'Neill, 'The Power of Example', p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 257; *Death and Immortality*, ch. 4, pp. 61-78; *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Coleman, 'Conclusion: After Sainthood?', p. 212.

discussed in chapter 1, that ‘the supposition that injustice is more profitable than justice is very dubious’.<sup>36</sup> This is not a utilitarian claim, because it does not define goodness in terms of the results of actions, but it does imply that the kind of justice Foot is talking about would indeed be capable of being given a successful utilitarian defence. Phillips’ and Mounce’s response to Foot was to argue that injustice very often is, if measured in terms of worldly success, more profitable than justice, but that this is not evidence that we should be unjust.<sup>37</sup> Much of the behaviour, if not the motivation, described in approving terms by Phillips could be given a utilitarian defence. The idea that things ought sometimes to be given up as a means to an end – that you can’t always get what you want, or that some things you want can only be got through self-sacrifice – is entirely consistent with a utilitarian perspective which, as I argued in chapter 2, ultimately sees self-interest as the justification for ethical behaviour. The utilitarian advocacy of self-denial can be seen on a much larger scale, too, in arguments for the adoption of policies of principled passivity in the face of aggression. The justification goes something like this: non-violence will be a successful strategy for resisting aggression because the aggressor will be shamed into ceasing to be aggressive. This relies on the exploitation of the fact that the other party, despite pursuing an aggressive policy for, one presumes, self-interested reasons, nevertheless possesses a conscience: there are certain things which can still never be countenanced. In some circumstances, such as international relations, this ‘conscience’ may consist of public opinion within the ‘aggressive’ nation or nations, as well as the real consciences of their political leaders. The classic historical example of this is Gandhi’s non-violent campaign against British rule in India, which contributed to India achieving independence in 1947. There is a danger of historical misrepresentation (including the danger of presenting a one-dimensional view of Gandhi himself) in overstating the role of non-violence in India’s independence struggle. It is interesting to consider whose interests such misrepresentations serve. Salman Rushdie claims that Richard Attenborough’s 1982 film *Gandhi* ‘satisfies certain longings in the Western psyche’, one of which is

the liberal-conservative political desire to hear it said that revolutions can, and should, be made purely by submission, and self-sacrifice, and non-violence *alone*. To make *Gandhi* appeal to the Western market, he had to be sanctified and turned into Christ – an odd fate for a crafty Gujarati lawyer – and the history of one of history’s greatest revolutions had to be mangled.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 102. See also Mark Juergensmeyer’s discussion of western attitudes to Gandhi’s sanctity and his assessment of Attenborough’s

It is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest an element of British self-satisfaction arising from being able to claim that the British Raj was the kind of benevolent regime which was capable of being brought down by non-violent opposition – a regime with a conscience, unlike some others one could mention. We can see this kind of national pride in comments such as the following, from Niall Ferguson's history of the British Empire: 'In the end, the British sacrificed her [*sic*] Empire to stop the Germans, Japanese and Italians from keeping theirs. Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all the Empire's other sins?'<sup>39</sup> There are plenty of situations in which passive resistance would be utterly futile – the possibility of feeling self-satisfaction at responding positively to such resistance exposes the general inadequacy of a strictly non-violent policy, an inadequacy which Michael Walzer points out:

George Orwell ... wonders whether such a [non-violent] campaign would even be possible in a totalitarian state. 'It is difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard from again.' Nor would civilian resistance work well against invaders who sent out squads of soldiers to kill civilian leaders, who arrested and tortured suspects, established concentration camps, and exiled large numbers of people from areas where resistance was strong to distant and desolate parts of the country. Nonviolent defense is no defense at all against tyrants or conquerors ready to adopt such measures. Gandhi demonstrated this truth, I think by the perverse advice he gave to the Jews of Germany: that they should commit suicide rather than fight back against Nazi tyranny. Here non-violence, under extreme conditions, collapses into violence directed against oneself rather than at one's murderers, though why it should take that direction I cannot understand.<sup>40</sup>

This points to the existence of serious question-marks over the utilitarian efficacy of strategies of non-violence – and from a utilitarian point of view, which is the standpoint from which the justification I am considering arose in the first place, if a policy results in a net disutility, then it is immoral. Peter Singer argues, on the basis of research into the Prisoners' Dilemma, that a policy of non-retaliation can lead to harmful results, and not only for those who pursue such a policy:

Most of us think that turning the other cheek is a noble idea, even if too idealistic for this world. Consequently, we admire those who are prepared to act on it. If they are prepared to be struck on both cheeks, we think, they are the *only* ones who are likely to be worse off. Now we know that this is not so. To turn the other cheek is to teach would-be cheats that cheating pays. There is not much attraction in an ethic of turning the other cheek if the resulting

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film as 'an authentic recreation of the hagiography of [C.F.] Andrews, [John Haynes] Holmes and [Josiah] Oldfield', 'Saint Gandhi', in Hawley (ed.), *Saints and Virtues*, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 355.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 332.

hardship falls not only on those who allow themselves to be struck, but on everyone else as a whole.<sup>41</sup>

So we can identify a group of related objections to self-denying behaviour, not all of which would be recognised as objections from a Wittgensteinian perspective, but which ought, taken collectively, to raise serious question-marks over the suggestion that morality necessarily requires self-denial. First, self-denial will often lead not only to the self-denying individual's own personal disadvantage, but to a wider net disutility. In the political realm, the self-denial of certain individuals or groups may allow tyranny to flourish. Furthermore, where this is the case individual self-denial may constitute a failure to participate in collective acts of resistance to tyranny whose success is therefore jeopardised – personal self-denial may, in effect, be seen as a selfish act which enforces collective self-denial against the will of the majority. Sometimes, non-violent passivity may be the best strategy; on many other occasions it may not, and it may even work in the interests of those responsible for injustice, as Michael Rogin suggests in a discussion of the Black American civil rights movement:

Is it the case that by choosing to respond to injustice with New Testament agape, African Americans take on the sins of white people, continuing to carry the burden that Harriet Beecher Stowe placed on her Uncle Tom? (Negroes should stop being therapists for white Americans, the SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael insisted in the early days of Black Power.)<sup>42</sup>

The rhetorical force of this is not only in its exposure of the fact that it is not helpful to Black people for them to refuse to resist injustice, because it fails to exert any pressure on those who have the political power to change their situation, although of course this is true; equally important is that it is bad for white people that they are not made to face up to the injustices for which they are responsible. The description of passivity in the face of oppression as 'New Testament agape', however, points to the existence of an alternative strategy of justification to those outlined above, one suggested by Singer's contention that 'Most of us think that turning the other cheek is a noble idea'.<sup>43</sup>

### **Self-Renunciation and Genealogy: Nietzsche on 'Slave Morality'**

This second justification for principled forbearance, passivity and self-denial, one which does not rely on a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis and which possesses some

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Singer, *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 164.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Rogin, 'The Ugly Revolution', review of Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000), and Clayborne Carson et al (eds.), *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Vol. II: Symbol of the Movement January 1957-December 1958* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), *London Review of Books* 23/9 (10 May 2001), p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> Singer, *How Are We To Live?*, p. 164.

psychological plausibility, is simply that it allows you, whatever the cost may be, to retain the right to be described as good. This relies on the same moral response as that which gave the utilitarian justification its initial appeal: even if it is ultimately untrue to argue that aggressors will be shamed by non-violent opposition into changing their behaviour, the *potential* existence of shame in the face of such opposition points to the fact that aggression is widely perceived as bad, non-aggression as good. And it is possible to portray forbearance as good irrespective of the response it meets. This possibility is behind Nietzsche's attack on Christian morality which leads, he argues, to stultification and stagnation, a decline in the will to power – because this is perceived as evil – which results in *décadence* and self-satisfaction, and an emasculated deity:

