Hermeneutics and moral imagination: the implications of Gadamer's truth and method for Christian ethics

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HERMENEUTICS AND MORAL IMAGINATION:

The Implications of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* for Christian Ethics

by

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Abstract

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This study considers the implications for Christian ethics of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (in particular, his hermeneutics as presented in *Truth and Method*). The adequacy of moral deliberation based on autonomous moral reasoning to complex dynamic situations is challenged, as is the Enlightenment conception of abstract, universal rationality. Two major theses are proposed. First, that ethics (including Christian ethics) should adopt a stance that is properly *hermeneutical*: taking proper account of ethics' embeddedness in history and tradition; and abandoning hope of a universal or objective standpoint from which to make ethical judgements. Second, that human beings are fundamentally *imaginative* moral beings: imagination is central to ethics because it is central to language and reason.

Legalism and utilitarianism are critiqued as examples of the dependence of ethics on notions of absolute truth and universal method. Gadamer's T*ruth and Method* is considered, highlighting areas of relevance to ethics. In response to Gadamer's observations on the centrality of language to hermeneutics, the work of Mark Johnson in cognitive science is explored in detail. The centrality of imagination to moral reasoning and to conscience is noted; and parallels are drawn between conscience and taste. It is proposed that a proper emphasis on the metaphorical nature of moral language, together with a notion of reason (and of moral deliberation) that is essentially imaginative, accord better with the phenomenology of ethical deliberation than the traditional accounts and also allow for more flexible responses.

The implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Johnson's moral imagination for Christian ethics are explored in relation to creation, incarnation, revelation and inspiration. The study concludes that a properly hermeneutical Christian ethics would allow a greater role for the imagination in moral deliberation and provide a system which is flexible, creative, and humane, and which properly reflects the goodness and beauty of God.

Contents

Abbreviations

MA	John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision and Truth* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991).
MI	Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
TM	Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1960], trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 2nd, revised ed, 1989).

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Chapter One

Introduction

In this thesis I will explore the implications for Christian ethics of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (in particular, his hermeneutics as presented in *Truth and Method*[1]). I hope to demonstrate that thorough and explicit attention to the hermeneutical dimensions of ethical thought can yield important insights into our ethical understanding and moral reasoning. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the continuing contemporary discussions of the problems of modern ethical systems by challenging some of their assumptions and suggesting an alternative emphasis and approach.

Gadamer's hermeneutics seem to be simply assumed by many authors (for example Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*[2]) but it is rare to find any explicit reference made to his work or any rigorous examination of the implications of hermeneutics for ethics. Although hermeneutical principles have found their way into American philosophy, Gadamer's work does not seem to have been well known in America until comparatively recently. This appropriation of hermeneutics at second hand may explain some apparent aporias in much modern ethical writing. Gadamer himself suggests that his work may have been marginalised because of the 'technological animosity to history', the rise of analytic philosophy, the Anglo-American theory of science, and the fresh impetus of the social sciences towards statistical and formal methods, in the latter half of the twentieth century.[3]

1.1 Abstraction

Ethical decisions affect some of the most important and value-laden areas of our lives and our relationships with others; yet we are denied any affective dimension to our deliberations by many contemporary ethical theories. Ethics is to be an objective, quasi-scientific, discipline: all subjective considerations (feelings, emotion, imagination), all agent-relative deliberations, and all context-relative features are to be excluded. This

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1 *TM*.

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985).

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Afterword' [1989], in *TM*, 551-79, at 551.

flies in the face of our everyday moral experience. Instinct and common sense tell us that our lives and interrelationships with others are complex and dynamic: it feels inappropriate to deny our feelings and passions in relation to decisions about our lives and relationships when they are often the things that motivate us most strongly. Passions and emotions *matter*. We regularly find ourselves in situations where we feel that a perfectly good rule should not be applied 'on this occasion' or where there seems to be simply no good alternative. Ethics is about concrete choices; it can feel very artificial or heartless to consider moral deliberation in the 'abstract'

I suggest that the abstraction of moral principles (whether rules, rights, duties, consequences or whatever) from the context of action, and from human experience and emotion, constitutes a serious defect in any system of moral thought. Many modern ethical theories have attempted to describe rules that apply in all cases, or a procedure for determining the 'right' action or the 'right' choice in any given situation. However, in their attempts to turn ethics into a rational scientific discipline such theories have abstracted the ethical decision making process into an objective and dissociated method.

However, ethicists have long been aware of the need to take proper account of the context of ethical problems. John Dewey and James Tufts, observed (in 1908):

> Of one thing we may be sure. If inquiries are to have any substantial basis, if they are not to be wholly up in the air, the theorist must take his departure from the problems which men actually meet in their own conduct. He may define and refine these; he may divide and systematize; he may abstract the problems from their concrete contexts in individual lives; he may classify them when he has detached them; but if he gets away from them he is talking about something which his own brain has invented, not about moral realities.[4]

Some degree of abstraction may be required in our ethical thinking, but only as a tool of analysis. When faced with a deeply contextual ethical choice with a range of morally relevant factors and a network of relationships one has to begin somewhere, and abstracting certain features of the situation for consideration may be indispensable. However, it is crucial to remember that such abstraction is a means and not an end. The results of ethical reflection on such abstracted features must surely be weighed against other possible approaches and fed back into the context to inform an ethical judgement. No single approach, based on the abstraction of particular features, can hope to provide a judgement that is properly relevant even to the situation under consideration let alone

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[4] Quoted in Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (London: S.C.M., 1966), 159.

to other, or all, similar situations. In my opinion, much ethics since the Enlightenment has been characterised by progressively increasing abstraction and has signally failed adequately to address 'the problems which men actually meet in their own conduct'.[5] In order to achieve their aim of universal (or even just wider) applicability ethical systems can only be very general in their prescriptions or proscriptions. As the systems become more general, they are of less and less direct practical use. They also lose their purchase on moral agents, becoming less and less able to motivate ethical decisions. Where are the strong sources of moral 'something-or-other' that will allow us to draw the kinds of ethical conclusions that carry enough moral weight to inspire people to live accordingly? My sense is that intellectual (rational) suasion is not enough, and that affective and aesthetic suasion are needed, which suggests that ethics will need to find its roots in affectivity and aesthetics, as well as reasonableness. Much contemporary ethics has focussed on the last of these three (with a particular notion of 'reasonableness'), with the result that frequently we are unable to explain to ourselves why we think some kinds of acts are morally valuable and others morally objectionable.

1.2 Modernity and rationality

There are many ways of reading the Enlightenment but arguably one dimension of it is not so much the simple triumph of reason, but the completion of the process of dissociating the reason from the will and the passions, such that they can be contraposed in the way that David Hume does (reason as the slave of the passions). R. A. Shiner suggests that:

> The bulk of moral epistemology in the history of philosophy has been dominated by the model of the essential separation of Reason and Sentiment as possible sources of moral judgement ... We are not going to make any further progress (in meta-ethical theory) until we give up the Great Divide between Reason and Sentiment.[6]

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[5] The term 'Enlightenment' is increasingly contested: concerns have been expressed that different countries experienced different 'Enlightenments'; different commentators would date the Enlightenment differently and would include different authors as representative figures. I am using the term with its commonly accepted meaning: the intellectual movement beginning in England in the seventeenth century with Locke and the deists and developing in France and Germany in the eighteenth century. The term is roughly equivalent to 'the Age of Reason'. See M. J. Inwood, 'Enlightenment', in Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 236-37.

[6] R. A. Shiner, 'Butler's Theory of Moral Judgement', in S. C. Brown (ed.), *Philosophers of the Enlightenment* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979), 199-225.

The standard account of modernity sees it arising with the seventeenth century insistence on rationality, together with a rejection of tradition and superstition: this scientific and philosophical revolution was instigated by Galileo and Descartes and produced a world of physical theory and technical practice. Stephen Toulmin suggests that, in fact, the roots of modernity go back rather earlier, to the Renaissance humanists: e.g. Erasmus and Rabelais in the fifteenth century, Montaigne and Shakespeare in the sixteenth.[7] Descartes' philosophy was a response to Montaigne's restatement of classical scepticism: 'unless some one thing is found of which we can be completely certain, we can be certain about nothing'.[8] Montaigne believed that such a thing could not in fact be found, and that we simply cannot attain to certainty. Descartes found certainty in his *cogito* (the certainty of existence offered by mental experience). Modernity, Toulmin suggests,

> had two distinct starting points, a humanistic one grounded in classical literature and a scientific one rooted in 17th-century natural philosophy.[9]

However a great deal of humanist insight was lost in the seventeenth century. With the Enlightenment, reason became the supreme authority. The basic presupposition of Enlightenment rationalism is that we can, by the exercise of our reason alone, discover everything there is to know about the world and ourselves, including religion and ethics. The Enlightenment emphasis was on 'scientific method', on validation, and on the search for 'univocity'. Reason is the sole arbiter; human beings are no longer to be subject to any external authority. Cartesian dualism was to become the 'chief girder in [the] framework of Modernity':[10] natural phenomena were increasingly explained in mechanical terms and rationality came to be seen as the distinguishing feature of human beings. However, human beings were characterised as mixed creatures: part *intellectual* in their exercise of reason, part *carnal* in their susceptibility to emotion. Human beings must strive to control unruly passions by the exercise of a decontextualised rationality.

Toulmin suggests four ways in which philosophy after Descartes set aside humanist concerns in relation to practical knowledge.[11] First, the move from the oral to the written: validity of arguments came to depend on the analysis of chains of written

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[7] Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 22-28.

[8] From Montaigne's *Apology of Raimond Sebond*. Quoted in Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 42.

[9] Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 43.

[10] Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 108.

[11] Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 30-35.

statements (logic) rather than on the persuasiveness of public utterances (rhetoric). Second, the move from the particular to the universal: the abstraction of absolute and universal principles (like statute law) rather than the consideration of particular cases (case law). Third, the similar move from the local to the general: the demands of rationality require a focus on abstract ideas and unifying principles 'behind' concrete examples of cultural diversity. Fourth, the move from the timely to the timeless: transient human affairs are ignored, the focus is on timeless principles that hold good always and everywhere. I suggest that these approaches have been followed in ethics as well as in philosophy more generally, and that they are responsible for the propensity for abstraction in much modern ethics and so for ethics' increasing failure to motivate agents in complex moral situations:

> The seduction of High Modernity lay in its abstract neatness and theoretical simplicity: both of these features blinded the successors of Descartes to the unavoidable complexities of concrete human experience.[12]

Moral philosophy is only ever conducted by real people embedded in real historical cultures and traditions. As McIntyre puts it:

> There was the-morality-of-fourth-century-Athens, there were the-moralities-of-thirteenth-century-Western-Europe, there are numerous such moralities, but where ever was or is *morality as such*? [13]

For Kant, the answer to this was that all rational beings are required in virtue of their reason to act on maxims that are universalisable. Hence the necessity that ethics be universal. However, Hegel and Gadamer, among others, would argue that no such universal principles exist: reason itself has a history and *all* principles are specific to particular cultures in particular times and places.[14] Kant's principles, which he assumed to be universal,

> turned out to be the principles and presuppositions of one highly specific morality, a secularised version of Protestantism which furnished modern liberal individualism with one of its founding charters. Thus the claim to universality foundered ... For what the progress of analytic philosophy has succeeded in establishing is that there are *no* grounds for belief in universal necessary principles – outside purely formal enquiries – except relative to some set of assumptions. Cartesian first principles, Kantian *a priori* truths and even the ghosts of these notions that haunted empiricism for so long have all been expelled from philosophy. [15]

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[12] Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 201.

[13] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 266.

[14] See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

[15] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 266-67.

However, the ghosts of Kantian universalism linger in many other disciplines including, I suggest, in ethics.

Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin are critical of the dominant assumption that moral reasoning must be formal and demonstrative or else not 'rational' at all.[16] They observe that demonstrative reasoning, which leads to knowledge as *episteme*, operates within a system of concepts. In other words, it is an abstract undertaking: relation to real life is suspended, and the focus is on *internal* consistency. Following Aristotle, they suggest that moral arguments cannot legitimately be abstracted in this way and that therefore moral knowledge is a matter not of theoretical knowledge, or *episteme*, but of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*. I will argue that there is much to gain from this emphasis on moral knowledge as *phronesis* (Chapter Four), and from a recovery of humanist concerns with practical wisdom. Ethics needs to recover rhetoric (Chapter Six); and, following Gadamer, it must recognise the inescapably situated nature (particular, local and timely) of all ethical reflection (Chapter Four).[17]

1.3 Kant's ethics and its separation from aesthetics

Whilst Kant was convinced of the importance of reason he was also concerned to delineate the limits of reason. For Kant it is impossible to know anything 'in itself', rather we can only know how things appear to be: precisely because we can only know them through our minds and our reason. We are simply unable to move to an objective standpoint outside of space and time. Reason and language can only apply *within* our world. He was, then, a transitional figure between the Enlightenment and later philosophers such as Hegel and Gadamer.

Kant is often characterised as continuing the separation between reason and emotion. However, Mary Midgley disagrees:

> The view that our feelings don't concern morality, that we have no duties about them, that it does not matter how we feel so long as we act correctly, is often attributed to Kant ... this is a mistake.[18]

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[16] Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 326.

[17] See Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 186.

[18] Mary Midgley, 'The Objection to Systematic Humbug', in *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), 76-102, at 76.

She suggests that Kant's problems arise because he is opposing people (moral sense theorists such as Francis Hutcheson) who exalted feeling 'absurdly' in ethical judgement. Consequently he stresses the inferiority of feeling and argues that morality is conditional on the presence of a good will. What Kant is emphasising is the responsible self as a whole. The clash between will and feeling is to some extent artificial:

> we may perhaps do better to say, in the end, that [feeling] has a different kind of value, both kinds being necessary to the whole and not in competition. But we must certainly also say that these two kinds of value are intelligibly related.[19]

Midgley's defends Kant against the charge of saying that our feelings do not concern morality. She shows that Kant may have been misunderstood, and that his insights could have been developed in other ways. However, much modern ethics, including 'Kantian ethics' perpetuates the separation with which Kant himself is unfairly charged. I will argue (Chapter Five) that, if Midgley is correct, Kant's position is to be preferred: will and emotions are both essential components of moral deliberation.

Kant's *Critique of Judgement* can be seen as offering a mediating course between the opposing approaches of rationalism and empiricism. Both mental concepts and sense experience are needed: they are brought into relation with one another through the work of the imagination. However, for Kant, humankind is still primarily rational. Michael Inwood notes that

> in the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant broached the possibility that our faculties of sensibility and understanding are both rooted in imagination; in the second edition he abandoned this idea and reinstated the primacy of reason. Heidegger preferred the possibility rejected by Kant, that man is an imaginative being rather than a primarily rational being.[20]

Together with Mark Johnson,[21] I will argue that humans are primarily imaginative beings: indeed imagination is actually a central component of reason (Chapter Five).