When the prerequisites of *ascending* life, when everything strong, brave, masterful, proud is eliminated from the concept of God; when he declines step by step to the symbol of a staff for the weary, a sheet-anchor for all who are drowning; when he becomes the poor people's God, the sinner's God, the God of the sick *par excellence*, and the predicate 'saviour', 'redeemer' as it were remains *over* as the predicate of divinity as such: *of what* does such a transformation speak? such a *reduction* of the divine? To be sure: 'the kingdom of God' has thereby grown larger.<sup>44</sup>

Nietzsche's argument is bound up with his account of the origins of such a morality. He asks which qualities are perceived by Christianity as good, and notes with interest that many of them – humility, forgiveness, refusal to retaliate – are, conveniently enough, qualities which the weakest in society are ideally placed to display:

And the impotent failure to retaliate is to be transformed into 'goodness'; craven fear into 'humility'; submission to those one hates into 'obedience'... the inability to take revenge is called the refusal to take revenge, perhaps even forgiveness ('for they know not what they do – we alone know what *they* do!')<sup>45</sup>

There can be nothing virtuous, thinks Nietzsche, in a failure to do something which one is in any case incapable of doing; what Christianity does is to repackage and market this inability as noble forbearance, and thus virtue. If such qualities are good, it claims, then their opposites must be evil. But in fact this does not follow. It is not surprising, says Nietzsche, that the weak see themselves as good and the strong, those who oppress them, as evil;<sup>46</sup> not surprising, but still wrong. Christianity is guilty of making a virtue out of necessity.

Wittgensteinian approaches to morality and philosophy of religion are not, strictly speaking, genealogical, in that they do not contain historical investigation or

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<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 17, p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), I 14, p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I 13, p. 29.

speculation about the origins of contemporary moral and religious attitudes. They do, however, implicitly accept the legitimacy of such investigations, albeit by historians and anthropologists rather than by philosophers: they believe that our moral and religious attitudes are the product of our culture and upbringing rather than a reflection of universal, and therefore universalisable, truth. A frequent, but by no means universal, feature of genealogical approaches to morality is that they function as a more or less implicit critique of morality's present content. By finding an answer to the question 'where does this moral belief come from?' in particular historico-cultural events and trends, genealogies of morals expose, first, the contingency of moral attitudes and, secondly, in many cases the moral questionability of some of the causes of such attitudes. The latter is strictly, of course, philosophically suspect – it falls foul of the 'genetic fallacy' of confusing the origin of a belief or practice with its present meaning, and it might also be subject to a reflexive criticism from within the practice of genealogy itself: the moral attitudes we possess, which cause us to find certain historical reasons for contemporary moral attitudes morally questionable, are themselves subject to genealogical analysis and, therefore, critique. Nevertheless, genealogical critiques such as Nietzsche's can possess real rhetorical and moral force. Nietzsche can be accused, with some justice, of committing the genetic fallacy, and it is true that his account of the origins of Christian morality, for all its psychological appeal, is both historically implausible and, strictly, ruled out by his own assumptions, historical development being in his own terms untraceable since 'each new meaning or function effaces the last'.<sup>47</sup> For my current purposes, however, this historical account is less important than the striking parallels between certain aspects of Nietzsche's and Phillips' analyses of religion and morality. Nietzsche argues that a recognition that Christian theism is intellectually untenable – which so far as he is concerned is unavoidable, whether the consequences of that recognition are welcome or not – is a consequence of Christianity itself:

You see what it was that really triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor's refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price. Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and governance of a god; interpreting history in honour of some divine reason, as a continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purposes; interpreting one's own experiences as pious people have long enough interpreted theirs, as if everything were providential, a hint, designed and ordained, for the sake of the salvation of the soul – that is *all over* now, that has man's conscience *against* it, that is considered indecent and dishonest by every

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<sup>47</sup> Douglas Smith, Introduction to Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. xix.

more refined conscience – mendaciousness, feminism, weakness and cowardice.<sup>48</sup>

Nietzsche and Phillips both claim that looking at the world in terms of divine providence is unsustainable, and that an awareness of its unsustainability comes as a direct result of viewing the world according to Christian moral categories. For example, Phillips rejects attempts to justify evil in terms of a divine plan which will be revealed to us at the end of time on the grounds that, if we accept this explanation, then ‘God is condemned, for we believe that no consequences could justify torturing children to death’.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Nietzsche says that ‘we find that which has been revered as God not “godlike” but pitiable, absurd, harmful, not merely an error but a *crime against life*’.<sup>50</sup> Yet where Nietzsche sees this as evidence that belief in God is unsustainable, Phillips sees it only as evidence that belief in various characteristics commonly ascribed to God is unsustainable – as evidence for the need of religious believers to replace belief in a ‘natural’ god with belief in a ‘supernatural’ god.

Phillips’ understanding of authentic Christianity might fairly be characterised as demanding ‘intellectual cleanliness at any price’ – Christianity is preserved, but at the price that God does not act on our behalf in the world, will not answer our prayers, will not vindicate our belief in him by granting us immortality. A particular kind of moral behaviour is demanded by such a belief – and those characteristics Phillips identifies as constitutive of ‘true religion’ are very similar to characteristics Nietzsche sees as constitutive of ‘slave morality’. Nietzsche has the oppressed say to themselves:

Let us be different from the evil, that is, good! And the good man is the one who refrains from violation, who harms no one, who attacks no one, who fails to retaliate, who leaves revenge to God, who lives as we do in seclusion, who avoids all evil and above all asks little of life, as we do, the patient, the humble, the just.<sup>51</sup>

The morality which both Phillips and Nietzsche’s ‘slaves’ are espousing could be criticised as potentially highly damaging, both because of the likely results of behaving in such a way and, in Nietzsche’s terms at least, because forms of behaviour ruled out by such a morality may be more valuable. Nietzsche argues against Christianity on the grounds that, as Simon May puts it, ‘it engenders weakness, degradation and despair – and that its claim to foster love, light, and life is simply *false*’.<sup>52</sup> This does not look like an unreasonable characterisation of, for example, Weil’s words, quoted by Phillips, that ‘I

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 357, p. 307.

<sup>49</sup> Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 47, pp. 162-163.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I.13, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup> Simon May, *Nietzsche’s Ethics and his War on ‘Morality’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 39.

must love being nothing. How horrible it would be if I were something! I must love my nothingness, love being a nothingness'.<sup>53</sup> Of this, Brian Clack comments:

It just does not go without saying that such sentiments are not pathological. From the necessity of denying our self-centredness, need we really go this far? Does not this self-abasing, nothingness-seeking religion act as a confirmation of Nietzsche's suspicion that Christianity served only to destroy everything noble, everything vigorous and affirmative in human life, so that the Christian really was the 'sick animal man'?<sup>54</sup>

Nietzsche's criticism of the 'slave morality' which he identifies with Christianity as engendering 'weakness, degradation and despair' is closely tied to another, more subtle one, that, given that it consists of a series of refused responses to the actions of others, it is necessarily *reactive*:

In order to exist at all, slave morality from the outset always needs an opposing, outer world; in physiological terms, it needs external stimuli in order to act – its action is fundamentally reaction.<sup>55</sup>

One cannot forbear to act on someone else without having the option to act on someone else; one cannot forgive without having been offended against; one cannot submit without having someone or something to submit to. In other words, a morality which advocates passivity assumes that there will be agents who are not passive. This is of course a reasonable assumption to make, given the nature of the world we live in. But it implicitly concedes that the behaviour it demands is unattractive and incapable of commending itself to everyone – particularly given that the existence of some people who are prepared to forbear may make life easier for those who would prefer not to do so, and would rather prey on those who do. It necessarily means that the agent who is prepared to use force will always win (in her own terms, at least), it leaves the way open to tyranny and oppression, and it offers no resources to those who are oppressed except the knowledge that they are in the right.

### **Zygmunt Bauman and 'Ethics' in Modernity**

These three approaches to the kind of moral outlook Phillips seems to be advocating all call into serious question, and not merely for self-interested reasons, the idea that a self-renunciatory life is a desirable one to pursue: Wolf suggests that the 'moral saint' is likely to miss out on aspects of life which we rightly see as important: a utilitarian analysis suggests that the harm an individual's self-renunciation allows may well

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<sup>53</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 101, quoted in Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 221.

<sup>54</sup> Brian Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 103, quoting Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 3, p. 116.

<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I.10, p. 22.

be distributed more widely than seems morally acceptable; Nietzsche suggests that describing forbearance as a virtue is a highly convenient way of making the weak feel good about themselves. If the Wittgensteinian approach can yield at worst, an account of morality and religion which looks like Nietzsche's stripped of any element of critique, is there a way of rescuing its insights so that the rejection of self-interest can avoid looking simultaneously (intellectually) self-serving and (materially) self-destructive? One potentially successful way of doing this may be found in the recent work of Zygmunt Bauman, who operates firmly in what might be described as a Nietzschean, or Foucauldian, tradition, but whose key distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality' enables him to insist on the need for morality to distinguish itself from self-interest without thereby equating it with self-renunciation. The ethics/morality distinction is made as a convenient way to distinguish between two distinct approaches to the question of what we ought to do and how we ought to reason about it. The distinction is implicit, I think, in Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, although they do not use the same terminology (nor, of course, do many other philosophers,<sup>56</sup> which means that it probably should not be used outside the context of discussing Bauman's work). 'Ethics', according to Bauman, 'is the concern of philosophers, educators and preachers'.<sup>57</sup> The instinctive agreement to this which we might expect to be forthcoming from philosophers, educators and preachers is likely to be tempered by the implication Bauman seeks to draw from it: meanwhile, morality is the concern of everybody else – or at least it ought to be, but this fact is obscured by the focus on ethics of philosophers, educators and preachers. By 'ethics', Bauman means systems and codes designed to rationalise and enforce certain standards of behaviour:

Properly ethical statements are such as do not depend for their truthfulness on what people are actually doing or even on what they believe they ought to be doing. If what ethical statements say and what people do or believe are at odds with each other, this is assumed to mean, without need of further proof, that it is the people who are in the wrong. Only ethics can say what *really* ought to be done so that the good be served. Ideally, ethics is a code of law that prescribes good behaviour 'universally' – that is, for all people at all times; one that sets apart good from evil once for all and everybody.<sup>58</sup>

This is contrasted with 'morality' which, precisely because it operates independently of such ethical codes, involves the use of conscience and the exercise of responsibility.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Ricoeur employs a very different morality/ethics distinction, which he uses to differentiate between what he sees as an Aristotelian teleological perspective and a Kantian deontological perspective: 'It is, therefore, by convention that I reserve the term "ethics" for the *aim* of an accomplished life and the term "morality" for the articulation of this aim in *norms* characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effort of constraint' (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 170).

<sup>57</sup> Bauman, *Life in Fragments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, p. 11.

Bauman's account of the morality/ethics distinction relies on a genealogy of ethics in which culture or society – the level, of course, at which the Wittgensteinians seem to see moral normativity as residing – is equated with force and coercion (in Bauman's own terms, with 'ethics' rather than with 'morality'). This genealogy is in part a critique of attempted rational justifications of morality – attempts which Bauman, as much as the Wittgensteinians, thinks are intellectually unsustainable but, importantly for his approach, nevertheless potentially successful so far as winning assent is concerned. There are parallels here with the feminist critique, which I discussed in chapter 3, of the notion of 'absolute truth' as the epistemological basis of an unquestionable cultural system of male dominance and the unchallengeable oppression of women, although Bauman himself shows little interest in discussing feminism.

While Bauman's description of 'ordinary people who just go on doing things while applying rules of thumb they cling to (often without as much as being able to tell clearly what those rules are like)<sup>59</sup> is strongly reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian claim that principles such as 'lying is wrong' are rarely found in normal discourse, even (or, perhaps, especially) among people whose lives are characterised by truthfulness,<sup>60</sup> the Wittgensteinians tend to see the ethicists they criticise as being engaged in a pointless exercise which is utterly divorced from real life and real moral choice. Bauman's ethicists are much more important, and much more dangerous, than this. Their authority is 'legislative and juridical at the same time'.<sup>61</sup> One result of the fact that ethicists' appeal to reason as the foundation of ethics is doomed to *intellectual* failure is that the ethics they promulgate does not automatically commend itself to the rest of us. It is not, as they claim, universally and straightforwardly attainable (of course, if it were then they would be redundant – this might be a useful clue as to the viability of their project):

First to delegitimize or 'bracket away' moral impulses and emotions, and then to try to reconstruct the edifice of ethics out of arguments carefully cleansed of emotional undertones and set free from all bonds with unprocessed human intimacy, is equivalent (to use the memorable metaphor of Harold Garfinkel) to saying that if we could only get the walls out of the way we would better see what supports the ceiling.<sup>62</sup>

But intellectual failure is not *political* failure – and the ethicists' project of discovering a rational basis for ethics has practical consequences. The rational basis for ethics, in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and other theorists of the relation between the individual and

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<sup>59</sup> Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips and Mounce, *Moral Practices*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 35.

the state (among more recent thinkers we could name Rawls as an influential example), is in effect (whether or not it is made explicit) that ethical action coincides with self-interest. But while this ought to be attainable by every reasonable person, the category 'every reasonable person' is actually rather a small group of people – it consists, in fact, of philosophers, whose task it is to tell the rest of us what our interests/the good (the same thing, of course) consist of; the content of morality must, since most people are not capable of working it out for themselves, be couched in the form of law and enforced as such. This makes us morally irresponsible, for two reasons. First, because the primacy of self-interest means that we no longer have any absolute, as opposed to contingent, responsibility towards others; second, because the responsibility for making moral decisions has shifted from ourselves as individual humans to the state, which we ought (for self-interested reasons – the state is conceived of as acting in the interests of all its members) to obey, so that 'the individual was freed from all obligations towards other human beings (except, that is, those spelled out and enforced by the sole power competent to legislate "the law of the land")'.<sup>63</sup> Bauman argues:

Despite the fact that reason is every person's property, the rules promulgated in the name of reason are to be obeyed after the pattern of submission to an overwhelming external force. They can be best thought of in the way we think of laws legislated by authorities armed with coercive means to enforce their instructions. Though the justification for being moral is ruggedly individualistic and autonomous – it refers to self-love and self-interest – the actuality of moral behaviour can only be secured by the heteronomous force of Law.<sup>64</sup>

We could add, of course, that this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: obeying the law is, in any state where the law is properly enforced, in the self-interest of the agent. Ethics is equated with rationality in part by excluding difference, by denying that there may be more than one possible answer to a given moral problem. One of the defining features of 'ethics' identified by Bauman – and one which we saw the Wittgensteinians criticise too – is its desire to be universalisable. Morality, unlike ethics, simply cannot be universalised in any meaningful way: 'reciprocity is the vital attribute morality does not possess – but should possess if one wished it to be universalizable'.<sup>65</sup> The universalisability essential, in different ways, to the ethics of Kant, Hare and others discussed above is problematic because even though it does not in itself contain the means for its own enforceability it does implicitly demand them, and it does involve denying the legitimacy of non-universalisable moral strategies. Kant's question at the

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<sup>63</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>65</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 56.

beginning of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, ‘Do we not think it a matter of the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy completely cleansed of everything that can only be empirical and appropriate to anthropology?’<sup>66</sup> would receive a clear ‘No’ from both Bauman and the Wittgensteinians because of its effectively totalitarian implications. Real, as opposed to theoretical, reciprocity gives a duty to the other, and this is incompatible with morality. As Bauman says, “‘I am ready to die for the Other’ is a moral statement; ‘He should be ready to die for me’ is, blatantly, not’.<sup>67</sup> This is somewhat different from Winch’s objection to universalisability, that while he was prepared to argue that he ought to behave in a certain way in a certain situation he was not prepared to extend this into a claim that anyone else, in a relevantly similar situation, should do the same<sup>68</sup> – Winch’s discussion does not consider the duties of another to *me* – but it clearly comes from the same stable. It is claims for universalisability which identify ethics with law and, in turn, with force – and which distinguish it from personal responsibility, from true moral choice, and from morality itself. Universalisation ‘may take no other form than that of the substitution of heteronomous, enforced-from-outside, ethical rules for the autonomous responsibility of the moral self (and that means nothing less than the incapacitation, even destruction, of the moral self)’.<sup>69</sup> The Wittgensteinians seem less concerned than Bauman with the political implications of supposedly universalisable, rational ethics, being content to dismiss them as intellectually bankrupt. We might say that for the Wittgensteinians, the problem with ethicists is that they do not achieve anything; for Bauman, the problem with ethicists is that they do. What they achieve is to convince people that ethics and morality are the same thing, and therefore remove from them the responsibility to think morally. The result of their success is what Bauman calls modernity.