Kant does make a rigid distinction between ethics and aesthetics. In relation to aesthetic judgments, he argues against both pure subjectivism and any strong version of objectivism: principles of taste are *neither* merely empirical expressions of preference *nor* determinate *a priori* laws. We cannot make an aesthetic judgement without personal experience of an object and there are no necessary and sufficient criteria by which we

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[19] Midgley, 'The Objection to Systematic Humbug', 90.

[20] Michael Inwood, *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107.

[21] *MI.*

can define a beautiful object in advance. Judgements of taste are not cognitive judgements,[22] and yet they expect universal agreement. For Kant this means that aesthetic judgements must be 'disinterested': the justification for the claim to universality depends upon the inability to 'discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions'.[23] The insistence on disinterest means that such judgements cannot rely on agreeable sensations or on concepts of the good. The judgement of the beautiful is content with mere contemplation. Aesthetic judgements proceed without reference to *a priori* concepts: they are 'reflective' rather than 'determinative': they do not involve bringing particulars under universals.

In relation to ethics Kant is sharply critical of:

> those accustomed to purvey, in accordance with the public taste, a mixture of the empirical and the rational ... the empirical part should be scrupulously separated from the rational part.[24]

moral law is about *a priori* reason, not about practical rules or empirical principles:

> we cannot do morality a worse service than by seeking to derive it from examples[25]
>
> Empirical principles are always unfitted to serve as a ground for moral laws. The universality with which these laws should hold for all rational beings without exception - the unconditioned practical necessity which they thus impose - falls away if their basis is taken from the special constitution of human nature or from the accidental circumstances in which it is placed.[26]

For Kant, moral judgement is determinative and therefore of a different kind from aesthetic judgement. Gadamer concludes, crucially, that this distinction (on the basis of which Kant excludes all considerations of aesthetics or feeling from moral deliberation) is not absolute':[27] the types of judgement and knowledge that Kant so rigidly separated are in fact substantially similar, differing in degree rather than kind. Similar arguments have been advanced by Marcia Muelder Eaton and Richard W Miller.[28] I will argue,

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[22] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), §1.

[23] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §6.

[24] Immanuel Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals' [1785], in H. J. Paton (ed.), *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H J Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1948), iii. Page references are to the second edition of *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, which appear as marginal notes in this edition.

[25] Kant, 'Groundwork', 29.

[26] Kant, 'Groundwork', 90.

[27] *TM*, 39.

[28] Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral', *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992), 219-40; Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), 355-64; Richard W. Miller, 'Three Versions of Objectivity: Aesthetic, Moral and

with Gadamer, that Kant was wrong to make this rigid distinction between ethics and aesthetics; and that ethics may have much to learn from our experience of aesthetic judgements (Chapter Three and Chapter Four). I will argue that Kant is right to identify a central role for the imagination in aesthetic judgement but that this role should be extended to moral judgment as well; indeed, that it is basic to all understanding (Chapter 6). I will also argue that ethics is an *a posteriori* enterprise and that moral laws *can only* take their basis from the 'special constitution of human nature or from the accidental circumstances in which it is placed'. This will involve losing their claim to universality but it is the only way to retain their relevance and intelligibility (Chapter Four and Chapter Five). Our moral knowledge is inescapably bound to our situation.

1.4 Joseph Fletcher and Alasdair MacIntyre

A crisis in Protestant Christian ethics was precipitated by Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*, published in 1966.[29] It is debatable, however, whether Christian ethics has really ever dealt adequately with the challenges which Fletcher presented. Stanley Hauerwas observed (in 1974):

> The situation ethics debate seems to be slowly coming to an end. This may not be due to the fact that the issue has been settled, but as so often happens in intellectual disputes the adversaries simply become bored and begin to turn their interests elsewhere.[30]

Hauerwas wished to reopen the debate because he believed that: first, 'there was something essentially right about the main thrust of [Fletcher's] view'; and second, 'a restatement of the problems in terms of the nature of moral notions gives an important insight into the proper business of theological ethics'.[31] I would argue that he was right on both counts. I intend to return to both ideas in the course of this thesis: to address the first in relation to Gadamer's hermeneutics and the second in relation to the work of Mark Johnson.

Scientific', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26-58.

[29] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*.

[30] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 11.

[31] Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 11-12.

Fletcher outlines three approaches to making moral decisions.[32] First legalism:

> with this approach one enters into every decision-making situation encumbered with a whole apparatus of prefabricated rules and regulations. Not just the spirit but the letter of the law reigns. Its principles, codified in rules, are not merely guidelines or maxims to illuminate the situation; they are directives to be followed. Solutions are preset, and you can 'look them up' in a book – a Bible or a confessor's manual.

Second, antinomianism:

> Over against legalism, as a sort of polar opposite, we can put antinomianism. This is the approach with which one enters into the decision-making situation armed with no principles or maxims whatsoever, to say nothing of rules. In every 'existential moment' or 'unique' situation, it declares, one must rely upon the situation of itself, there and then, to provide its ethical solution.

Third, situationism:

> A third approach, in between legalism and antinomian unprincipledness, is situation ethics. (To jump from one polarity to the other would be only to go from the frying pan to the fire.) The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so.

Critiques of Fletcher's approach in *Situation Ethics* actually often represent him as advocating a form of antinomianism whilst, in fact, he is sharply critical of such unprincipled responses. Indeed, in *Situation Ethics* itself, he is already aware of this potential error:

> There has indeed been a 'misplaced debate' about situation ethics, because so many have too quickly taken it to be antinomian.[33]

Fletcher is often criticised and dismissed for allowing no respect for ethical principles and exclusively emphasising the situation. However, he does allow maxims a role in ethical decision making. The point he is making is that while such maxims may hold true *generally* they are not to be seen as ultimately decisive: we must be prepared to compromise them if the situation demands. He refers to this as 'principled relativism'[34] and allows rules a role only as illuminators and not as directors of ethical decision-making. He suggests that the classical rule of moral theology requires us to obey laws and principles as the principal elements of morality but, as far as possible, to temper our behaviour with love and reason. Fletcher, on the other hand, suggests that in fact love is

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[32] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 17-31.

[33] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 34.

[34] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics.*, 43-46.

the principal consideration, and law should have only a subservient place.[35] Fletcher's situation ethics have been rightly criticised for their dependence upon the rather vague, general and subjective principle of *agape*. The formal content of situation ethics in terms of actual moral guidance is notoriously lacking: how are we to know what love requires in complex social situations? Whilst this criticism may be valid it is not alone sufficient to undermine Fletcher's basic point that consideration must be given to the particularity of specific situations as well as to general maxims. His emphasis on situations, on the radical particularity of ethical decisions, is in accord with the non-abstractness of our decision-making experiences. This emphasis changes the balance between considerations of norm and context in ethical decision-making. However it does perpetuate the *distinction* (and indeed the tension) between norm and context. I will argue that we need to see norm and context as features of moral deliberation which, rather than competing, mutually inform one another: neither trumps the other.

> Situationists ask very seriously if there are ever enough cases enough alike to validate a law or to support anything more than a cautious generalization.[36]

Hauerwas is critical of Fletcher's tendency to oversimplify the factors of the moral life: reducing them to a balance between situation and principles:

> Equally important for our reflection are the issues of the nature of the moral self, the conception of Christian existence, and the nature of moral authority, all of which receive little attention from the point of view of situation ethics.[37]

He also suggests that Fletcher fails to account for the significance and variety of moral principles that exist. The danger in all of this is that Fletcher's valid insights about the complexity of moral decision making can be dismissed. The debate peters out not because the issues have been settled but because enough of a smokescreen has been created that people turn their attentions elsewhere. Inaccurate characterisations of Fletcher's position, together with justified criticisms of *Situation Ethics*, have allowed other authors to sideline or ignore his important challenges regarding the situation of moral decision making and the more or less universal human experience that in certain circumstances we would wish to say that certain moral rules should be broken. In my view Fletcher's insights represented an important corrective to the oversimplifying and abstracting tendencies of much ethical theory. The drive for abstraction and simplicity in conventional ethics means that it simply fails to address the complexity of the moral

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[35] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 31.

[36] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 32.

[37] Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 12.

life. What is required is an account of moral rationality which takes proper account of the situatedness (tradition, culture, situation and agent) of moral deliberation and that can accommodate different perspectives without descending into total relativism. I will argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics provide just such an opportunity (Chapter Three and Chapter Four).

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre argues that the shrillness and interminability of modern moral debate is the result of a catastrophe in the history of ethics.[38] What we possess today are simply fragments of older traditions. Our moral notions have been abstracted from the contexts that made them intelligible. This situation has been compounded by emotivism: the argument that all evaluative judgements are nothing but expressions of personal preference.[39] Consequently, we are using moral language that we cannot fully comprehend in debates that can never be rationally settled. MacIntyre also observes that the modern moral self has become an autonomous individual, detached from all social particularity.[40] He argues that like other human enterprises, ethics should be shaped by our language, culture and history. MacIntyre identifies the catastrophe that is responsible for the fragmentation of our ethical thinking as the Enlightenment Project: the search for a purely rational justification of morality with no regard for any human *telos*. The big mistake was to reject the Aristotelian model of morality. MacIntyre makes a sustained case for the recovery of this model of morality using the key concepts of *virtue, practice, narrative* and *tradition.*[41] The most important point is that ethics is essentially a *communal* practice. Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones argue that Scripture is primarily addressed to communities rather than to individuals and that ethics must be considered in relation to tradition:

> [B]ecause there is no way to talk about moral decisions apart from people's contexts, convictions and commitments, a preoccupation with decisions made by isolated individuals distorts our conception of ethics in general and the relation of Scripture to Christian Ethics in particular. An adequate conception of ethics requires attention to issues of character and the formation of character in and through socially-embodied traditions.[42]

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[38] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1-5.

[39] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6-23.

[40] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 32.

[41] There is not space here for a thorough and detailed consideration of MacIntyre's arguments. For further discussion see Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg and Mark Thiessen Nation (eds.), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after Macintyre* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

[42] Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 9.

MacIntyre sees the Enlightenment Project as a blind-alley in ethical theory, leading almost inevitably to emotivism and Nietzschean nihilism. The Enlightenment has mistakenly excluded from ethics all social considerations (virtues and practices) and all historical considerations (narrative and tradition). MacIntyre's considerations of language, culture and history together with his understanding of tradition represent a deeply Gadamerian insight about the hermeneutic nature of human understanding. Whilst we might agree with MacIntyre's characterisation of the state of contemporary ethics and with his emphasis on tradition it is not clear why we should choose one tradition over all the rest: is it not possible to recognise the ontogeny of our differing ethical notions and yet seek to find means of encouraging conversations and reconciliation between traditions? If we are to choose one, why should we choose the Aristotelian model? Would it not be better to accept that no tradition has a monopoly of ethical truth and that we need to take the best insights of all of them? I will argue that we should do precisely that (Chapter Five).

1.5 Starting points

Having been a conservative evangelical for many years, my own Christian ethics was nurtured within a legalist framework. However, this framework proved to be insufficiently flexible and compassionate when faced with real-life cases (I worked as a volunteer with people affected by HIV and Aids). I needed to find an alternative approach: perhaps this research should be seen as a form of 'therapy'.

Consider the following scenario:

> A man is standing on a bridge over a river in full spate, just upstream from a high waterfall. His three children are walking on the riverbank with his wife when the youngest falls into the river a couple of hundred yards upstream from the bridge and is swept away. The man sees what has happened. There are no onlookers, there is little time and, although the man can probably reach the child, the chances of a successful rescue are slim. What would you do in that man's situation?

There are many ways of approaching this dilemma, based on rules, consequences, duties, and so on. Most people conclude that the consequences for the family of the man's death in an attempted rescue are too great; the man should stay put. However, one person faced with this dilemma offered the response that they would jump in 'so

that their child did not have to die alone'.[43] It seems unlikely that any of the traditional approaches to moral decision-making would reach this conclusion and yet, to me at least, it seems to be a praiseworthy and somehow 'fitting' response. Can motivation alone make an action right? Can a desire to act out of love and concern for another outweigh all other moral factors? How could this decision be justified? Is 'fittingness' sufficient justification? Traditional accounts of moral deliberation struggle to answer questions such as these, though they are clearly weighty and important matters. Perhaps there is more to ethical deliberation than our traditional theories allow?

This study has been prompted by a series of feelings or hunches. First: the hunch that abstraction and reduction in ethical theories is in danger of rendering them irrelevant to the complex dynamic situations in which we live out our moral lives; that morality conceived as a system of laws or a single universal method is simply too narrow and too unimaginative to capture most of what goes on in our moral experience. Second: the hunch that the Enlightenment's dissociation of reason from the will and the passions was a mistake and that post-Kantian rationalist ethics may have led to the impasse in ethics noted by MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Third: the hunch that, in ethics, intellectual (rational) suasion is not enough and that affective and aesthetic suasion are also needed. Ethics will need to find new roots in affectivity, aesthetics, reasonableness and rhetoric: notions such as fittingness, flexibility, balance and mitigation will be crucial. Fourth: Johnson's thesis that human beings are fundamentally *imaginative* moral animals. Fifth: the hunch that Fletcher got something significantly right in *Situation Ethics*: in terms of his diagnosis of the problem if not his prescription for a solution. Sixth: the hunch that Gadamer's hermeneutics, with its denial of absolute truth and criticism of scientific method, may have something to offer to our understanding of 'understanding' in ethics.

Relatively little has been written directly on the relevance of Gadamer's work for ethics: I have found Matthew Foster's book *Gadamer and Practical Philosophy: The Hermeneutics of Moral Confidence* and five Ph.D. theses.[44] Of these, the most relevant

[43] I am grateful to the Revd Dr Joseph Cassisy for this example.