Bauman’s book *Modernity and the Holocaust* challenges conventional wisdom about the nature of the Holocaust. Bauman argues that far from being an aberration, the systematic extermination of Europe’s Jews is ‘fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world – and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society’.<sup>70</sup> The Holocaust, for Bauman, is a natural product of the modernist project, in which individual moral decision-making is replaced with technical, task-oriented, problem-

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<sup>66</sup> Kant, ‘Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals’, p. 55 (p. 389).

<sup>67</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 51.

<sup>68</sup> Winch, *Ethics and Action*, pp. 151-170.

<sup>69</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 8.

solving reasoning, and the moral responsibility can be passed by any given individual within the bureaucratic structure either up, to those (relatively few) giving the orders, or down, to those (again, relatively few) murdering human beings, to the extent that *everyone* can with some plausibility deny that they have a full picture of what is going on, that they are responsible for what is going on, or – importantly – that, given the size of the bureaucratic structure in which they work, any act of resistance or non-cooperation on their part could have even the remotest effect on the end result, apart from needlessly damaging their own personal chances of survival.<sup>71</sup> Bauman describes the way in which even Jewish community leaders were co-opted into the process of their own extermination, both making the process easier and, through their cooperation, inadvertently giving legitimacy to the goals at which the process was directed.<sup>72</sup> It is important to Bauman's argument that the Holocaust is not a unique instance in modernity of serious moral and political results arising out of the collapse of moral responsibility. Would workers in arms factories feel any responsibility for the deaths of babies killed by napalm in the Vietnam War?

Of course they wouldn't. And there is no bureaucratic reason why they should. The splitting of the baby-burning process in minute functional tasks and then separating the tasks from each other have made such awareness irrelevant – and exceedingly difficult to achieve. Remember as well that it is chemical plants that produce napalm, not any of their individual workers.<sup>73</sup>

The response of the factory workers is both plausible and correct – yet at the same time morally irresponsible. This is not because they are irredeemably bad people but because moral irresponsibility is a defining condition of modernity. We are conditioned to pass on, up or down, the moral responsibility for taking the moral responsibility for our actions – and the result is that we are prepared to contemplate actions which are morally wrong but which are technically possible and will lead to politically useful ends. The collapse of moral responsibility makes the pursuit of such otherwise unattainable political ends possible, and the day-to-day reality of what we contemplate is masked from us by the hierarchical bureaucratic structure we inhabit. Succumbing to moral irresponsibility is, however, not inevitable, as the Holocaust again shows. We know that some – relatively few – people did not participate in the Nazi bureaucracy of extermination, and

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<sup>71</sup> See for example Adolf Eichmann's statement to his interrogator: 'All my life I have been accustomed to obedience, from early childhood to May 8 1945 – an obedience which in my years of membership in the SS became blind and unconditional. What would I have gained by disobedience? And whom would it have served? I never, at any time, played an essential, decisive role in the events from 1933 to 1945; for that my rank and functions placed me in far too low a position'. Jochen von Lang and Claus Sibyll (eds.), 'The Transcripts of Eichmann Interrogated', tr. Ralph Mannheim, *Granta* 6 (1983), p. 203.

<sup>72</sup> Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, pp. 117-150.

<sup>73</sup> Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 100.

that acts of rescue did take place. Why? Bauman's answer is that 'the rescuers were willing to rescue because this was their nature'.<sup>74</sup> In effect, despite ethics, morality survives.

The substitution within ethics, and within the project of modernity in general, of political – coercive – ascendancy for intellectual sustainability is part of what shows its failure. Modernity's attempt to bring everything into rational control, to describe and evaluate everything in ways which cannot be rationally opposed – a project which, because it is intellectually untenable, can only succeed through force and coercion – is doomed. 'Postmodernity', then, for Bauman, is the state he considers us to have no choice but to inhabit if we are intellectually honest: recognising the failure of the modernist project to provide explanations which are, even in principle, universally applicable and capable of winning universal assent. If this is unavoidable, then we must see it as a great opportunity: 'Postmodernity, one might say, is *modernity without illusions* (the obverse of which is that modernity is postmodernity refusing to recognise its own truth)'.<sup>75</sup> Thinking for ourselves, moral responsibility, is the cost of liberation from those who seek to do our thinking for us – or from impersonal structures which remove from all of us the need to think. Bauman argues that 'the end of the "ethical era" ushers in the "era of morality" – and that postmodernity could be viewed as such an era'.<sup>76</sup> Postmodernity is linked, in Bauman's thought, to autonomy – the ability to make moral decisions for ourselves – on the grounds that one of the roles played by ethics, associated of course with law, coercion and force, is to remove our moral responsibility:

Contrary to one of the most uncritically accepted philosophical axioms, there is no contradiction between the rejection of (or scepticism towards) the ethics of socially conventionalized and rationally 'founded' norms, and the insistence that it does matter, and *matter morally*, what we do and from what we desist. Far from excluding each other, the two can be accepted or rejected only together. If in doubt – consult your conscience.<sup>77</sup>

The ability and the responsibility to think for ourselves go hand in hand, and both are militated against by modernity.

### **Self-Renunciation and Other-Directedness**

The claim that self-interest has nothing to do with morality is more radical than it might first appear: so far as Bauman is concerned, morality does not, as universalising

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<sup>74</sup> Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 32.

<sup>76</sup> Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, p. 42.

<sup>77</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 250.

theories of ethics allege, redirect self-interest, but brackets it out of moral discussion altogether. But Bauman takes this insight in a very different direction from that of the Wittgensteinians. Bauman sees morality not as *self-renunciatory* but as *other-directed*:

Responsibility being the existential mode of the human subject, *morality is the primary structure of intersubjective relation* in its most pristine form, unaffected by any non-moral factors (like interest, calculation of benefit, rational search for optimal solutions, or surrender to coercion). The substance of morality being a duty towards the other (as distinct from an obligation), and a duty which precedes all interestedness – the roots of morality reach well beneath societal arrangements, like structures of domination or culture.<sup>78</sup>

This difference in focus, on what might well be seen as two sides of the same coin, has important and far-reaching conclusions. There are a number of serious-looking problems with presenting self-renunciation as the ideal standard for, or the logical conclusion of, proper moral and religious practice. I noted, in the light of feminist arguments, that it involves the encouragement of humility and submission, including for those who are already, generally speaking, humble and submissive. Indeed, by virtue of its failure to challenge or question certain forms of power, it seems to allow the possibility of leaving space in which tyranny can enter and operate – self-renunciation makes life easy for those who are not inclined to be self-renunciatory. In a Christian theological context, these problems are particularly apparent when self-renunciation is expressed in sexual terms: when submission is understood as a feminine characteristic, idealised as proper female behaviour in all areas of life and in sexual relations in particular, and institutionalised as a dominant-submissive hierarchy in sex and elsewhere which tends to reinforce female subordination – problems which the defenders of self-renunciation find it difficult to criticise coherently, or even in many cases to recognise as problems. Another area of critique, clear in Nietzsche's assault on 'slave morality' and present in some commentary on Weil, the desert fathers and the mystics, is of the narcissism of some ostensibly self-renunciatory behaviour: the fact that a self-conscious self-renunciation can actually be self-serving. Self-renunciation focuses, necessarily, on the self – it is easy to forget that anyone else is involved in moral life and that anyone else is affected by our moral decisions and actions. Without a consideration of the other, self-renunciation can collapse all too easily into self-obsession – because there is nobody else in the picture. Yet morality only matters at all because we have to live with others, in community – and modernity's focus on self-interest makes such communal living more difficult, because self-interest's attitude to the Other must necessarily be one of

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<sup>78</sup> Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 183.

suspicion. Self-interest, at worst, minimises the risk of our getting hurt at a potential cost to those with whom we interact. When used as the basis of a universalising system of ethics, it distorts our duties into universal duties and coerces others into performing them. Self-renunciation, at worst, minimises the risk of our hurting others, of doing evil, at a great potential cost to ourselves, a cost which is no longer thought to matter because it is outweighed by the self's greater need to be able to claim, whatever else happens, to be good. Other-directedness seems to me to avoid both of these pitfalls: everyone matters morally – importantly for self-interest, including you, and importantly for self-renunciation, including me. Bauman describes the Other in modernity as 'he who, at best, is the prey on which the self can feed to replenish its life-juices, and – at worst – thwarts and sabotages the self's constitution'.<sup>79</sup> It seems to me that a Wittgensteinian self-renunciatory approach accepts this basic analysis of the nature of the Other and extends it to cover the self as well. It rejects modernity's solution of erecting barriers to defend oneself against the Other, but fails to propose any alternative. In other words, self-renunciation involves a rejection of the option of preying on the Other, and an acceptance of the possibility of being thwarted and sabotaged. Diminishing the agency of a self which is understood as predatory and threatening to others, as self-renunciation seems to seek to do, might well look like a good thing. Even better, however, might be to seek to change the self into something whose relationship with the rest of the world falls somewhere in between self-renunciation and self-obsession. This requires trust – in oneself, and in others.

### **Intuitionism, Necessity and Mysticism: Iris Murdoch**

Bauman never offers a systematic theoretical account of what morality consists of; indeed, he rejects the possibility of creating systematic theoretical accounts of morality. In this sense, he could be fairly characterised as an intuitionist, along with Wolf and indeed, because of his similar rejection of systematic theoretical accounts of ethics, Phillips himself. There do seem to be affinities between Bauman's embracing of other-directedness, Wolf's 'healthy form of intuitionism',<sup>80</sup> in which common sense dictates that certain extreme manifestations of moral behaviour which interfere with the possibility of living a full and well-rounded life should be avoided, and the intuitionism of Phillips' moral and religious outlooks. As I argued in chapter 1 Phillips' account is intuitionist insofar as it does not rely on theoretical accounts, but what it commands

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<sup>79</sup> Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 85.

<sup>80</sup> Wolf, 'Moral Saints', p. 439.

looks very similar to the behaviour of Wolf's 'moral saints'. A feature of intuitionism is that it sees the good as something to be *discovered* rather than to be *decided upon* (whether this is construed as the discovery of something real or as the acknowledgement that certain beliefs must follow from certain other beliefs whether the agent likes it or not), and therefore assumes that the good cannot depend upon an individual agent's will. One way of exploring the intuitionism of Phillips and the Wittgensteinians is to look at some connections between their moral philosophy and that of Iris Murdoch. Like that of the Wittgensteinians, Murdoch's moral philosophy is indebted to the writings of Simone Weil, in both her moral realism, which involves a rejection of the ego, and her use of the concept of 'attention', as she acknowledges in *The Sovereignty of Good*.<sup>81</sup> This leads, as it does for Phillips, to a concern for the effacement of the self. According to Byrne, in Murdoch's work 'Moral experience becomes something involving loving attention to realities outside one's own ego and entailing the daily fight against the ego's demands and perceptions and for spiritual purification. Moral reality becomes something mediating a transcendent, perfect and necessarily real object of attention'.<sup>82</sup> As Murdoch says, 'In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego'.<sup>83</sup> She describes moral philosophy as 'properly ... the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion'.<sup>84</sup> Much contemporary moral philosophy, however, is egoistic and assumes or provides for individual autonomy. This colours Murdoch's attitude to Kant, just as it coloured the Wittgensteinians' attitude to such thinkers as Hare and Foot:

We are still living in the age of the Kantian man, or Kantian man-god ... Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy. The *raison d'être* of this attractive but misleading creature is not far to seek. He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal; and since he is not a Hegelian (Kant, not Hegel, has provided Western ethics with its dominating image) his alienation is without cure. He is the ideal citizen of the liberal state, a warning held up to tyrants. He has the virtue which the age requires and admires, courage. It is not such a very long step from Kant to Nietzsche, and from Nietzsche to existentialism and the Anglo-Saxon ethical doctrines which in some ways closely resemble it. In fact Kant's man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, p. 100.

<sup>83</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 52.

<sup>84</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 52.

<sup>85</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 80.

The Kantian man (the fact that he is a *man*, which was part of the feminist critique of such theories described in chapter 3, does not seem to interest Murdoch) makes his own ethical decisions and is the master of his own destiny. His self-reliance leads, both in the British empirical tradition and in existentialism, to an ‘Unambitious optimism’ in which ‘Contempt for the ordinary human condition, together with a conviction of personal salvation, saves the writer from real pessimism’.<sup>86</sup> We can make links, through Murdoch’s use of Weil, between this mistrust of optimism and similar features in Wittgensteinian thought. The self-centredness of individualistic ethical systems helps the ego to create and maintain fantasies which work against the possibility of properly moral behaviour: ‘The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one’.<sup>87</sup> What Murdoch means by fantasy is similar to what the Wittgensteinians describe as ‘false consolation’, and there are strong parallels with Wittgensteinian concerns in her claim that ‘In the case of morality, although there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place’.<sup>88</sup> Murdoch links fantasy with the will and contrasts it with loving attention:

What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called ‘will’ or ‘willing’ belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.<sup>89</sup>

This attention is self-denying precisely because the fantasy with which it is contrasted is self-aggrandising, and because it is necessarily an attention to something other than the self, over which the self can have no control. Given that the self cannot control reality, or decide for itself what the Good consists of, ‘The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like “obedience”’.<sup>90</sup> Given that the true, the real, the Good is something independent of the self, something to which it must be obedient, the ability to perceive it is ‘automatically at the same time a suppression of self’.<sup>91</sup>

There is a close connection between morality and religion in Murdoch’s thought. This can be seen first in one important element of her critique of self-centred individualistic ethical systems: that in their assertion of the primacy and adequacy of

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<sup>86</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 50.

<sup>87</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 59.

<sup>88</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 67.

<sup>89</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 67.

<sup>90</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 66.

human will they ‘have no adequate conception of original sin’.<sup>92</sup> Murdoch claims that in what she identifies as their basic optimism Sartre and Heidegger, along with twentieth-century Oxford and Cambridge moral philosophy, ‘contrast with the vanishing images of Christian theology which represented goodness as almost impossibly difficult, and sin as almost insuperable and certainly as a universal condition’.<sup>93</sup> Murdoch is identifying her position with religion and against humanistic moral philosophy. This might be seen as somewhat problematic for her, however, since she also thinks that belief in God is no longer tenable. According to Byrne, ‘Murdoch gives every appearance of being committed to a version of the secularisation thesis whereby belief in God and the gods is now impossible for “us”, that is modern, Western intellectuals’.<sup>94</sup> She speaks of the present age as one in which ‘traditional supernatural religious beliefs fade, and seem to be *inevitably* superseded by scientific and technological conceptions of human existence’.<sup>95</sup> It is the scientific overthrow of traditional religious beliefs which makes the consolation they offer false – and the objection to false consolation is also, as it is for Weil and the Wittgensteinians, a moral objection. The problem is that ‘Almost anything that consoles us is a fake’<sup>96</sup> – the ‘almost’ is important, but so is the basic mistrust of consolation. God is not necessarily a *false* consolation, because ‘we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things that are valuable’,<sup>97</sup> but even so God is still a *consolation*, and ‘As soon as any idea is a consolation the tendency to falsify it becomes strong: hence the traditional problem of preventing the idea of God from degenerating in the believer’s mind’.<sup>98</sup> Murdoch’s understanding of what counts as false consolation, and therefore of what religious belief and practice may and may not consist of, is very similar to that of Weil and the Wittgensteinians. For example, Murdoch argues that ‘Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love’.<sup>99</sup> In the now inevitable absence of God, the same sort of loving attention – this time to the Good – is still necessary for the avoidance of the different kinds of false consolation provided by overambitious accounts of scientific progress and by individualistic, self-aggrandising accounts of ethics.