[44] Matthew R. Foster, *Gadamer and Practical Philosophy: The Hermeneutics of Moral Confidence* (Atlanta GA: Scholars, 1991); Roger A. Badham, 'The Implications of Gadamer's Hermeneutics for Contemporary Christian Ethics' (Ph.D. thesis: Drew University, New Jersey, 1997); Eric W Bain-Selbo, 'Understanding Others Morally: Philosophical Hermeneutics and Comparative Religious Ethics' (Ph.D. thesis: The University of Chicago, Chicago, 1997); Susan-Judith G Hoffmann, 'The Ethical Dimension in Gadamer's Hermeneutics' (Ph.D. thesis: University of Guelph, Guelph, 1992); Michael J Kelly, 'On the Possibility of Philosophical Ethics: A Hermeneutic Response' (Ph.D. thesis:

to this study is Roger Badham's thesis 'The Implications of Gadamer's Hermeneutics for Contemporary Christian Ethics'. Badham does not offer any detailed exegesis of *Truth and Method* though he does explore Gadamer's concepts of *sensus communis*, historical consciousness and *phronesis*. Badham develops his insights in very different directions from mine, drawing on work by Don Cupitt, Lawrence Kohlberg, H.Richard Niebuhr, and James Gustafson. There is no reference to moral imagination. Susan-Judith Hoffman does elaborate a 'hermeneutic ethics' arguing that Gadamer's hermeneutic circle can be brought to bear on ethical principles and that such an approach constitutes a promising alternative to the autonomous moral reasoning of the Enlightenment. Joy Ross also explores the possibility of an ethics rooted in Gadamer's hermeneutics, noting the situatedness of our moral understanding together with its essential linguisticality. She develops her approach in relation to the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*. Neither Hoffman nor Ross explores Gadamer's hermeneutics in relation to Christian ethics, or in relation to imagination. Eric Bain-Selbo appropriates the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer in the service of comparative religion, again focussing on the concept of *phronesis*. He develops his arguments in relation to openness to other traditions; here, religious traditions. Matthew Foster and Michael Kelly both approach Gadamer in a search for confidence in relation to philosophical ethics. Both argue that the contemporary lack of confidence is unwarranted and that Gadamer' hermeneutics can provide such confidence. However, this confidence is justified on very different grounds from the traditional arguments and without any 'foundation' in the transcendental sense. Kelly suggests a dialectical method of ethical reflection based on Gadamer's notion of effective history. Foster argues that hermeneutics must include *techne* (as part of human history and tradition): dialogue with neighbours involves reaching out from one's areas of competency. Although Gadamer is steadfastly opposed to 'method' Foster argues that a consideration of 'techniques' and 'rules' can be subsumed under the hermeneutic enterprise. My work does share common ground with all of these authors. However, the distinctive features of my approach are the engagement with legalism and utilitarianism; the thorough exegesis of *Truth and Method*; the engagement with the work of Mark Johnson; the exploration of the significance of moral imagination; and the specific relation to Christian ethics.

Boston University, Boston, 1986); Joy C Ross, 'Gadamer and Hermeneutic Ethics: On the Possibility of Moral Understanding in a Modern World' (Ph.D. thesis: The Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia, 1994).

1.6 Outline of study

I propose two major theses. First, that ethics (including Christian ethics) should adopt a stance that is properly *hermeneutical*: taking proper account of ethics' embeddedness in history and tradition, abandoning hope of a universal or objective standpoint from which to make ethical judgements. Second, following Johnson, that human beings are fundamentally *imaginative* moral beings: imagination is central to ethics because it is central to language and reason.

In Chapter Two I will challenge two approaches to ethics, legalism and utilitarianism, which represent contemporary ethics' dependence on notions of absolute truth and universal method. I will argue that they share significant common ground, including certain assumptions based on Enlightenment modes of thought.

Chapter Three will consist of a thorough exegesis of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (guided by a concern to uncover its relevance to ethics) as the basis for a thought-experiment concerning the relationship between ethics and hermeneutics.

In Chapter Four I will evaluate this thought-experiment by exploring the implications for ethics discovered in Chapter Three and relating them to my critique of legalism and utilitarianism from Chapter Two. I will also consider criticisms and developments of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

In Chapter Five I will consider the central role of moral language together with the importance of metaphor and concept-formation. I will outline important connections with the work of Mark Johnson in cognitive science: especially in relation to metaphor, concept-formation and imagination. In particular I will outline his conception of reason and contrast it with the Enlightenment notion of abstract and universal rationality. I will also explore the role of imagination in ethical deliberation; the imaginative character of conscience; and some parallels between taste and conscience; concluding with a suggested model for the work of moral theorists.

In Chapter Six I will explore further Mark Johnson's notion of moral imagination and its possible relevance for Christian ethics. I will set out a critical realist approach to

truth and briefly consider the importance of the imagination in aesthetics and revelation. I will attempt to correlate the doctrines of creation and incarnation with a hermeneutical approach to ethics that incorporates moral imagination. I will explore improvisation as a model for Christian ethics; and consider the importance of inspiration and the communal dimensions of ethics. The chapter concludes with a consideration of two practical consequences: the recovery of rhetoric; and the adoption of casuistry.

In Chapter Seven I will review the arguments to that point and consider a hermeneutical approach to 'experience' before reflecting, as an example, on the current debate in the Anglican Communion about homosexuality. I will then draw some final conclusions.

Chapter Two

Moral Truth and Moral Method: a Critique of Legalism and Utilitarianism

Gadamer argues against the possibility of absolute truth (timeless and unchanging truth that can be known with complete certainty) and suggests that 'scientific method' is simply inappropriate in the human sciences (including ethics). In my critique of contemporary ethics I wish to challenge two 'mentalities': two approaches to ethics which represent contemporary ethics' dependence on notions of absolute truth and universal method and which share some characteristic assumptions and philosophical foundations. The first is 'legalism'; the appeal to moral absolutes and the assumption of a universal moral reality based on a particular conception of universal human reason. I will take as a paradigm example the work of John Finnis[1] (section 2.1). The second is utilitarianism with its claims to the universal application of a 'scientific method' (section 2.2). At first sight these two approaches may appear to be quite distinct, each often regarding the other as characterising the wrong approach to ethics: however, I will argue that they have a significant amount in common, including certain assumptions based on Enlightenment modes of thought. In each case I will set out a brief overview of the approach to ethics and then explore criticisms from the perspective of my own concerns about abstraction and the importance of context.

2.1 John Finnis on moral absolutes

2.1.1 The New Natural Law Theory

The 'New Natural Law Theory' has been developed by John Finnis and Germain Grisez (founders of the Finnis-Grisez 'school'). It includes an account of the basic human goods; a theory for deriving moral norms from those goods; an account of 'practical reasonableness'; and a theory of 'exceptionless moral norms' or 'moral absolutes'. It is, as Rufus Black observes, 'a sophisticated and supple moral theory'.[2] The theory

[1] See e.g. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980); John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983); *MA*.

[2] Rufus Black, 'Introduction: The New Natural Law Theory', in Nigel Biggar and Rufus Black (eds.), *The Revival of Natural Law: Philosophical, Theological and Ethical Responses to the Finnis-Grisez School* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 1-28, at 1.

attempts to make good the failings of previous, negative, natural law theories and to construct an account of human fulfilment and flourishing.

One important foundation for the new theory is a distinction between theoretical reason seen as pursuing 'knowledge about aspects of reality' and practical reason, the function of which is seen as 'bringing realities into being'.[3] By means of this distinction they hope to avoid the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy of scholastic natural law, that is the logically illicit derivation of an 'ought' from an 'is':

> from a set of theoretical premises, one cannot derive any practical truth, since sound reasoning does not introduce what is not in the premises. And the relationship of principles to conclusions is a logical one among propositions. Therefore, the ultimate principles of morality cannot be theoretical truths of metaphysical and/or philosophical anthropology.[4]

They suggest that scholastic natural law prescribes as moral those actions that conform to, and are derived from, 'human nature'. The Finnis-Grisez school argue that their list of basic human goods 'corresponds' to different dimensions of human nature but is not 'derived from' them.[5]

Grisez identifies (correctly, I suggest) three major failings of classical moral theology founded on scholastic natural law. First:

> Classical moral theology tends to reduce Christian moral life to a means of gaining heaven and avoiding hell.[6]

Laudably, the new natural law theory seeks to elucidate the intrinsic relationship between human nature and human fulfilment in our earthly life. Second, Grisez criticises classical moral theology for its 'static character'.[7] He argues that human nature does not change but that new possibilities for action are constantly appearing. Grisez is right to criticise classical moral theology for adopting a static model: human lives are composed of complex dynamic processes as *a fortiori* are the developing 'lives' of communities and traditions. Grisez is surely right in seeking to reinterpret the structure of natural law in an attempt to respond flexibly to new possibilities. Even if human nature is relatively static our understanding and appreciation of it can develop quite

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3 Black, 'New Natural Law', 4.

4 Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle and John Finnis, 'Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends', *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987), 99-151, 102.

5 Black, 'New Natural Law', 7.

6 Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1: Christian Moral Principles (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1983), 106.

7 Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 106.

rapidly. Third, Grisez criticises classical moral theology for its legalism, for being 'too much concerned with laws and too little concerned with persons'.[8] This criticism echoes my own concerns about abstraction, as we shall see, and Grisez is again to be commended for his attempts to conceptualise human fulfilment and flourishing.

The Finnis-Grisez school attempts to identify the basic human goods or objectives by enquiring into the reasons for our actions. They pursue the chain of reasons until they claim they have identified reasons which require no further reasons to justify them. These 'ultimate reasons for doing things' are what they label as 'basic human goods'[9]:

The General Categories of Basic Human Goods	**Dimensions of Human Nature to Which these Goods Correspond** *Human beings ...*
Substantive goods (goods in which people can participate without deliberately pursuing them)	
1. life itself – its maintenance and transmission – health and safety	as animate ... organic substances
2. knowledge and aesthetic experience	as rational beings capable of knowing and experiencing reality
3. some degree of excellence in work and play	as simultaneously rational and animal
Reflexive goods (goods pursued through choice)	
4. harmony between and among individuals and groups of persons – living at peace with others, neighbourliness, friendship	as agents through deliberation and choice
5. harmony between the different dimensions within the self, including one's feelings, emotions, judgements and choices	
6. harmony between the dimensions within the self and a person's acts: harmony among one's judgements, choices and performances – peace of conscience and consistency between one's self and its expression	
7. harmony with some more-than-human source of meaning and value	

[8] Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 106.

[9] This table is taken from Black, 'New Natural Law', 6-7. and draws on Grisez, Boyle and Finnis, 'Practical Principles', 107-8.

These basic goods correspond to different dimensions of human nature: hence our natural inclinations provide important information as we attempt to identify the goods. Taken together these goods constitute human fulfilment. The Finnis-Grisez school argues that everyone should rationally arrive at this same list of human goods because the list corresponds to our human nature. On Black's analysis, they do accept that the basic human goods are always culturally embodied but cultural variation is limited to variations of expression within this same list of basic human goods: different ranking of the various goods or different forms of their expression.[10] New Natural Law thus provides a basis for explaining and affirming moral diversity. It characterises the basic human goods as incommensurable, non-hierarchical, and self-evident. The claim of self-evidence is not a claim that everyone will *actually* recognise a specific list of goods; but rather that once a person has understood what is meant by a particular good, in the light of the sort of reflection necessary to identify it, they will recognise it as a basic justificatory reason for action.[11]

Having identified this list of goods New Natural Law theory characterises morality as

> being completely practically reasonable in the making of decisions about how to pursue human fulfilment.[12]

Amongst the requirements of this basic principle are that we should 'avoid the distortion of human decisions by feelings and emotions'.[13] Morality is purely a matter of reason. Having identified human beings as having different dimensions of the self (feelings, emotions, judgements and choices), rather than seek to accommodate all of these dimensions in moral considerations they limit morality simply to choices guided by judgement in the face of potential distortion by feelings and emotions.

New Natural Law theory envisages these basic principles being embodied in moral norms. Positive norms point people towards human fulfilment, they instantiate one or more basic human goods, and are often in need of development in a particular context. They are not obligatory as it will often be reasonable to pursue any one of a number of such norms at any one time. Negative norms

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[10] Black, 'New Natural Law', 9-10.

[11] Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 64-65.

[12] Black, 'New Natural Law', 15.

[13] Black, 'New Natural Law', 15.

> emerge when a generic proposal for action does violate some requirement of practical reason ... unreasonably thwarting human fulfilment.[14]

Perhaps the most important requirement of practical reason in the emergence of negative norms is that one should never choose directly against a basic human good. The matter of intentional choice in this requirement is important and harmful side-effects of an action may sometimes be justified by a consideration of the principle of double effect. In New Natural Law theory simply acting in accord with a basic human good does not necessarily render an action moral.[15] However, deliberately acting against one of the basic human goods does render the action immoral. Such negative moral norms are considered by the Finnis-Grisez school to be 'exceptionless'.

I have some serious concerns about the implied status of the whole system of New Natural Law theory. It is not presented in any provisional way; as a *suggested* way forward or as a *contribution* to ethical debate. Rather it is presented as *the only* right ethical theory, alterations or revisions are not entertained, and the system (at least in Finnis's hands) remains more or less unchanged since first proposed. However, the more general aspects of the theory need not detain us any longer; what I wish to challenge is this characterisation of exceptionless moral norms, particularly as set out in Finnis's book *Moral Absolutes*.[16]

2.1.2 Moral absolutes: exceptionless moral norms

Moral Absolutes is predominantly a contribution to an intra-Catholic debate: Finnis's main target is proportionalism. The book addresses the question of whether there are such things as exceptionless moral norms and

> attempts no more than an overview of [this] much debated and most important question of faith and morals, and an outline of some grounds for thinking it reasonable to propose and accept a definite answer.[17]

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[14] Black, 'New Natural Law', 20.

[15] Grisez, Boyle and Finnis, 'Practical Principles', 123-25.

[16] See also Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights;* John Finnis, *Aquinas : Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus.*

[17] *MA*, foreword.

Finnis begins by acknowledging the challenge to 'the very possibility of true moral absolutes'.[18] While he accepts that exceptionless moral norms are few, and not fundamental, he nonetheless sees them as strategic:

> the moral norms whose truth is now contested are decisively important for conscience, conduct, and civilization. And their intrinsic relationship to the foundations of morality and faith is such that to deny them is to overlook, ignore, or challenge those foundations.[19]

Finnis sets up the issue by quoting Pope John Paul II:

> The whole tradition of the Church has lived and lives on the conviction [that] there exist acts which, *per se*, and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object.
>
> There are moral norms that have a precise content which is immutable and unconditioned ... for example, the norm ... which forbids the direct killing of an innocent person.[20]

Finnis is here claiming no more than that such norms are exceptionless: for him that is the definition, in this context, of 'absolute'. To avert the charge that such moral absolutes are merely tautologous (e.g. 'murder is wrong') Finnis argues that the prohibited acts can be specified without relying on prior moral judgement (e.g. the kind of judgement implied by the choice of the word 'murder' in the above example). Finnis's position, then, is identical to that of the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. Timothy Chappell raises the concern that elements of the New Natural Law theory are far from self-evident and that they could have been generated '*ad hoc* to give certain conclusions in applied ethics',[21] regarding, for example contraception and abortion. He suggests that Grisez moves too quickly from 'self-evident first principles' to claims about what must never be done (choosing to destroy, damage or impede any intelligible human good).

In a move which seems to weaken his case, Finnis accepts that for some moral absolutes the particular act is specified with reference to circumstances (the circumstance of marriage for example). This surely implies that the moral absolute proscribing adultery can only hold in societies where marriage is deemed a human good (as it is by the Catholic Church). In other societies the moral 'absolute' would either not apply or else be meaningless. The prohibition of adultery seems once more to be a prior conviction.

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[18] *MA*, 1.

[19] *MA*, 1.

[20] *MA*, 2. He is quoting *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), ellipsis original to Finnis.

[21] Timothy Chappell, 'Natural Law Revived: Natural Law Theory and Contemporary Moral Philosophy', in Biggar and Black, *The Revival of Natural Law*, 29-52, at 32.