For Murdoch, the contemplation of and attention to the Good is very similar to the religious contemplation of and attention to God – at least to the proper religious

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<sup>92</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 47.

<sup>93</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>94</sup> Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>95</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 426.

<sup>96</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 59.

<sup>97</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 56.

<sup>98</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 57.

<sup>99</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 55.

contemplation of and attention to God as described by Weil and the Wittgensteinians. The idea of God is nevertheless for Murdoch one which is capable of being productive and useful – or rather, even if it is no longer able to be productive and useful for *her*, given her status as a modern, Western intellectual, one whose value she can recognise. Indeed the idea, or something like it, should remain at the heart of moral philosophy:

God was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*; and ... moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics.<sup>100</sup>

The Good, in effect, takes God's place.<sup>101</sup> Murdoch's approach might be described as a kind of non-religious mysticism:

Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience.<sup>102</sup>

While this may well cause problems for modern, Western intellectuals, Murdoch argues that 'The virtuous peasant knows, and I believe he will go on knowing, in spite of the removal or modification of the theological apparatus, although what he knows he might be at a loss to say'.<sup>103</sup> How will he do this? Murdoch's answer is that he will draw on alternative resources which he will be able to understand: 'I do not think that the virtuous peasant will be without resources ... There will doubtless be new superstitions'.<sup>104</sup> The problem here is not just with Murdoch's category of 'virtuous peasant', which it might be kindest to describe as dated, but with the general idea that for a certain set of people, which does not include Murdoch, new superstitions will be required to take religion's place in the (still necessary) justification of morality. The best way, for most people, to deal with the death of religion is to come up with new stories (presumably equally intellectually untenable ones) to do the job religion used to do. If Murdoch is committed to the position that religious belief is now impossible for modern, Western intellectuals, we might say that this is equally true of Phillips. What is important to recognise about this, however, is that for Phillips it is not a statement of atheism so much as a criticism of modern, Western intellectuals, who are no longer capable of

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<sup>100</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 55.

<sup>101</sup> Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion*, p. 104.

<sup>102</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 74.

<sup>103</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 74.

<sup>104</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 74. Murdoch does not develop the concept of 'superstition' in any detail, and does not appear to mean the same as Phillips does in using the term; here it means something like 'stories and beliefs which are not true but which govern behaviour'.

seeing religious belief in properly religious terms – and, insofar as Phillips is a modern, Western intellectual, it might also be seen as a statement of regret. The problem with intellectuals is that they intellectualise things – things which will break if they are pushed too hard, but which are not designed to be pushed in the first place.<sup>105</sup> Given this, there is perhaps a resemblance between Murdoch's championing of the 'virtuous peasant' and a tendency in Phillips' work to reject certain criticisms of ordinary believers who fail to apply rigorous critical techniques to their own beliefs and practices – techniques in which Phillips and other philosophers have been trained and which it is impossible for them, in good conscience, to refuse to apply. We might say that intellectuals and ordinary believers inhabit, in Wittgensteinian terms, different forms of life or moral practices, and that it is impossible to be part of both of them at once.

Murdoch's contention, which she shares with Moore, that the Good must be both real and 'indefinable and non-representable',<sup>106</sup> depends on the claim that '*Good, not will, is transcendent*':<sup>107</sup> that the self is inadequate as a source of moral value and that moral value must therefore come from an external source which it is the job of the self to attend to and contemplate. Moore's importance to Murdoch can be seen in a passage at the beginning of *The Sovereignty of Good* in which she sums up what she sees as the key features of Moore's position before stating her agreement with them:

A great deal has happened since he wrote, and when we read him again it is startling to see how many of his beliefs are philosophically unstatable now. Moore believed that the good was a supersensible reality, that it was a mysterious quality, unrepresentable and indefinable, that it was an object of knowledge and (implicitly) that to be able to see it was in some sense to have it. He thought of the good upon the analogy of the beautiful; and he was, in spite of himself, a 'naturalist' in that he took goodness to be a real constituent of the world. We know how severely and in what respects Moore was corrected by his successors ... on almost every point I agree with Moore and not with his critics.<sup>108</sup>

This is not to say that there are not significant points of disagreement between Murdoch and Moore, whom she sees as 'the frame of the picture'<sup>109</sup> of modern ethics, a picture she largely rejects. I do not want to rehearse now the serious and justified criticisms the

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<sup>105</sup> See for example Phillips' criticism of William James' unsuccessful attempts at scientific investigation of occult phenomena, that 'James never thought of asking whether the failure to fit the phenomena in question into a theoretical framework, might be due to a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of these phenomena' (*Recovering Religious Concepts*, p. 175), or his attack on Swinburne, Mackie and Roberts as the 'Friends of Cleanthes' who assume that the word 'God' refers to an object, and that it makes sense to try to find out whether this object exists or not and in principle to come up with either a definitive answer or one based on a balance of probabilities – but in fact they have not 'looked hard enough at religious movements in determining the logical grammar of the word "God"', (*Recovering Religious Concepts*, pp. 63-81).

<sup>106</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 69.

<sup>107</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 69.

<sup>108</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>109</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 3.

intuitionists received, except to say that I would describe their main weakness as a late-Victorian, Imperial-era failure to realise that trusting ourselves and others to think morally is not the same as assuming that everybody's reactions are, or ought to be, the same. But Moore's intuitionism is something he shares with Murdoch and indeed with Weil, Phillips and the Wittgensteinians, along with a number of other thinkers discussed in this thesis including some virtue ethicists, feminists and postmodernists. And a feature of intuitionism is a deep scepticism about the worth, and suspicion of the results, of certain forms of philosophical reflection. Brian Hutchinson complains about Moore's tendency, which he has in common with Murdoch, as we have seen, as well as with Wittgenstein ('don't think, but look!'<sup>110</sup>) and Phillips, to emphasise unmediated knowledge over rigorous philosophical and empirical investigation and analysis:

His impatience with dialectical thinking, so odd in one who is himself a master dialectician, suggests that the proper procedure for understanding the world is not to investigate and analyze, but simply to *wait* for the insight that sets everything right. This is to abandon the way of the philosopher for the way of the mystic, or perhaps for the person who does not think very much.<sup>111</sup>

If Hutchinson is right that intuitionism, mysticism and simply not thinking very much sit closely together, then – assuming that simply not thinking is not a desirable trait in those who make it their business to think – any attempt to negotiate the territory they inhabit requires great care.

### The Power of Example

Murdoch's somewhat unfortunate claim that 'the virtuous peasant' will need 'new superstitions' as resources to draw on in understanding the nature of the good has some similarity to the Wittgensteinian claim that our moral and religious responses are a result not of theory-driven reasoning but of our cultural surroundings, the way we learn language and make connections between words and stories, real and imagined events in the world and their moral and religious meanings. Bauman's mistrust of philosophers who prescribe codes of law and remove the responsibility for thinking morally from 'ordinary people' who are in fact perfectly capable of moral behaviour also resembles this sort of view. A major problem with the intuitionism of Moore, Prichard and Ross was their apparent assumption that our knowledge of the good was 'absolutely underivative or immediate',<sup>112</sup> that we all know, really, what we ought to do in any given situation.

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<sup>110</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 66, p. 31c.

<sup>111</sup> Brian Hutchinson, *G.E. Moore's Ethical Theory: Resistance and Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>112</sup> Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', p. 27.

This is a problem the Wittgensteinians avoid by their emphasis on language and culture and their willingness to allow that different people may legitimately have different moral responses, but it means that we should pay attention to the way in which such responses develop, to the stories and concepts on which people draw in order to build a moral and religious understanding of the world. What stories might ordinary believers draw on to illustrate the proper nature of moral and religious belief and practice, as understood by Phillips and the Wittgensteinians? Such stories should reflect the self-renunciatory character of morality and religion. Good moral stories should reject the idea that properly moral behaviour produces good results or is in my interests, or that anything I do could be 'good enough'. Helpful religious stories should point towards the need for complete dependence on a God who is conceived of not as an all-powerful 'policeman in the sky' who will answer my prayers, reward the good and punish the wicked but as a standard of perfection against which I will always be found wanting and from whom everything is an undeserved gift, the rejection of any idea that I am owed anything. Where might such stories be found?

In fact, as I have been arguing, there are plenty of stories like this, and I have presented some of them in chapters 5 and 6: Antony, fasting in his cave in the desert; Benedict, composing and living by his Rule of renunciation of the world and obedience to God and the Abbot; Francis of Assisi, renouncing his inherited wealth and founding an order committed to living in poverty and chastity; John of the Cross, praying for annihilation; Hadewijch of Antwerp, united with Christ in a mystical vision so that 'nothing any longer remained to me of myself';<sup>113</sup> Angela of Foligno, meditating on Christ's broken and tortured body and expressing her desire for a viler death than that suffered by Christ and his saints; Rose of Lima, punishing her flesh and humbling herself, eventually becoming worthy of a 'mystical marriage' to Christ; Simone Weil, praying for paralysis and insensibility, dying after refusing to eat more than her Nazi-occupied compatriots. These, and any number of comparable stories, are of course inspired by Christ's own submission to suffering, torture, crucifixion and death, as well as his commands to his followers to disregard worldly concerns, to renounce possessions, to humble themselves, to take up their cross and follow him. And these, and any number of comparable stories, have of course been enormously influential for Christians who have sought to understand what is required of them if they want to live a proper Christian life. It is worth comparing the accusation by philosophers of religion such as

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<sup>113</sup> *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, Vision Seven, p. 282, quoted in Petroff, *Medieval Women's Mystical Literature*, p. 15.

Swinburne that Phillips' account of the content and implications of religious belief bears little resemblance to Christianity as it is understood by Christians, with the complaint by feminist theologians that Christianity has historically encouraged Christians, and women in particular, to be self-sacrificing at the cost of their psychological and physical health. The Wittgensteinian account of authentic religious belief and practice, which their critics deny exists, looks very like the feminist account of the Christianity which feminists see as widely influential and worthy of being challenged. The difference, of course, is that the Wittgensteinians, unlike feminists, have no interest in challenging it, and indeed lack the methodological resources to do so.

If we reject the Wittgensteinian refusal to condemn various forms of self-renunciatory religious and moral belief and practice, does this entail a wholesale rejection of Wittgensteinian methodology? I want to argue that it does not, and that the Wittgensteinian approach is able to give a convincing account of how we come to hold certain beliefs, and in particular of the proper philosophical content of such beliefs. Central to this account is the contention that in order to make sense moral belief must reject self-interest and religious (or at least Christian) belief must have a core self-renunciatory component. Nevertheless, this is the kind of insight which should cause disquiet to philosophers and theologians who are less temperamentally inclined to see their job as nothing more than descriptive, or indeed to those who are unable, for reasons of personal commitment, to maintain a Wittgensteinian distance from the religion they want to study and evaluate. In particular, it should raise questions for those involved in pastoral care. Certain responses to the kind of behaviour the Wittgensteinians, and Phillips in particular, seem to see as properly moral or properly Christian are, like morality or Christianity themselves on a Wittgensteinian account, not theory-driven. Sontag's claim that 'No one who loves life would wish to imitate [Weil's] dedication to martyrdom nor would wish it for his children nor for anyone else whom he loves'<sup>114</sup> is surely just true for most people, notwithstanding Phillips' resistance to anything which could be interpreted as a prudential consideration; the same goes for Coleman's observation of the scandalous nature of certain aspects of the lives of many of the saints, including St Francis, that 'No one today raises children to be this kind of saint, and perhaps parents never did'.<sup>115</sup> If so, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion's suggestion that Christianity, followed properly, might well call for such behaviour points

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<sup>114</sup> Sontag, 'Simone Weil', p. 22.

<sup>115</sup> Coleman, 'Conclusion: After Saunthood?', p. 211.

to its potential value as a critical resource for Christians and others who wish to draw attention to some of the problematic implications of Christian theology.

Phillips sees religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as highly demanding, as requiring standards of behaviour which may very well be impossible to attain. Religious belief has an 'absolute character', which means that "Be ye perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect" makes a deeply impressive and, perhaps, puzzling demand on us. To water it down is like thinking that what God asks of us is to do our best!<sup>116</sup> It clearly goes without saying, for Phillips, that the idea that what God asks of us is to do our best is, from a religious perspective, a ludicrous one – the demand for perfection is just that, and to fail to reach perfection is to fail to fulfil the demands of religious belief. The fact that human beings will necessarily fail to reach perfection is beside the point. Yet might not a recognition of this fact lie behind, for example, Angela of Foligno's inability to 'imagine a death vile enough to match my desire'?<sup>117</sup> I drew attention in chapter 3 to what some feminist theologians have identified as the dangers, especially for women, associated with an understanding of sin as being primarily a matter of pride and selfishness, contrasted with a selfless love which seeks only the good of the other. And in chapter 6 I suggested that the normalisation within Christian theology of certain kinds of 'saintly' visions and actions, notably by women, serves to mask the harm which certain manifestations of religious belief, such as severe fasting, self-mutilation and visions of violent sexual contact with the divine leading to the annihilation of self, can do both to the saint herself and to those around her – indeed, that it extends the boundaries of moral and religious normativity within the surrounding culture. This, in turn, can make certain forms of imitation of such actions look like a normal part of religious life – and of course, if something looks like a normal part of religious life, then it probably is. The danger of holding up Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, Rose of Lima or Simone Weil as praiseworthy is that people might imitate them; the danger of taking a Wittgensteinian approach is, firstly, that it is prepared to accept that their behaviour may be held up as praiseworthy and, secondly, that it refuses to recognise the consequences of imitating them as harmful. The problem with my argument here, from a Wittgensteinian point of view, is that it uses terms which come from outside the religion it seeks to criticise, and that it should therefore be irrelevant to the way in which members of that religion assess their own beliefs and behaviour. Phillips is keen to distance himself from any attempts to criticise religion, or at least from attempts to

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<sup>116</sup> Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>117</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, p. 128, quoted in Hollywood, "Beautiful as a Wasp", p. 232.

criticise religions and religious forms of life which are internally consistent and not superstitious. As he says, 'I have nothing against theological reform, but it is different from the philosophical reflection I am concerned with'.<sup>118</sup> Yet we could argue that even if Phillips does not see himself as the one to do it, his work suggests, much more than the work of many of his critics in the philosophy of religion, a need for theological reform which he and they do not see. After all, I have argued on historical as well as philosophical grounds that much of the criticism Phillips has received for his claim that in order to make sense religious (or at least Christian) belief must have a core self-renunciatory component is misplaced. The great strength of the Wittgensteinian approach is the account it gives of how we come to hold certain beliefs, and of the character those beliefs have as constitutive of certain ways of thinking rather than as the conclusions of certain rational thought processes. If Phillips is right about the nature of the content of those beliefs – and I am inclined to think that his account does far more justice to the role religious belief plays in the life of the religious believer than do the accounts of many of his philosophical contemporaries – then his account constitutes a serious challenge for Christian theology, even if he does not intend it as such.

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<sup>118</sup> Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, pp. 242-243.