Finnis begins part way along the process of considering circumstances and then argues that from that point on a norm is 'absolute':

> Once one has precisely formulated the type, one can say that the norm which identifies each chosen act of that type as wrong is true and applicable to every such choice, whatever the (further) circumstances.[22]

Finnis separates his moral absolutes from another 'exceptionless' case: that of the settled judgement of conscience which deems an act right 'in all the circumstances'. He argues that such judgements may indeed be exceptionless but only in situations where all the circumstances are the same. In the case of moral absolutes on the other hand one need only identify certain circumstances for all other circumstances to become irrelevant:

> The moral absolutes of Christian tradition ... are proposed as valid, true and applicable even in circumstances which are neither foreseen nor even implicitly identified in the norm, but which despite their relevance and moral importance (if they arose) would not deflect the norm's applicability.[23]

It is hard to see how Finnis can describe such circumstances as 'relevant': his definition of the moral absolute renders them precisely 'irrelevant' even though they may have moral importance in other situations (where a moral absolute does not apply).

Oliver O'Donovan characterises Finnis's position:

> There are some closely specified moral propositions which are not susceptible of being revised in the light of further moral experience.[24]

Finnis asserts that the Christian faith affirms specific moral absolutes and turns for examples to the Decalogue and to Christ's teaching on adultery.[25] He sees the Ten Commandments as a 'manifestation of God's sovereignty in ... creation'.[26] Finnis's reliance on the 'plain assertions' of Jesus requires a confident exegesis of the passage in question (Matthew 19.4-9). The passage though is not simply and unequivocally about adultery; rather it addresses a situation (post-divorce) in which the couple are, in legal terms, no longer married. Finnis acknowledges that the situation requires 'interpretation and elaboration, since there are questions about who is indeed married'.[27] Is Jesus here

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[22] *MA*, 3.

[23] *MA*, 5.

[24] Oliver O'Donovan, 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes', in Biggar and Black, *The Revival of Natural Law*, 111-30, at 113.

[25] *MA*, 6-9.

[26] *MA*, 7.

[27] *MA*, 8.

speaking about adultery directly or is he, rather, emphasising the good of marriage and addressing the issue of lack of commitment on the man's part (divorcing a wife merely to take another is as much adultery as engaging in sex with another while still married)? Taken at face value, the verse hardly appears to be establishing a moral absolute about adultery (though this of course may have been a 'given' in the culture of the time). However, Finnis does not seem able to accept any development in our understanding of biblical prescriptions or of human nature: revelation is fixed and final. Implicit here is a particular conception of reason: as universal and unchanging.

Finnis argues that human fulfilment is the fulfilment of individuals in community (Kingdom) and that the Decalogue is to be understood as 'the implication of the supreme principles': to love God and neighbour, and to seek first the Kingdom of God. We can readily accept this but it is simply a *non sequitur* to argue that they must therefore be moral absolutes.

Finnis addresses a criticism, made by Garth Hallett, that to adhere to moral absolutes is to 'honor rules above values'.[28] He argues that the value is already included in the rule and that by keeping it one is honouring the value of the person whose good would otherwise be infringed. (At this point, his argument is remarkably close to that of rule utilitarianism in which rules are justified by whether keeping them tends, on the whole, to promote utility.) Finnis rejects out of hand any notion of 'balancing' goods to be achieved by observing or by ignoring the rule. He simply asserts that in observing the rule one does not dishonour or ignore the goods 'which one supposes could be secured by violating the moral absolute':[29] they simply have no place in the considerations of moral judgement in the face of a moral absolute. His argument against the felt necessity of violating moral absolutes on occasion is that we should simply trust divine providence. His argument for moral absolutes seems to be largely that they are 'God-given', in natural law (by reason) or in Scripture (by revelation), and that we should simply accept them. However, this again implies a conception of universal reason and an understanding of revelation which, though all revelation comes through human beings situated in history and tradition and bound by language and culture, admits no change or development in our understanding and interpretation.

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[28] Garth Hallett, *Christian Moral Reasoning* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 120.

[29] *MA*, 11.

Finnis argues that the denial of the possibility of moral absolutes is a 'post-Christian phenomenon'. By this he means that it is a feature of Enlightenment thought, especially that of 'such men as Bentham and Marx' by whom

> the Kingdom was transformed into the inner-worldly realm of justice, prosperity, fraternity and freedom, to be constructed by enlightened human planning and providence.[30]

Finnis rightly argues that the Enlightenment relies on technical reasoning in moral deliberation and is critical of proportionalism for this reason.[31] He uses the term synonymously with consequentialism:

> ... their characteristic moral principle and method: Pursue the course which promises, in itself, and in its consequences, a net greater proportion of good states of affairs, or ... a net lesser proportion of bad, overall, in the long run.[32]

Proportionalism represents a sustained challenge to Finnis's conception of moral absolutes.

2.1.3 The denial of absolutes: proportionalism

Finnis identifies two major factors behind the denial of absolutes by Catholic moral theologians; first, the general atmosphere of secular dissent from the church's moral teaching and, second, the question of contraception and a desire to approve it. He argues against proportionalism by an alleged *reductio ad absurdum*. Relying on the assertion that 'divine providence involves the permission of evil only so that out of it God may draw a somehow greater good', he suggests that in any decision requiring moral judgement proportionalism implies that one can simply 'do whatever you feel like' safe in the knowledge that God will only allow what makes for the greatest good in the long run.[33] This is not an accurate summary of proportionalist thought; rather, it describes a situation in which human beings have no responsibility for moral judgement (the opposite of the proportionalist view). Finnis is suggesting that proportionalism

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[30] *MA*, 12-13.

[31] For further criticism of proportionalism see Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1993). For examples of proportionalist thought see Bruno Schüller, *Wholly Human: Essays on the Theory and Language of Morality*, trans. Peter Heinegg (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986). and Richard McCormick, 'Killing the Patient', in John Wilkins (ed.), *Understanding* Veritatis Splendor - *the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Church's Moral Teaching* (London: S.P.C.K., 1993), 14-20.

[32] *MA*, 14.

[33] *MA*, 15-16.

somehow denies the importance of free choice and of moral responsibility which the New Natural Law affirms.[34]

The crisis in traditional Catholic ethics reached a head with the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968.[35] Finnis defines the contraceptive act as a contra life choice, chosen separately from any decision to engage in intercourse and therefore separate from considerations of the moral features of the contracepted sexual act itself.[36] He blames a misunderstanding of this for much of the confusion surrounding contraception in Catholic moral theology. Again he insists that acts are specified by their intention (object), so that, for example, Natural Family Planning need not be adopted as a method of contraception but rather as a choice to avoid the bad side-effects of having a baby, without any choice to prevent conception. He also identifies the assumption that regular sexual satisfaction is a right (or even an obligation) within marriage as a cause of the pastoral pressures on the church to accept contraception. He is critical of much common moral teaching which presented the church's position as simply a series of laws rather than truths 'about the intrinsic relationship of certain types of act to true integral human fulfillment'.[37] The basic problem was a failure to 'identify clearly and centrally the most relevant moral absolute violated by contraception'.[38] Finnis considers various attempts to justify contraception (by e.g. Louis Janssens and Paul VI's commission). He argues that when such attempts failed attention turned to the very foundations of Catholic moral teaching. He observes that most Catholic ethicists who dissent on contraception also deny the possibility of moral absolutes.[39] The focus of debate moved away from contraception to the philosophical debate about the very possibility of the moral absolutes which were seen as obstacles to the desired conclusion (except, of course, by Finnis who saw them as protecting the traditional position).[40]

Finnis accuses Franz Scholz, John Dedek, Louis Janssens, and Richard McCormick of reading back proportionalist principles into scholasticism, especially Aquinas. Finnis is dismissive of such attempts, arguing that Aquinas was quite clear that there are a

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[34] See Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, 136-38; Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, chapters 2 & 8.

[35] *MA*, 84-85.

[36] *MA*, 84-90.

[37] *MA*, 87.

[38] *MA*, 88.

[39] *MA*, 89-90.

[40] *MA*, 93.

minority of negative norms which hold *semper et ad semper*: always and everywhere, without exception. He is equally dismissive of suggestions from John Milhaven that modern people (humanity come of age) may have a dispensation from God to approach moral judgements in new ways; and of suggestions that 'modern moral problems are so *complex* that no revealed norm could truly settle them'.[41] He notes, correctly, that just because the church does not have an immediate answer to every moral problem we cannot conclude that it has no answer to any. To be fair to Finnis, he readily admits that moral absolutes may be few in number, even though he considers that they are of strategic importance.[42]

Finnis deals with a number of philosophical objections to moral absolutes. First, Josef Fuchs suggests that the tradition of moral absolutes rests on the naturalistic fallacy. Finnis contends that Aquinas's practical principles are not deduced from facts but are simply self-evident and that acts are judged not on their physical characteristics but in terms of their object shaped by the agent's will and intention.[43] Second, objections from Joseph Fuchs and James Walter that the tradition is based on a fallacious inference from God's creative will to his moral will. Finnis contends that moral absolutes are not justified by any appeal to God's will but to integral human fulfilment.[44] Third, the suggestion, by Janssens, that moral absolutes 'irrationally abstract some elements from the total reality of a human action' (as I have also argued). Finnis does not really address this criticism directly; rather; he points out again the impossibility of addressing all the elements:

> In reality, the injunction to consider all the goods and bads in the totality of the situation, when there is no rational criterion for processing all the information, cannot (for all its authors' good intentions) be other than an invitation to devise rationalizations for doing what one feels like.[45]

This may be true unless, of course, such consideration is still a worthwhile ideal even if unattainable; unless there are criteria other than rational; unless emotivism (which seems to be a great fear of Finnis) can be controlled in other ways such as by reference to a communal dimension of deliberation or to a moral tradition. Again, the fact that proportionalism cannot achieve its ideal does not necessarily mean that the effort to

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[41] *MA*, 92.

[42] *MA*, 1.

[43] *MA*, 94.

[44] *MA*, 95.

[45] *MA*, 97.

consider all the goods and ills should not be made: unless one insists on a perfect and rational moral judgement, in the way that Finnis does, when the only option is to limit the factors under consideration. This, of course, is the same criticism that Finnis laid at the door of proportionalists who could similarly only achieve a terminus to their deliberations by limiting their considerations. As human beings we cannot escape our limitations but we should still set our sights high. Fourth, proportionalists such as Fuchs point to the criterion of 'proportionateness' used by the tradition in the development of the doctrine of double effect. Finnis contends that in this instance there is no weighing of net good or bad consequences; there is simply an injunction that one should do no more harm than is necessary, that the foreseen harm of an action should be proportionate to the desired end.[46] Whilst there may be no strict weighing of consequences here there is certainly a judgement about what is proportionate in the circumstances. Fifth, K.-H. Peschke argues that moral absolutes falsely absolutise criteria which should be subject to some higher principle such as reverence for God. Finnis contends that in the tradition moral absolutes are indeed subject to such principles (love of God and conformity to reason) and are already implications of such principles.[47] Sixth, Franz Boeckle and McCormick argue that the moral absolutes 'absolutise the human goods which they claim to protect' when such goods are premoral and conditioned: so that no norm protecting them can be absolute.[48] Here Finnis repeats his definition of moral absolutes as claiming no more than to be exceptionless, on the grounds that such exceptions would be unreasonable. Finnis concludes that the appeal to reason against moral absolutes

> turns out, under the pressure of rational arguments to be an appeal not to reason but to some intuitive process which is 'beyond reduction to reasoning processes or analytic judgements' and which is therefore fittingly called by those who rely on it an 'instinct'.[49]

He suggests that

> the whole effort to develop a theoretical critique of the tradition's absolutes is a simple *antecedent* wish to approve some of the actions they exclude.[50]

A similar antecedent wish (to exclude certain actions) may be part of the motivation for Finnis's assertion of the absolutes. We must ask whether 'instinct' is always to be

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[46] *MA*, 97.

[47] *MA*, 99.

[48] *MA*, 99.

[49] *MA*, 100, quoting McCormick.

[50] *MA*, 101, emphasis original.

discounted; and whether such instinct can provide a legitimate challenge to the moral absolutes.

Finnis observes that all these objections represent instances of one particular kind of argument against the moral absolutes: that they all in one way or another seek to make ethics into a *techne*, a technique or method. Finnis argues, rightly in my view, that the possibilities of human fulfilment, even in the life of one individual are too open-ended for any technique to be appropriate. This criticism is particularly telling against consequentialism which explicitly seeks a scientific method and attempts to reduce ethical deliberation to an instrumental calculus.

Finnis argues that proportionalism is 'incoherent with its own ambition to guide free choices'.[51] However it seems to me that his argument at this point is spurious, based on an inaccurate characterisation of proportionalism. Finnis notes that proponents of proportionalism argue that a comparison of options is possible because there is a common notion of 'value' in terms of which the various options can be assessed. Thus the option promising the greater good will have the highest aggregate value. Finnis then argues that, at this point, all other options fall away and there is no longer a real choice to be made; there are no longer any rationally appealing options, hence proportionalism is incoherent with its own aim of guiding rational choice.[52] This seems to say little more than that, *after* one has made a choice other options are to be discounted. Whatever 'method' is applied, one option will ultimately be preferred and chosen; it is hardly fair to criticise a method for producing an answer. Finnis misses the point that it is at the beginning of the process that all the options seem rationally appealing (or at least need to be considered); the proportionalist method is aimed precisely at grounding the choice between such options when it is not clear *at the outset* which is best. Finnis claims that a coherent proportionalist position requires

> a rational judgement, made *prior* to moral judgement and choice, and concerning the intelligible goods in the options available for choice.[53]

What Finnis has failed to notice is that the proportionalist method simply conflates the moral and rational judgements: the right thing to do simply is the option that promises

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[51] *MA*, 51.

[52] *MA*, 52.

[53] *MA*, 54, emphasis mine.

the greater good. The moral judgement is made in the process of the rational judgement and is not consequent upon it.

In asserting the incommensurability of options, Finnis acknowledges that different instantiations of a particular good can be incommensurable since each is 'an aspect of some person's reality'; it is only 'states of affairs considered in abstraction from their origins, context, and consequences' that can be compared in value.[54] The moral calculus required by consequentialism is simply beyond us. Finnis is surely right in his assertion of incommensurability but it is interesting that he acknowledges the importance of the individual to the evaluation of good. He suggests that any option which infringes a basic human good can never be rationally chosen; any such preference can only be based on feelings. This seems simply to be an assertion that moral absolutes are always rational and that any denial of them must be the result of reason being overwhelmed by feelings. It seems that Finnis shares many assumptions with consequentialists about morally significant factors while refusing to accept their 'method' or to abandon his own attachment to moral absolutes.