# Conclusion

## Part I

This thesis has identified and discussed a central feature of Wittgensteinian ethics and philosophy of religion, displayed in particular in the work of D.Z. Phillips, namely the importance placed on self-renunciation as constitutive of authentic moral conduct and religious belief and practice. Part I of the thesis described the nature of Wittgensteinian ethics, its key features and its place in contemporary moral philosophy. In chapter 1 I traced the emergence of the Wittgensteinians as a distinctive group in moral philosophy. The Wittgensteinians defined themselves against some key thinkers in post-war British ethics, notably R.M. Hare and Philippa Foot. Against Hare, they argued for the importance of the limits set by language and culture over moral decision-making, rejecting the idea that the individual is free to set her own ethical maxims and make her own moral decisions. Against Foot, they denied that properly moral behaviour was in the prudential interest of the agent, and argued for a strict separation between morality and advantage. I explained the Wittgensteinians' rejection of the fact-value distinction, and made some connections between their position and intuitionism. I discussed the important criticisms made by Onora O'Neill, that the Wittgensteinian position entails moral relativism and moral conservatism, and the Wittgensteinian response that ethical theory, construed as an aid to moral decision-making, fails to do justice to the reality of moral dilemmas.

Having situated Wittgensteinian ethics in the context of the debates in which Wittgensteinian philosophers chose to engage directly, in chapter 2 I examined the wider context, considering a set of highly influential, related ethical theories which consider ethics to depend, in one way or another, on the redirection of self-interest, and emphasising the distinctiveness from this approach of Wittgensteinian ethics, which rejects any consideration of self-interest as having anything to do with morality. This led to a discussion of another influential approach in contemporary moral philosophy, virtue ethics, whose emphasis on the role of the virtues in self-development and building good character looks to the Wittgensteinians to be dangerously prudential. I argued that virtue ethics, especially as described in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, has important methodological similarities with the Wittgensteinian approach, and that therefore a feminist critique of MacIntyre which drew attention to ways in which particular cultural definitions of the virtues could be exclusionary, by construing 'the good life' in a way

which is not equally accessible to all members of the culture in question, could be applied to the Wittgensteinians as well.

In chapter 3 I built on this by identifying some parallels between Wittgensteinian and feminist assumptions about the role of culture and language in influencing our moral responses, and made a key distinction: feminists use this as the basis of a critique of culture and language, while the Wittgensteinians do not. I discussed the possibility of making the kind of absolutist critique of culture and language which feminists want to make from the relativist perspective which feminists' rejection of many of the values embodied in the cultures and languages they criticise forces them to take. I went on to examine some issues arising from Phillips' work, criticising him for showing a lack of awareness of the ways in which moral responses rooted in language and culture can oppress women in particular. This led to a discussion of the way in which the Wittgensteinian rejection of self-interest can be read as an exhortation to self-abnegation, thus making feminist critiques of such self-abnegation relevant to any assessment of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy. I made a connection between this philosophical discussion of self-abnegation and Valerie Saiving's identification of the widespread Christian understanding of sin as characteristically selfish and love as characteristically self-giving. The critique of this understanding by Saiving and other feminists, that the theological emphasis on the goodness of humility has been profoundly harmful to women in particular, led me to a more in-depth consideration of self-renunciation.

## **Part II**

Chapter 4 began with a discussion of the role of the concept of self-renunciation in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, focusing in particular on Phillips' work. I argued that the methodology used within Wittgensteinian ethics applied equally to Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, and drew attention to some of the ways in which Phillips' writings in the philosophy of religion displays the same concerns and assumptions as his writings in ethics. I examined Phillips' use of the concept of 'superstition', and its importance as a limiting category which helps to identify those religious beliefs, practices and reactions which are not superstitious. Phillips' understanding of prayer and of immortality, and his reliance on the work of Simone Weil, show the centrality of self-renunciation in his philosophy of religion, a feature of his account of religion which has been criticised on the grounds that it is not a true picture of the beliefs of most Christian believers.

This critical strategy was discussed in more detail at the beginning of chapter 5, where I argued that Phillips' self-consciously philosophical rather than sociological response to his critics, and his claim that his account of authentic religion pays attention to what makes sense, and not to what religious believers actually believe, gives his critics too much credit. In fact, as I showed, there is a great deal of empirical evidence that self-renunciatory behaviour has been central to Christianity throughout its history, at least in the lives and writings of those Christians who have been considered the most admirable and worthy of imitation by their contemporaries and successors. I presented some of that evidence, drawing on New Testament sources as well as on accounts of the lives of the saints and the growth of monasticism. I also drew attention to the fact that Christian self-renunciation has included certain forms of extreme ascetic and self-mortifying behaviour, much of which can be seen as highly physically damaging and theologically problematic.

Chapter 6 examined some serious problems with ways in which some Christian self-renunciation has been expressed and performed. I pointed out that much Christian asceticism, particularly the renunciation of sexuality, has been a manifestation of theologically sanctioned misogyny. Christian mystical literature, particularly that written by women, frequently contains erotic elements using sexual metaphors involving male dominance and female submission, in which encounters with the divine look like violent forced sex and in which union with God and the renunciation, indeed annihilation, of the self are closely linked. The metaphors of 'bride of Christ' and 'mystical marriage' appear to rely on an understanding of marriage in which the power relationships involved are highly unequal. This led me to an extended discussion of Weil, of her importance to Phillips' account of authentic religion and of issues in her life and writings which suggest strong parallels with the problematic elements previously identified in medieval women's mysticism, in particular the way in which she was able to give theological justification to her belief in her own insignificance, and the way in which her commitment to self-renunciation was implicated in her death. I considered some feminist responses to Weil's life and work, and showed that Phillips seems largely oblivious to their concerns, and to the problems posed by these issues in the Christian mystical tradition in general and in Weil's life in particular.

### Part III

In chapter 7 I argued that Phillips' methodological rejection of the possibility of criticism of a form of life in terms which come from outside the discourse of that form of life should not make that form of life immune from moral critique. I discussed various critical strategies which might still be possible if we take the Wittgensteinian approach to ethics and philosophy of religion seriously. Given that, for Phillips, the demands of morality and religion are both absolute and limitless, it seems that saintliness is, in effect, what is demanded by his Wittgensteinian account of ethics and philosophy of religion. I considered three ways in which this counsel of perfection might be criticised in terms which even a Wittgensteinian might find convincing. First, I examined Susan Wolf's argument, from a virtue perspective, that the 'moral saint' is not an ideal to which we ought to aspire. Next I showed that in utilitarian terms self-renunciation can be criticised on the grounds that it harms not only the agent herself (who denies that this is morally significant) but those around her as well. Finally I drew parallels between Phillips' account of authentic Christianity and Nietzsche's account of the role of Christianity in encouraging 'slave morality'. The possibility of making these criticisms seems to arise from Phillips' assumption that a morality which is not self-interested must be self-renunciatory; I attempted to call this assumption into question by comparing Phillips' account of morality with that of Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman's genealogy of morality yields a critique of the focus on self-interest of much contemporary ethics as removing moral responsibility from the individual and placing it in the hands of the state; I explored his alternative to self-interest, which is not self-renunciation but other-directedness. I argued, developing a claim I made in chapter 1, that many of the thinkers discussed in this chapter so far, including Bauman, Wolf and Phillips, can be characterised as intuitionist in their rejection of certain kinds of moral reasoning, and explored this claim by discussing the work of Iris Murdoch, another thinker sympathetic to intuitionism and, like the Wittgensteinians, deeply influenced by Simone Weil. In Murdoch's ethics mysticism and intuitionism seem to go closely together, and the same might be said of Phillips.

Phillips' account of self-renunciation can be supported not just by his philosophical argument that it follows consistently from taking other moral and religious beliefs and assumptions seriously, but also by the moral and religious stories which have been used by Christians to exemplify proper Christian behaviour, many of which have been presented in this thesis. But if we take those stories seriously, then there are good

reasons to see Phillips' account as morally questionable, even if it is philosophically correct. And if his account is philosophically correct, then we ought to be more uneasy than Phillips is himself about the nature of authentic morality and religious belief.

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