Finnis also criticises proportionalism for its effect on the character of the individual moral agent. A strict consequentialist, he suggests, would be prepared to 'do and become anything' if it would achieve an overall balance of greater good.[55] Finnis rightly observes that these effects on character are simply incommensurable with the other kinds of consequences of one's actions and that strict consequentialism ignores 'the soul-making significance of moral action'.[56] He argues that choices have a lasting effect on one's character[57] and emphasises the reflexive nature of moral choices: the choices one makes have consequences for oneself and potentially for the world (Finnis cites Sir Thomas More's refusal to lie as an example).[58] The incommensurability of diverse goods (as here with considerations of character) is perhaps the most frequent and the most telling criticism levelled at all forms of consequentialism. However, the fact that the strict method of consequentialism fails does not necessarily imply that consequences should never be considered. Incommensurability is a criticism of consequentialism in

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[54] *MA*, 53.
[55] *MA*, 20.
[56] *MA*, 23.
[57] *MA*, 73.
[58] *MA*, 50.

terms of its own understanding of 'method': it is a *non sequitur* to suggest that because the method fails, the concerns are irrelevant. Whilst we might agree with Finnis's criticisms of consequentialism at this point, to do so implies neither that a consideration of consequences is irrelevant to moral judgement nor that an appeal to moral absolutes is the only way to preserve the 'soul-making significance of moral action', the only way to give proper consideration to matters of character and virtue.

2.1.4 The relevance of tradition, and the 'narrowing of horizons'

Although he allows for development of character, Finnis does not seem able to accept any development in our understanding of biblical prescriptions or of revelation. Karl Rahner based his denial of exceptionless moral norms on the view that specific moral absolutes cannot be permanent because human nature itself is subject to change.[59] Against this, Finnis asserts (with Vatican II *Gaudium et Spes*) that there are certain fundamental and unchangeable realities which are founded in Christ (and which are presumably knowable in a perfect, permanent, 'absolute' way). He ignores the fact that our understanding of any such realities is inevitably conditioned by our history, tradition, culture and language: once more there is an appeal to absolute reason.

Finnis is concerned to protect the 'foundations' of Christian tradition[60] and will not allow any deviation even in conflict or borderline situations; but all our understanding, even Finnis's notions of foundations and Christian tradition, are conditioned by our historical and linguistic finitude. As Eberhard Schockenhoff observes:

> even the assessment of specific actions as intrinsically evil and morally reprehensible under all circumstances is itself subject to the historicity of our moral knowledge.[61]

Finnis accepts that 'historicity and social change do affect moral judgment',[62] citing as examples changes in social and cultural entities (e.g. borrowing and lending); conceptual clarification; removal of 'emotional bias'; and the development of new (or

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[59] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 22 vols., vol. 14: Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, The Church in the World, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 14-16.

[60] *MA*, 14.

[61] Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Natural Law and Human Dignity: Universal Ethics in an Historical World*, trans. Brian McNeil (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 192.

[62] *MA*, 25-26.

apparently new) forms of behaviour. It is not clear why he refuses to allow that such changes could occur relating to the norms which he wishes to preserve as 'absolute': the impact of conceptual clarification and new behaviour regarding homosexual relationships would seem to be one possible example. Finnis continues to draw a distinction between identifying the rightness of an act and identifying the wrongness of an act. He accepts that:

> Everything in the New Testament, Augustine and Thomas (and much in Plato and Aristotle) tells you that judging the rightness of an action is no easy task but is the task of virtue, of discerning one's vocation and following it out with creativity, intelligence, fairness, humility and all the other needful dispositions. The moral absolutes now in dispute identify wrong actions, not right; they are negative norms (*praecepta negativa*) which hold good always and on every occasion (*semper et ad semper*).[63]

This description of positive moral judgement has much to commend it: it is not clear on what basis Finnis can justifiably exempt the negative norms from similar consideration. Finnis, quoting Grisez, argues that it is the negative norms excluding divorce and adultery that create the stability and 'space' needed for marital love to grow. Grisez acknowledges that 'the meaning of the good of marital love is not exhausted by anyone's present understanding of it'.[64] He argues against defining the good of marriage in positive terms since 'to say, once for all, what marital love is and must be, would be to mummify it'.[65] Grisez is right to emphasise the need for a stable framework within which to operate. Freedom must operate within certain limits; the alternative is simply chaos. However, the framework need only be relatively stable rather than absolute: the sort of evolving framework offered by a tradition's moral understanding.

Finnis speculates on several possible motives for denying the existence of moral absolutes but is particularly exercised by

> a loss of the sense that revelation was completed in the life, the words, and the deeds of Jesus, communicated to and handed on by the apostles as a gospel which is 'the source of all saving truth and all moral teaching' and 'includes everything which contributes to the holiness of life ... of the people of God'.[66]

One need not argue that revelation has continued or is 'progressive' (to use John Henry Newman's term) since the death and resurrection of Jesus to question the demand of

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[63] *MA*, 27-28.

[64] *MA*, 28.

[65] *MA*, 28.

[66] *MA*, 30. He is quoting Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* paras 4,7 and 8, ellipsis original to Finnis

faith implied here; one need only point out that our *understanding* of any revelation, even if that revelation were complete, must be partial and developing.[67] The revelation may indeed be the *source* of all moral teaching and *include* everything that contributes to holiness but why should we believe that we have already perfectly identified all that this entails? Finnis is afraid that letting go of moral absolutes implies relativism and undermines God's revelation: denying moral absolutes

> is to take a long step toward denying that God has revealed anything to a people, or ever constituted a people of God at all.[68]

Finnis considers the Decalogue in the Fathers[69], observing that the commandments were seen as 'precepts of natural law': known by reason and given by God as intrinsic to human nature; guiding us towards human fulfilment. As such, their content is fixed. O'Donovan modifies this position by proposing that whilst moral absolutes are not subject to any 'antithetical development' they may be subject to complementary development; to new areas of application:

> Imagination never suffices to envisage all the possible implications of a principle we hold exceptionless; the discovery of such implications is part of what is involved in a serious attempt to apply principles to cases.[70]

This question of the scope of application is important and Finnis addresses a criticism, made by Bruno Schüller, that refusing to violate a moral absolute for the sake of the greater good 'thereby manifest[s] a lesser or narrower willingness to further human good';[71] that following a moral absolute necessarily implies a 'narrowing of horizons':

> A principal proportionalist objection to the truth of specific moral absolutes is this: They irrationally abstract *some* elements from the total reality of a human action. ... in adhering to a moral absolute one rejects an option as soon as one understands it as including an action of the type specified in the norm, and thus one narrows one's focus unreasonably. [72]

However, Finnis argues that to judge an action 'right' requires a consideration of all the circumstances but that an action may be judged wrong as soon as it is seen to violate a moral absolute.[73] However, he argues that this is not a narrowing of one's horizon since

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[67] For a discussion see David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[68] *MA*, 30.

[69] *MA*, 9.

[70] O'Donovan, 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes', 125.

[71] *MA*, 17, in footnote.

[72] *MA*, 15-20.

[73] Finnis accepts that moral absolutes are all negative (i.e. prohibitions).

> [one] is not excused from doing everything morally possible to pursue the goods which could have been sought by violating the moral absolute ... the situation thus morally structured challenges the chooser to expand the horizons of possibility with creativity and zeal.[74]

Finnis argues that it is proportionalism that involves the inevitable narrowing of horizons in order to render the judgement manageable (or at least seemingly so) by choosing which factors and consequences of an action are to be included in a moral judgement. Finnis is undoubtedly right to suggest that it is simply impossible for the proportionalists to consider every conceivable consequence, and that they must inevitably limit their horizon. Any such limiting of horizon, says Finnis, cannot be guided by any *moral* principles but only by 'feelings'.[75] However, the proportionalist criticism of moral absolutes that they 'irrationally abstract some elements from the totality of a human action' still has considerable force unless one believes that a 'rational' approach *must* involve moral absolutes. Moral absolutes are undoubtedly abstractions; the only question is whether they are rationally justified; and indeed whether such justification has any *moral* grounds. Finnis is attempting to preserve moral judgement as a purely rational endeavour and to deny any role to feelings. This conception of reason and its opposition to feelings and desire is open to question.[76] Surely proportionalism can also be a challenge to expand the horizons of possibility with creativity and zeal: the only apparent difference between the two situations of moral judgement is that for the legalist certain types of act are simply excluded. The legalism of moral absolutes and the assessments of proportionalism *both* involve a narrowing of horizons.

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[74] *MA*, 17.

[75] *MA*, 18.

[76] See e.g. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind : The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *MI*; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 2nd revised ed, 1920-25), II-1.59. Aquinas argues that virtue and passion can co-exist provided passions are subordinate to reason.

2.1.5 The possibility of exceptions

Schüller argues that it can be right, in certain circumstances, to violate any of the moral norms; Finnis disagrees. In a reflection on the tale of the Tyrant's Wife[77] (where the moral issue is whether it would be right to seduce a tyrant's wife in order to overthrow the tyrant), Finnis addresses this question of whether acts prohibited by his moral absolutes could ever be right, concluding, of course, that they cannot. For Finnis, adultery, fornication, lying and murder are simply always wrong and this wrongness is not simply 'formal', i.e. it is not contained within the definition of the acts (as e.g. adultery is not *defined* as 'wrongful sex outside marriage' but simply as 'sex outside marriage' which is deemed wrongful by a separate judgement).

Finnis here touches on the important issue of concept formation in relation to 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'. For the legalist, it can never be right to do certain bad things (proscribed by moral absolutes). Once an action is identified as wrong it must not be chosen whatever one's feelings: it is better to suffer wrong than to do it.[78] This is an exercise in avoiding evil. For the proportionalist, an act is identified as the right thing to do by virtue of its good (or less harmful) consequences: in tragic situations an action may be 'right' even though still 'bad'. This is an exercise in maximising the good. General moral intuition certainly suggests that actions usually conceived of as wrong may have to be done on certain occasions: either for a greater good or in tragic situations where there is no good option. The distinction need not be, as Finnis suggests, between whether such acts are good or bad but between whether they are right or wrong *in the circumstances*. For Finnis, the circumstances make no difference to a moral judgement in the face of a moral absolute. This, though, is to abstract an action from its context in the totality of human life. Can an action be adequately specified without reference to the context? Finnis argues that such acts are defined 'in terms of the acting person's object: what that person chooses'. However, that choice will always include a consideration of context: Finnis makes the point himself when he quotes (approvingly) Aquinas's suggestion that an act of marital intercourse and an act of adultery are *different* acts, that they 'relate to the human goods at stake in intercourse quite

[77] *MA*, 31-37.

[78] *MA*, 47.

differently'.[79] This can surely only be maintained with reference to the context (of marriage, at least)? Even then, the act may not be adequately specified, e.g. in cases of marital rape. Context and motivation are important factors in moral judgement and specific moral absolutes do not leave any room for such considerations. Finnis himself declares that:

> To define an act for the purpose of moral evaluation, one should not look to the physical behaviour and causality precisely as such. Instead one should look to the proposal, combining envisaged end with selected means, which the acting person adopts (or may adopt) by choice, the proposal which any relevant behaviour will express and carry out.[80]

It seems that in the process of defining moral acts, moral absolutes have already 'smuggled in' considerations of consequences (envisaged end). O'Donovan notes the importance of implicit considerations of context in certain moral norms. He argues that some norms which appear to be merely tautologous do in fact have specific force by virtue of 'an unspoken reserve of cultural understanding' (his example is 'Do your duty', addressed to a soldier).[81] He suggests that some words in these moral norms involve an implicit reference to cultural commitments. In a similar manner, he suggests, some terms in Finnis's moral absolutes 'arise explicitly from institutions and conventions in society' (for example the institution of marriage). He argues that in both cases the norms 'affirm as valid a corpus of moral demands which is associated with a social role'. [82]

Finnis attempts to answer the objection that tradition has allowed killing for the sake of a greater good: in war and in capital punishment. He notes that Aquinas contended that capital punishment 'need involve no choice to destroy a human good ... but can be done with a different intentionality ... restoring the order of justice violated by the one who killed'.[83] He admits that Aquinas's explanation may be challenged (rightly so, for it is surely disingenuous in the extreme) but claims that Aquinas is intent on avoiding any 'greater good' type of argument which might be labelled as proportionalist.

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[79] *MA*, 38. See Aquinas, 'Summa Theologica', I-2.18 and I-2.1.

[80] *MA*, 40.

[81] O'Donovan, 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes', 118.

[82] O'Donovan, 'John Finnis on Moral Absolutes', 119.

[83] *MA*, 55-57. Aquinas, 'Summa Theologica', II-2.64.

Finnis's defence of the moral absolutes includes the principle that evil cannot be chosen even for the sake of a greater good.[84] He repeats his criticism of proportionalism: that it can result in the absurd position of recommending that one 'try anything', even sin, because this provides the opportunity for the greater good of God's glory in redemption. He suggests that this form of antinomianism was rejected by Paul in Romans 3 and that he (Paul) was effectively arguing against a consequentialist approach which judged actions according to their effectiveness. Finnis sees this as anticipating his own critique of proportionalism: that it is inconsistent with divine providence.[85] He also attributes the principle (that one may never do wrong in order to prevent a greater wrong) to St Augustine who argues that though intention and purpose are significant in moral debate there are some things which are clearly always wrong and should never be chosen whatever the intention.[86] However, it is the consideration of intention which, for Finnis, is crucial when considering the unwanted consequences, or side-effects, of a moral choice.

2.1.6 The principle of double effect

Finnis emphasises the distinction between actions that are *intended* and actions that are merely *side-effects* of a choice.[87] He asserts that certain types of intention (those prohibited by the specific moral absolutes) are 'incompatible with the love of God and with seeking the Kingdom' because they are simply incompatible with a concern for human good.[88] He goes on to consider the importance of intention in other moral judgements: this significance of intention is the basis for the doctrine of double effect. Actions are defined by their intention, and that intention includes not just the end of the action but also the means of attaining it; means are seen as intermediate ends. Behaviourally different acts may be morally identical because they share the same end,[89] as may positive actions and omissions. However, other effects which are not directly related to the achievement of the end are simply *side-effects* and are not relevant in evaluating the morality of the choice or intention. They are categorised as pre-moral

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[84] *MA*, 59.

[85] *MA*, 60-63.

[86] *MA*, 63-66.

[87] *MA*, 67.

[88] *MA*, 68.

[89] *Finnis's example is contraception by barrier methods and by the contraceptive pill.*

evils. One may have a moral responsibility for these side-effects but it is different from the responsibility one has for one's moral choices. Finnis argues that

> though they are caused by one's choice and action, they are not chosen, that is, are not intended, even if they are foreseen (even foreseen as certain). Rather, they are permitted, that is, (as I shall say), *accepted*.[90]

Finnis does accept that one may have a great moral responsibility for foreseen consequences of a choice but insists that they are to be evaluated on a different basis from the choice itself. It is hard to see why one is not equally morally responsible for something one can foresee 'as certain' to result from one's choice as for that choice's 'intended' consequences (though *possible* side-effects could be considered differently).

Consequentialists might argue that a course of action resulting in the death of non-combatants could be right in certain circumstances; Finnis might agree if the deaths were a side-effect:

> Killing non-combatants as a side effect, which one clearly foresees and thus accepts, of one's properly motivated military operations can be acceptable; but killing non-combatants, by the very same devices, as a means of demoralising enemy combatants ... is never to be intended, chosen, done.[91]

In his moral deliberation, Finnis has taken account of context (war) and consequences (death of non-combatants), as well as intention, to conclude that the moral absolute prohibiting the taking of innocent life can be broken (though not intentionally). For Finnis, the moral absolute that evil may not be chosen for the sake of good is not the measure of one's responsibility for side-effects. They are measured instead by the principle of fairness and by 'other basic moral principles'.[92] Finnis himself acknowledges the importance of other features of context when he outlines the 'basic moral principles' to which he refers:

> creativity and fidelity in making and carrying out commitments, a certain detachment from particular goals, and all the other virtues needed to bring feelings and actions into harmony with reason's grasp of the basic human goods.[93]

He describes the prudent as mature people of practical wisdom, part of whose prudence is

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[90] *MA*, 71.

[91] *MA*, 68.

[92] *MA*, 81.

[93] *MA*, 81.

> precisely their firm integration of character around *all* the moral absolutes, their unwillingness even to deliberate about departing from one or other of them.[94]

Why could prudence not involve the integration of character around 'important moral principles' (virtually exceptionless, perhaps, but not absolute)? Even for Finnis, context and consequences are important and a judgement has to be made about 'fairness' or 'proportionateness' which is dependent upon context. The attempt to limit consideration of moral responsibility simply to one's intention seems impossible to attain. Chappell comments that

> in the explanation of actions, context is everything; but what the Grisez School offers is precisely an abstraction from any particular context.[95]

It may be that consequentialism's goal is also unattainable and that moral judgement may need to consider more aspects of a situation than simply future consequences but legalism's abstractions seem equally unsatisfactory. Both are guilty of abstracting from the totality of the context of moral decision-making.

Finnis addresses attempts by Richard McCormick, and by Hallett, to show that one may indeed intend human harm as a means to greater good.[96] Their examples include lying to protect confessional secrets; corporal punishment; capital punishment; therapeutic amputation; self-defence; and distressing criticism. Finnis argues that in all cases the intention is not to cause harm but that the action can properly be framed in terms of a different intention. Once more he struggles with capital punishment arguing that it is possible to hold that

> just insofar as the action chosen immediately and of itself instantiates the good of retributive justice, the death of the one being punished is not being chosen as an end in itself or as a means to an ulterior end.[97]

However, he argues that justification of capital punishment for the purpose of deterrence would be questionable. The suggestion that 'the death of the one being punished is not being chosen' surely highlights the questionableness of legalism's abstraction of 'intention': a good deal of 'context' has here been introduced in the identification of an agent's intention.

Just as interesting is the issue of therapeutic amputation. Finnis argues that

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[94] *MA*, 83, emphasis original.

[95] Chappell, 'Natural Law Revived', 42.

[96] *MA*, 78.

[97] *MA*, 79-80.

> therapeutic amputation (e.g. to prevent spread of cancer) is not doing harm but preventing the further harm that a limb already doomed would do to the health or life of the person.[98]

Once again, the context is relevant to the identification of intention in this example: the crucial phrase is 'already doomed'. In cases where it is clear that a limb can not be salvaged then Finnis's assertion holds true. However it is clear that amputation does involve harm when one considers other more difficult situations. What is the intention when therapeutic amputation is performed in a case where it is not certain that the limb is already doomed? What if there are possible alternatives that may save the limb? Just how early in the course of the disease can amputation be considered? Amputation of a limb in very early and localised cases of malignancy might prevent spread of the cancer, and that may be the intention of the surgeon, but that surely does not make it morally right? Again legalism's abstraction is unsuccessful: the subjective judgement of proportionateness must be based upon considerations of context and consequences. We have seen that Finnis characterises such judgement as an 'instinct' and 'beyond reason'. In my view, the model of an aesthetic judgement might be nearer the mark.

2.1.7 The aesthetic dissolution of the absolutes

There is one further type of challenge to the moral absolutes (and it is similar to the approach I wish to commend). Finnis refers to it as the aesthetic dissolution of the absolutes.[99] Finnis observes that such models of ethics are based on a particular reading of Aristotle on *phronesis*, and argues that they involve a '... reduction of ethics – not to a technique so much as to something like a creative fine art.'[100]

Finnis suggests that in any form of artistic creation the artist is not simply guided by some independent technique or by any goal external to the process: 'thus artistic creation outruns technique'. Instead, the artist is guided by a sense or intuition in response to the characteristics of their medium: the specific artistic creation is the only way for the artist to articulate this sense. 'There is an interaction between the process of creation and this imaginative "conception" or "intuition" or "anticipation" of the object'. The design may be radically altered during the process but never disappears.

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[98] *MA*, 79.

[99] *MA*, 101.

[100] *MA*, 101-02.

The aesthetic evaluation of the creation involves considerations both of 'what the work is trying to say' and 'how the work is saying it'. The criteria for judgement cannot be wholly specified prior to, or independently of, the creation:

> Provided the composition has a kind of inner unity, clarity, integrity, it can have an aesthetic worth which can govern and reshape, rather than be governed by, pre-existing standards generalizing the features of previous aesthetic objects which by their own inner unity, clarity, integrity established for themselves their artistic worth.

Finnis notes that some people 'conceive the moral life in a fashion analogous to this'. Moral norms interact with specific actions and are 'public distillations' of morally good action. There are no criteria which could allow the right to be identified in the abstract; rather, virtuous agents demonstrate excellence in a way analogous to a superior athlete.

> They propose that thinking about a situation which calls for something to be done 'is not the consideration of maxims and the placing of a case under a general rule'. They claim that moral principles and norms form no kind of system; none of them has its truth by being derivable from or otherwise related to the others; each has its truth 'by living off what [virtuous and vicious] agents do'.[101]

Perhaps moral principles and norms form no kind of *rationalistic* system but that does not necessarily mean that they are arbitrary, just as aesthetic judgement is not arbitrary.

The suggestion that the 'virtuous agent' demonstrates 'the excellence' that is possible in human behaviour is entirely in accord with the tradition of the saints (exemplary lives honoured for what they can teach us) and with the moral example of Christ (which must surely constitute at least a part of the moral import of the gospel). Johnson suggests that

> moral education and growth do not consist primarily in the learning of moral rules. We learn by experience and example ... We are inspired by the lives of people ... who seem to us to be caring, sensitive, intelligent, courageous and wise. We get a sense of what we might become and how we might live by observing how they live and by trying to act as they would.[102]

Finnis rightly identifies one conclusion of the aesthetic model of ethics: that 'the wrongness of certain choices cannot be known in advance'.[103] He suggests that on this model the right choice can only be determined in each situation:

> a field free from rational ... criteria, that is, from *applicable* standards for identifying which choices are not right.[104]

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[101] *MA*, 102-03, emphasis mine. Finnis attributes such views to e.g. Sokolowski and Conn. The quotations are from Robert Sokolowski, *Moral Action* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

[102] *MI*, 258.

[103] *MA*, 103.

[104] *MA*, 104, emphasis original.

This is simply an unwarranted exaggeration: the aesthetic model is not free of rational criteria; rather, other criteria are considered alongside reason; and standards, though provisional and derived from community and tradition, are still operative. Finnis's characterisation may hold true for forms of antinomianism: consider Fletcher's definition;

> This is the approach with which one enters into the decision-making situation armed with no principles or maxims whatsoever, to say nothing of rules. In every 'existential moment' or 'unique' situation, it declares, one must rely upon the situation of itself, there and then, to provide its ethical solution.[105]

To suggest that because the system does not rely exclusively on deductive reasoning it is completely unprincipled is a *non sequitur*. Finnis insists on reason alone, and on a particular conception of reason, in moral judgement. Göran Bexell suggests that the Finnis-Grisez School represents a rationalistic, rather than simply a rational ethics:

> A rational ethic is based on rational considerations and is logically consistent; its opposite is an irrational ethic. That ethics ought to be rational few would contest. A rationalistic ethic, on the other hand, allows *only the reason* to determine moral theology, at the expense of other human spiritual capabilities and other ethical phenomena; it may well presuppose an Aristotelian view of human beings as specifically rational. In such a system, feelings, will, or intuition should not override reason, as they may in a rational ethic.[106]

For Finnis, it is 'the sway of feelings over reason [that] constitutes immorality by deflecting one to objectives not in line with integral human fulfillment'.[107] The first principle of morality is that one ought to will only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with integral human fulfilment: Finnis describes this as the most abstract and generic moral absolute.[108] Finnis's conception of morality is thoroughly rationalistic:

> Nothing is unconditional (absolute) in moral thought save the demand of reason itself.[109]

This is a conception of reason as absolute and universal, and which has no room for feelings and desires.

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[105] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (London: S.C.M., 1966), 22.

[106] Göran Bexell, 'Is Grisez's Moral Theology Rationalistic? Free Choice, the Human Condition, and Christian Ethics', in Biggar and Black, *The Revival of Natural Law,* 131-47, at 133, emphasis mine.

[107] *MA*, 45.

[108] *MA*, 45.

[109] *MA*, 47.

Finnis argues that the aesthetic model overlooks 'the profound difference between the open-ended goods of persons ... and the *material* on which every fine art works'. He suggests that;

> In an art, features of a particular item of matter can make a significant difference to the artist's performance, a difference controlled by the artist's imagination and other non-intellectual sensitivities and acts. [110]

In this, Finnis simply begs the question. Why can similar considerations not be true of a moral agent? It is precisely the imagination (and other non-intellectual sensitivities and acts) whose place in ethics I wish to affirm. Although Finnis maintains his position regarding moral absolutes, he does say of positive norms:

> When the question is what *should* be done, the (affirmative) norms themselves, however specific, leave something, often much, to be settled by a conscience which now must be measured by the unintelligible particularity of one's own feelings, by an intuitional grip, by the 'discernment' which constitutes a particular prudence, about what is to be done.[111]

Quite so, and if one abandons the notion of moral absolutes then this becomes true of all situations of moral deliberation. Finnis argues that all the objections to moral absolutes which seek to make ethics a *techne* must fail because of the open-ended nature of human fulfilment. The result, he suggests, is that ultimately such approaches rely on 'an appeal to "instinct", "sense" or "intuition"'.[112] Similarly he suggests that for the aesthetic model 'the upshot is, again, an appeal to "intuition"'.[113] Finnis's final criticism of the aesthetic model is that it is basically an 'ad hoc proportionalism'.[114] He suggests that to claim that the exceptional features of a situation warrant the violation of a norm is to claim that those features 'outweigh the "wrong-making" factors!': hence his charge of proportionalism. However, this argument is circular: it is only because Finnis has chosen to characterise the claim in terms of *weighing* factors that this conclusion follows. The aesthetic justification of such an exception need involve no such instrumental method.

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[110] *MA*, 104.
[111] *MA*, 104.
[112] *MA*, 101.
[113] *MA*, 102.
[114] *MA*, 105.

2.1.8 Are moral absolutes defensible?

I wish to challenge the possibility of moral absolutes and the mentality that accompanies a legalist approach to ethics. I suggest it is simply not possible to specify moral norms with sufficient precision to make them universally applicable, i.e. exceptionless or absolute in Finnis's terms. However, such norms need not be abandoned completely, they can still be useful guides, suggesting what is *usually* (or, indeed, *almost always*) right. Finnis seems to assume that because such models deny moral absolutes they must necessarily abandon all norms completely. However this is not the case: consider Joseph Fletcher's definition of situationism:

> The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so.[115]

We need not abandon the system of moral norms; merely reconsider its status. Richard B. Miller's description of rules seems to correspond better to the phenomenology of ethical decision-making:

> rules ... do not track human conduct in the way that scientific laws track the behaviour of physical bodies: ... precisely and comprehensively, without remainder. But moral rules provide neither of these forms of coverage. That is because the behaviour to which moral rules refer is the result of human freedom and is embedded in chance and contingency. Moreover, the coverage provided by moral rules is relatively indeterminate in part because the language of moral rules is open-textured, requiring interpretation and clarification in the process of connecting them to facts or cases.[116]

Likewise Henry Sidgwick:

> what is needed is a line of argument which on the one hand allows the validity, to a certain extent, of the maxims already accepted, and on the other hand shows them to be not absolutely valid, but needing to be controlled by some more comprehensive principle.[117]

The question is whether exceptions should be allowed to rules which both sides agree are *generally* valid: in other words, whether rules should be absolute.

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[115] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 26.

[116] Richard B. Miller, 'Rules', in Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 220-36, at 220.

[117] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 4th ed, 1890), 417.

Many of Finnis's criticisms of proportionalism may be telling but to accept them does not imply that one must accept his account of moral judgement. While legalism appeals to universal moral reason and to absolute truth, consequentialism appeals to a quasi-scientific method. Legalism and consequentialism may both embody Enlightenment tendencies and both may thereby be untenable as complete systems despite both identifying important moral principles.

2.2 Utilitarianism

2.2.1 Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill

Classical utilitarianism was first formulated by Jeremy Bentham.[118] He built his system of ethical judgement on the idea of utility as the promotion of pleasure and avoidance of pain, drawing on ideas from Thomas Hobbes and David Hume. Bentham's is the first and paradigmatic statement of utilitarian ethics. The theory has been modified and adapted by later authors but, to a very large extent, all subsequent forms of utilitarianism and consequentialism represent attempts fully to come to terms with Bentham's legacy. Bentham outlines his method thus:

> To take an exact account then of the general tendency of any act, by which the interests of a community are affected, begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,
>
> 1. Of the value of each distinguishable *pleasure* which appears to be produced by it in the *first* instance.
>
> 2. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it in *the first* instance.
>
> 3. Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it *after* the first. This constitutes the *fecundity* of the first *pleasure* and the *impurity* of the first *pain.*
>
> 4. Of the value of each *pain* which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the *fecundity* of the first *pain,* and the *impurity* of the first pleasure.
>
> 5. Sum up all the values of all the *pleasures* on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the *good* tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that *individual* person; if on the side of pain, the *bad* tendency of it upon the whole.
>
> 6. Take an account of the *number* of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. *Sum up* the

[118] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1780] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1876).

> numbers expressive of the degrees of *good* tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *bad* upon the whole. Take the *balance;* which, if on the side of *pleasure,* will give the general *good tendency* of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general *evil tendency,* with respect to the same community.[119]

Bentham argues that his system allows the words '... ought, right and wrong and others of that stamp' to have objective meaning which they otherwise lack. If an action conforms to the principle of utility then it is one that ought to be done (or at least it is not one that ought not to be done), it is a right action.[120] For Bentham, utility is the only principle by which human beings should, and actually do, make moral decisions.

> The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection [to pleasure and pain], and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law.[121]

Note that Bentham's language in outlining his method is mathematical ('exact', 'value', 'numbers', 'sum up', 'balance' etc.). His approach is to attribute *numerical* values to the consequences of an act and to consider the resulting inequality sum. Utilitarianism thus represents an attempt to make ethics into a scientific discipline:

> The aim of ethics is to render scientific – i.e. true, and as far as possible systematic – the apparent cognitions that most men have of the rightness or reasonableness of conduct.[122]

It seeks to reduce complex ethical decision-making to a consideration of a single principle: utility. An ethical decision is supposed to be the result of the creation of an inequality sum of utility (and disutility) for each alternative course of action and a comparison of the results: the right action being the one which produces the greatest utility (or the least disutility). Johnson is critical of this kind of reductionism:

> Whereas Kantianism impoverishes reason by its excessive abstractionism, its chief Enlightenment rival, utilitarianism, does so by a corresponding reductionism. To put it crudely, utilitarianism reduces reason to economic, means-ends, technical rationality as the sole criterion for moral evaluation.[123]

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[119] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, 30-31.

[120] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, 3-4.

[121] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, 1-2.

[122] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 77, see also 422.

[123] *MI*, 120.

While Johnson here contrasts utilitarian *reduction* with Kantian abstraction, utilitarianism too performs its own versions of abstraction. In order to keep the 'arithmetic' manageable, utilitarians must limit their consideration of possible consequences. This process, which requires some prior principle to guide the selection, inevitably means that some features of the context are disregarded. This may be the case for all ethical deliberation but utilitarians are under particular pressure to 'narrow their horizons' and, arguably, the system has an inbuilt tendency to prefer those features which can be easily 'measured' (in terms of utility). As Bernard Williams rightly observes, such limitation has the effect of giving measurable consequences an unreasonable prominence in the decision whilst dismissing those features of a situation which do not fit readily into the utilitarian scheme.[124] Utilitarianism is characterised by a distinctive method rather than distinctive results. For Williams the question is

> not 'do you agree with utilitarianism's answer?' but 'do you really accept utilitarianism's way of looking at the question?'[125]

Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism and as such is committed to the position that actions are to be judged solely by their consequences; and that institutions, laws and practices are similarly justified by reference to their consequences. Actions themselves do not have any intrinsic value.

Roger Badham observes that such attempts to introduce scientific method into the human sciences are an attempt to turn *phronesis* into *techne* whereby *techne* falsely claims that its scientific methods produce all the knowledge necessary for a society:

> More specifically, in ethics the just society is produced by means of objective, universalisable ethical principles while the issue of virtuous character is denied real significance as unscientific, subjective and, therefore, untrustworthy.[126]

This universalistic frame of mind is typical of a scientific approach. It leaves no room for altruism and must assume that a moral method will produce similar results in similar circumstances. I want to suggest that such universalism is a chimera.

Utilitarianism is an attempt to make ethics purely 'rational' (in Enlightenment terms) and to free it from the influence of passion and emotion as well as the 'unwarranted' claims of authority. J. J. C. Smart explicitly sets out to

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[124] Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77-150, at 148.

[125] Williams, 'Critique', 78.

[126] Roger A. Badham, 'The Implications of Gadamer's Hermeneutics for Contemporary Christian Ethics' (Ph.D. thesis, Drew University, 1997), 30.

> state a system of ethics which is free from traditional and theological associations.[127]

Sidgwick focuses on the methods or processes of ethics:[128] as a result, traditional narratives and symbols are cast off (or at least, this is attempted). I will argue, with Gadamer, that it is not, in fact, possible to cast them off: it is they that have the power to mediate meaning. I will also suggest that the attempt to produce a purely rational ethics is misguided and illegitimate:

> this is not an *interpretation* but a de-mythologisation which has determined *a priori* that symbols and myths have no value.[129]

For utilitarianism, the question of the 'good' or the 'useful', the criteria by which consequences are to be judged, has been contentious, and different versions of utilitarianism have offered different definitions. Bentham's initial answer was to equate usefulness with the ability to promote pleasure and avoid pain, based on his observation that this is the principle upon which most people do in fact act, even if they do not consciously think of it:

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. [130]

And he was thus able, famously, to assert that 'quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry'. This must follow from Bentham's basic premise: 'goodness' here is simply defined in terms of quantity of pleasure. For Bentham, the interest of the community was simply to be determined by the sum of the interests of its members.

Bentham wishes to exclude all judgements of approbation based on feeling. He is here attacking moral sense theorists and leaves no room for 'aesthetic' judgements or communal values in his single-minded pursuit of an 'extrinsic' principle on which to base ethical judgements. This constitutes a form of abstraction: removing ethical judgements from all influence of feeling. Again this is a reflection of his determination to establish moral judgements on rational and scientific foundations. Bentham is aware of the complexity of this task and sets out at great length the kinds of pleasures and

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[127] J. J. C. Smart, 'An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics', in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 3-74, at 4.

[128] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 14.

[129] Badham, 'Implications', 98.

[130] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, 1.

pains and their measurement together with factors affecting human beings' sensibility to such pains and pleasures.[131] He is also aware of the unreasonable practical demands that such a system would make if applied to every moral decision:

> It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.[132]

In order for this system to be even remotely manageable, Bentham must drastically restrict his definition of utility. He chooses a strict hedonistic principle:

> By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.[133]

John Stuart Mill's essay on utilitarianism[134] is perhaps better known than Bentham's original work. Mill clarifies the principle of utility and explores its connections with other theories. He attempts to ground the theory in human nature and shows its compatibility with much ordinary moral reflection. However, he was unhappy with Bentham's definition of happiness and his adoption of a one-dimensional principle of pleasure. Mill held instead that there are *higher* and *lower* pleasures:

> better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. [135]

> It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that, while in estimating all other things quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.[136]

However, this adds a further level of complexity to the utilitarian calculus: it is not clear how this 'quality' is to be estimated nor does it seem likely that everyone will desire the same pleasures in the same degree. The difficulties of defining and of adequately evaluating types of happiness are highlighted even further by Smart who considers the hypothetical case of a man fitted with electrodes, the self-stimulation of which produced

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[131] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, chapters 3-6.

[132] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, 31.

[133] Bentham, *Morals and Legislation*, 2.

[134] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861] (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 2nd ed, 2001).

[135] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10.

[136] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 8.

various kinds of pleasure.[137] The instinctive reaction is to suggest that man was made for 'higher things' although the strict hedonist would simply have to decide in terms of quantities of pleasure. 'Happiness' is in itself an evaluative concept. Whilst Mill admits that it is possible to learn to do without happiness and even, in the case of the hero or the martyr, to reject it, he does not believe that this negates the principle of utility. Rather, he argues, the hero or the martyr prizes the happiness of others more than his own individual happiness. Despite this, however, Mill insists on keeping rigidly separate the morality of the action, the worth of the agent and the agent's motive: 'the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action'.[138] This is another form of abstraction and raises the question of whether it is really legitimate to characterise two actions as (morally) identical when they are performed in different contexts, by different agents and for different motives. As Williams points out, the situation is even more complex when one allows for 'negative responsibility' (a notion he wishes to criticise): when judged in terms of consequences alone one is just as responsible for the things one allows or fails to prevent.[139] In consequentialist terms there is no moral difference between me bringing about a situation and someone else (whom I could have prevented) doing so. As Williams observes this 'represents ... the extreme of impartiality, and abstracts from the identity of the agent.'[140]

2.2.2 G. E. Moore's challenge to utilitarianism

G. E. Moore is sharply critical of Mill (and of Sidgwick) arguing that pleasure is not the only criterion of the good and that Mill's comments on 'quality' of pleasures[141] actually imply that this must be the case.[142] Both Moore and Sidgwick argue that the 'good' is an unanalysable concept; utilitarianism's insistence that pleasure is the sole good can only be based on intuition and its claims rest simply on self-evidence.[143] Moore is happy to accept that pleasure may be good as an end but cannot accept that pleasure *alone* is good as an end. Moore criticises Mill for asserting that 'good' simply means 'desirable'

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[137] Smart, 'Outline', 19-20.

[138] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 18.

[139] Williams, 'Critique', 95.

[140] Williams, 'Critique', 96.

[141] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 59-109.

[142] Sidgwick, *Methods*.

[143] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 59-60.

and that one can only identify the 'desirable' by identifying what is *actually* desired. Moore counters that:

> The desirable means simply what *ought* to be desired or *deserves* to be desired.[144]

Where Moore's criticism really bites is in his critique of Mill's comments on *quality* of pleasures. Moore rightly points out that there must be some other criteria of 'good' by which Mill can make the judgement that certain pleasures are better, or of higher quality, than others. The judgement, by Mill's own argument, cannot be based simply on quantity or intensity of pleasure; rather there must be some other way of identifying the higher pleasures. Mill is determined to cling to his utilitarian principles but the situation is becoming too complex for a simple inequality sum involving just one term (pleasure) to provide an ethical judgement of sufficient weight and flexibility. This is even without introducing the further complexities associated with concepts of justice and equitable distribution: should the utilitarian be aiming to increase *total* happiness or *average* happiness? Smart suggests that there are

> good utilitarian reasons for adopting the principle of fairness as an important, but not inviolable, rule of thumb.[145]

Moore held that certain states of mind (learning, for example) had intrinsic value which was independent of any associated pleasure (or pain);[146] this is in contrast to Bentham and Mill who argued that their value was only as a means to attaining pleasure. Also, he argued that some things (truth, beauty, love and friendship, for example) were good independently of whether people actually desired them. I would agree with Moore that we intuitively value some things above others but I suggest it is meaningless to talk of value without any possibility of real application, without asking 'valuable for whom?'. Moore is critical of Sidgwick for suggesting that

> no one would consider it rational to aim at the production of beauty in external nature, apart from any possible contemplation of it by human beings.[147]

Moore does consider it rational: but I think the point that Sidgwick makes could be seen, in part at least, as the idea that the very definition of 'beauty' implies human (or possibly divine) contemplation. Moore asks us to consider two imaginary worlds: one beautiful and one ugly:

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[144] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 67, emphasis original.

[145] Smart, 'Outline', 37.

[146] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 86-87.

[147] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 114.

> Well, even supposing them *quite apart from any possible contemplation by human beings*; still is it irrational to hold that it is better that the beautiful world should exist, than the one which is ugly? [148]

What Moore has failed to notice in this example is that he (or any other judge) *contemplates* such worlds in the very act of imagining them. Our imagination is a crucial component of our ethical deliberation: in utilitarianism, imagination is involved both in the envisaging of consequences and in the evaluation of happiness (for oneself and for others). As Williams observes:

> discussion about how one would think and feel about situations somewhat different from the actual (that is to say, situations to that extent imaginary) plays an important role in the discussion of the actual.[149]

Any attempt to consider beauty or pleasure without reference to a subject constitutes a further form of abstraction. I hope to argue that the same is true of 'goodness' and that all attempts to abstract ethical decisions from contexts and agents should be resisted. Sidgwick hints at something similar:

> nothing ... appears to possess this quality of goodness out of relation to human existence, or at least to some consciousness or feeling.[150]

> the perception of goodness or virtue in actions would seem to be analogous to the perception of beauty in material things: which is normally accompanied with a specific pleasure which we call 'aesthetic'.[151]

However, he is careful to point out that goodness and beauty should not simply be equated: there can be good conduct which is not 'beautiful' and 'striking gifts and excellences' even in crime and wickedness.[152]

Moore himself is critical of the abstraction of pleasure (or consciousness of pleasure) as the only criterion for determining the 'good' and suggests that it is 'quite plain' that there are other more complicated states of mind which we think of as desirable. Therefore consciousness of pleasure cannot be the sole good; rather we must consider the 'principle of organic unities'.[153] It is not only the complexity of situations and consequences that militate against the method of utilitarianism; the complexity of human beings compounds the difficulties still further. I would suggest that ethical deliberation is far too complex for any single criterion or scientific method to do it full

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[148] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 83-84, emphasis mine.

[149] Williams, 'Critique', 97.

[150] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 113.

[151] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 108.

[152] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 108, in footnote 1.

[153] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 96.

justice. Williams is highly critical of utilitarianism because, he argues, it is simply incapable of making sense of the integrity of a moral agent as it makes only 'the most superficial sense of human desire and action'[154] and is unable to 'coherently describe the relations between a man's projects and his actions'.[155] Consequentialism denies any intrinsic value to actions and yet the activities that one freely chooses are those in which one can see intrinsic value. Williams argues that the denial of intrinsic value to actions is in danger of completely undermining utilitarianism: why would anyone choose to be a utilitarian unless they could see intrinsic value in that particular form of moral deliberation?[156] Equally, he suggests, it is absurd to require an agent to disregard his own projects in favour of the results of utility calculations which explicitly do allow for the projects of others.[157] Williams criticises Smart, and utilitarianism, for omitting any consideration of 'excellencies of character' which could help to define a 'good man'.[158] He also observes that in many important ways utilitarianism 'runs against the complexities of moral thought'.[159] This, I suggest is the inevitable result of the single-minded scientific reductionism which is at the heart of utilitarianism's method.

2.2.3 The big problem: incommensurability

One step in that method, the summing of utilities, has given rise to most criticism of utilitarianism. The very possibility of such a step presupposes the commensurability of goods:

> the assumption is involved that all pleasures included in our calculation are capable of being compared quantitatively with one another and with all pains ... so that each may be at least roughly weighed in ideal scales against any other.[160]

Smart observes that the complexity is, in fact, even greater as one has to not only foresee possible consequences and compare likely pleasures but also to estimate their probabilities.[161] Commensurability is required, first, between different goods for the same person (intrapersonal) and, second, between different people in relation to the

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[154] Williams, 'Critique', 82.

[155] Williams, 'Critique', 100.

[156] Williams, 'Critique', 85.

[157] Williams, 'Critique', 116.

[158] Williams, 'Critique', 128.

[159] Williams, 'Critique', 149.

[160] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 411. See also Williams, 'Critique', 88.

[161] Smart, 'Outline', 38-39.

same good (interpersonal): the latter is particularly difficult to ascertain. In practice, what is often required is simultaneous intrapersonal and interpersonal comparisons – good A for person X compared to good B for person Y. Robert Goodin argues that this is really only a problem for hedonistic Utilitarians: 'they are the ones asking us to get inside someone else's head'.[162] Williams suggests that utilitarianism makes enormous demands on the availability of empirical information: information which is, in truth, 'largely unavailable and shrouded in conceptual difficulty.'[163] He suggests that this is tolerated because consequentialism

> appeals to a frame of mind in which technical difficulty, even insuperable technical difficulty, is preferable to moral unclarity.[164]

This blind following of method (*techne*) is a feature of a scientific approach which is wholly committed to the pursuit of clarity, of a univocal 'right answer'. In the face of insuperable technical difficulty utilitarianism is regularly faced with situations where it can offer no justified (on its own terms) ethical guidance. Why should this be preferable to 'moral unclarity'?

Goodin suggests that welfare utilitarianism can mitigate the difficulties of interpersonal utility comparisons by defining utility in terms of welfare interests:

> Whereas preferences, pleasures and pains are highly idiosyncratic, welfare interests are highly standardised.[165]

He argues that it is welfare utilitarianism that has given the 'broader notion of utility some practical content'. However, the more standardised a measure of utility becomes the more abstracted it must be, and therefore it is in danger of losing its relevance to real situations. Goodin is prepared to accept this for the sake of a simple, rational (scientific) system:

> there is considerable advantage in being able to say there is *one common standard* – utilitarianism – underlying arguments both for and against, and hence capable of adjudicating the conflict. Utilitarianism in that way provides some *rational basis* for making what all too often seem to be no more than arbitrary value trade-offs, in such situations.[166]

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[162] Robert E. Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', in Peter Singer (ed.), *Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 241-48, at 246.

[163] Williams, 'Critique', 137.

[164] Williams, 'Critique', 137.

[165] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 246.

[166] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 247, emphasis mine.

However, he observes (without concern) that this is achieved by 'abstracting from people's actual wants to their more generalised welfare needs'.[167] This abstraction is further compounded by utilitarianism's commitment to treat individuals impartially:

> In the utilitarian formula, a utile is a utile is a utile. What we ought to do ... is independent of any consideration of who we are or of any special duties that might arise from that fact.[168]

Such abstraction isolates utilitarianism, and other forms of strict consequentialism, from considerations of tradition and character.

2.2.4 The relevance of tradition and character

Mill is happier than Bentham to allow tradition a role in moral judgement. As an answer to the objection that there is insufficient time, before every action, to fully assess the effects on general happiness, he says

> there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of actions.[169]

Mill is attempting to dispose together of two common criticisms of utilitarianism: that the gathering of the required information is impractical; and that utilitarianism does not take proper account of our moral precepts. For Mill, tradition and communally accepted moral precepts are only secondary rules; nothing more than the distillates of centuries of experience of the effects of actions on happiness; their status depends on the observation that following them generally tends to generate most happiness. Sidgwick observes:

> And in proportion as the apprehension of consequences becomes more comprehensive and exact, we may trace not only change in the moral code handed down from age to age, but progress in the direction of a closer approximation to a perfectly enlightened utilitarianism.[170]

Bentham seems to imply something similar but he seems more determined that each moral judgement should be approached afresh. Mill and Sidgwick allow the moralist to bring with him to the current question the accumulated wisdom of his tradition. In this they are closer to Fletcher's 'situationist' whilst Bentham is nearer to Fletcher's

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[167] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 244.

[168] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 246.

[169] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 24.

[170] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 452.

'antinomian'.[171] Sidgwick is of the opinion that utilitarianism cannot develop a moral code for humanity *de novo*, rather it must start within a received ethical tradition and then consider whether any changes to the tradition can be recommended.[172] In allowing 'rules of thumb' one knows in advance that one will on occasion fail to correctly identify exceptional cases: as Williams puts it: '[one is] licensing some tactical disutility in pursuit of strategic utility.'[173]

Mill was also uncomfortable with Bentham's reductionism and aware that utilitarianism could be seen as rendering men 'cold and unsympathising';[174] he insisted that moralists should cultivate their sympathies as well as their moral feelings.[175] The same charge can, of course, be levelled at deontologists who can appear heartless when preferring 'abstract conformity to a rule to the prevention of avoidable human suffering'.[176] Mill also attempts to justify certain moral precepts (e.g. that it is wrong to lie) by considering the consequences for the character of the individual:

> It would often be expedient [in the short term] ... to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity is one of the most useful ... things to which our conduct can be instrumental ... we feel that the violation [of the rule] ... would not be expedient.[177]

This does not seem consistent with his previous assertions about motivation. On the other hand, Sidgwick is concerned, in a discussion of moral sense or conscience, to give due place to

> the effect of sympathy [on] impulses that prompt to actions as well as with feelings that result from them.[178]

He suggests that the 'direct sympathetic echo' that one feels for the 'judgements and sentiments' of others, in their ethical conduct, is an important factor in sustaining one's own ethical deliberations.[179]

As Mill addresses further criticisms of utilitarianism it seems that he introduces further qualifications and moves further away from a simple utilitarian position. However he

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[171] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 24-25. cf. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 26.

[172] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 469.

[173] Williams, 'Critique', 126.

[174] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 20.

[175] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 21.

[176] Smart, 'Outline', 6.

[177] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 23.

[178] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 457.

[179] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 478.

still argues that all ethical theories are ultimately based on the single principle of utility even when this is not appreciated by their proponents. Music, health, and even virtue, he suggests, are desirable not as means to happiness but as part of happiness itself. The definition (and measurement) of happiness are becoming more and more complex as Mill attempts to make the utilitarian position more humane. Yet, Mill is determined to hold fast to utilitarian principles:

> If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true – if human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness ... [then] happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct.[180]

He suggests that all moralists resort to utilitarian principles in attempts to commend their own theories. Whilst I would accept that all ethical theories require a theory of the good, I think that Mill's mistake is to assume that this must always be defined, as he would argue, in terms of utility, even given the broader conception of utility which he outlines. Another interpretation might be that ethical theories are not all based on the principle of utility but that some utilitarians (like Mill) are prepared to admit the legitimacy of other principles (even if they attempt to justify them not on their own terms but in terms of the principle of utility). It seems that a strict utilitarian position is difficult to hold. It may be that no single ethical system can completely avoid the charge of heartlessness and that the best approach is to combine elements of more than one. Smart suggests that there may well be

> no ethical system which appeals to all people, or even to the same person in different moods.[181]

Heartlessness, it seems to me, may be the direct result of the forms of abstraction which we have already discussed. Could it be, once again, that what is required is a form of aesthetic judgement?

2.2.5 Evaluation of the good: aesthetics?

Goodin observes that all ethical theories require a theory of 'the good', especially utilitarianism which must evaluate 'good consequences'.[182] However he suggests that while such a theory might be indispensable there is little agreement on its content and

[180] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 39.

[181] Smart, 'Outline', 7 and 72.

[182] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', at 241.

source. He observes that most theories of the good appeal to broadly similar standards of goodness, in line with broadly Aristotelian principles which

> analyse excellence in terms of a rich complexity that has been somehow successfully integrated.[183]

He goes on to suggest that such broad agreement 'comes basically in the realm of aesthetics'. He argues that such 'aesthetic' agreement is inadequate to the task required of it by ethical theories because it amounts to 'promoting things that are good in themselves, without being good *for* anyone' whilst ethics is about *social* relations. I disagree with Goodin's evaluation of aesthetic agreement, assuming, as it does, a detached and purely subjective conception of aesthetics. Indeed I would suggest that this is exactly the sort of agreement we should be seeking in ethics. Goodin's dissatisfaction with such an approach is a manifestation of a 'scientific' approach which deeply mistrusts anything which cannot be validated by scientific method.

Mill (and Moore) are surely right to want to qualify (or oppose) Bentham's basic position. However, in order to do so they must appeal to principles which are not contained within a strict utilitarian framework. How are we to categorise higher and lower pleasures? Which states of mind are to be granted 'intrinsic value'? Goodin suggests that such appeals are in danger of undermining their ethical theories:

> the further this distances itself from classic hedonic utilitarianism, and the closer it comes to embracing an aesthetic ideal ... the less credible this analysis is as an ethical theory.[184]

Perhaps Goodin is looking for the wrong sort of ethical theory? He certainly seems to require a particular sort of theory: he is committed to a 'rational' and 'scientific' theory, having already excluded any possibility of an aesthetic component. Mill and Moore, on the other hand, seem to turn instinctively to aesthetic considerations when faced with the cold reductionism of Bentham's utilitarian calculus. Whilst we may not wish to accept the notion of a moral sense or faculty, it may be that aesthetic considerations (balance, elegance, fittingness, appropriateness) can have a place in ethical judgement. Such considerations need imply neither arbitrariness nor simply personal preference.

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[183] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 241.

[184] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 243.

2.2.6 The possibility of exceptions: casuistry

In answer to the criticism of utilitarianism that it allows an individual to favour his own interests, Mill argues that many of the criticisms laid at the door of utilitarianism are no more than comments on the general 'infirmities of human nature'. All moral theories must accept as a fact the existence of conflicting considerations and the possibility of exceptions: at least if they are to be 'believed by sane persons'. [185]

> There is no ethical creed which does not temper the rigidity of its laws by giving a certain latitude, under the moral responsibility of the agent, for accommodation to peculiar circumstances; and under every creed, at the opening thus made, self-deception and dishonest casuistry get in.[186]

This is a crucial observation and the comments regarding self-deception and dishonest casuistry highlight those areas which Finnis and others are, presumably, attempting to avoid by means of their insistence on moral absolutes. However, Mill and Fletcher seem to imply that 'latitude' should not be seen so much as a concession in 'peculiar circumstances' but rather should be seen to operate in a great many more cases of moral judgement: allowing proper consideration of agents, motives, contexts, situations, tradition and rules. The difficulty which then arises is how to evaluate the judgements which are made; at this point Mill would no doubt argue for the reintroduction of the principle of utility, his 'common umpire'.[187] I would argue instead that, at this point, there is a role for aesthetic criteria and communal judgement, matters to which we will return later. Bentham, Mill and Moore are all agreed that the rightness of an action is to be judged solely by consequences, states of affairs brought about by the action. Williams points to an inherent contradiction here. The essence of strict act-utilitarianism is a matter of 'asking oneself the correct question' (the question about consequences) at the moment of ethical deliberation. Ironically this makes it a matter of motivation: one must be motivated solely by a commitment to the consideration of consequences.

Even though Mill and Moore attempt to rescue utilitarianism from Bentham's simple hedonistic calculus they do still hold to the necessity of some form of (more subtle, weighted, more discriminating) calculus. Their criticisms of utilitarianism stem from the effects of Bentham's thoroughgoing reductionism in applying a single principle and a

[185] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 25.

[186] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 25.

[187] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 26.

scientific method. Their own systems, while being less reductionist cannot escape this charge completely: their ethics is still a matter of 'measurement' and comparison. Indeed, it is in the pursuit of this basic conviction that utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism lay themselves open to the classical criticisms and are guilty of varying degrees of abstraction. Utilitarians, perhaps especially Mill, may feel a certain unease about the practical results of a rigid application of a utilitarian calculus but nonetheless they are tied to this basic approach. For all the refinements and modifications, for all the introduction of external principles, and for all the attempts to make the system more humane, the various forms of utilitarianism (and consequentialism) can be reduced to an attempt to put measurable criteria into an inequality-sum for each alternative action. This inherent tension is, I suggest, a manifestation of the inadequacy and inappropriateness of scientific method in ethics. Similar considerations apply to other developments of utilitarianism such as those based on 'preference satisfaction' or on 'welfare'. The criteria, in themselves, may be worthy of consideration; the problems arise when they are co-opted into the service of utilitarian method. The problem lies in the fundamental structure of thought introduced by Bentham, from which subsequent Utilitarians are simply unable completely to escape.

Despite the criticisms of utilitarianism in relation to individual morality, might it perhaps come into its own as a standard for judging public action?

2.2.7 Public morality: a strength of utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism may not be well suited to day-to-day decisions: properly applied the method is simply too time-consuming.[188] However it may be a useful tool on those occasions when we must deliberate and decide on a moral question, so that it could be

> the standard that public policy-makers are to use when making collective choices impinging on the community as a whole ... The right choice is the one which maximises utility summed impersonally across all those affected by an action. [189]

[188] Rule utilitarianism claims to avoid this criticism but it too represents an abstraction from context and is arguably subject to the weaknesses of both utilitarianism *and* legalism.

[189] Goodin, 'Utility and the Good', 245.

This, certainly, seems to have been Bentham's view: he wrote an introduction to the principles of morals and *legislation*. However, even in public settings it is hard for utilitarianism to evade the criticisms levelled at Mill, Moore and others.[190] Williams suggests that many important questions in political philosophy, relating to political principles and to government, cannot be addressed by utilitarianism at all.[191] Although utilitarianism may seem well suited to questions of public policy it is likely that the method can be applied with most precision in certain limited and private cases.[192] In the absence of complete empirical information, utilitarianism can surely only provide a rough answer to a moral question. The sharpest criticisms of utilitarianism relate to incommensurability, inflexibility and inhumanity – all of which, I would argue, are the result of utilitarianism's search for objective scientific method.

Consideration of the consequences of an action certainly seems to be an instinctive way of approaching an ethical question – it is often the way 'ordinary' people 'do ethics'. Certainly it is commonly the way they justify rules (and legislation). Sidgwick observes that 'Common Sense is unconsciously utilitarian'.[193] I would not wish to argue that the insights of utilitarianism should have no place in ethical deliberation; pleasure and pain may be relevant criteria among others and consequences will need to be taken into account. However, as a complete system (which gives no quarter to alternatives) we must be aware of its severe limitations and recognise that, alone, it is simply unable to answer many ethical questions (even on its own terms) and that, as Johnson observes, it:

> narrows our reason so drastically that it excludes most of what is significant in our ordinary moral deliberations.[194]

2.3 Conclusions

Neither the appeal to absolute truth and universal reason implicit in legalism nor the 'scientific method' of consequentialism can hope to do justice to the full range of human moral consideration or to free us from the restrictions of our 'situation'. Rather we must enter the situation aware of our limitations and approach the moral judgement

[190] Williams outlines a number of criticisms of utilitarianism in matters of social choice. See Williams, 'Critique', 140-41.

[191] Williams, 'Critique', 149.

[192] Williams, 'Critique', 80.

[193] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 451.

[194] *MI*, 120.

with creativity and zeal. As Charles Taylor argues, we must utilise not just a simple language of quantity but also a language of qualitative contrasts.[195] As we have seen, value cannot always be quantified. Williams suggests that instinctively we are, at least in part, not utilitarians because we are unable to treat our moral feelings as objects with only utilitarian value:

> our moral relation to the world is partly given by such feelings, and by a sense of what we can or cannot live with ... utilitarianism alienates one from one's moral feelings.[196]

Perhaps instinct, imagination and inspiration are important at precisely this point. Could it be that our moral responsibility before God is not settled by an appeal to absolute truth or to incontrovertible method, but rather that it is to be worked out in creative engagement with God, with our situation, and with our tradition? The norms that Finnis describes as absolute need not be abandoned but might be seen to be indeed the 'public distillations' of morally good action which Finnis condemns,[197] to be followed in most (perhaps almost all) cases but nonetheless seen as provisional and able to be violated in certain possible (rare) circumstances. Such norms would indeed function as negative 'boundary markers' but are in no sense 'absolute' and are potentially susceptible to modification. We must always be conscious of our historical, linguistic and cultural situatedness: we can never eliminate it completely. Sidgwick observes that

> the detailed regulations which it is important to society to maintain depend so much upon habit and association of ideas, that they must vary to a great extent from age to age and from country to country.[198]

He also suggests that similar discrepancies will be found 'side by side in the morality of any one society at any given time' and that there will inevitably be imperfections in our own moral code.[199] Sidgwick is clear that humanity is inescapably 'situated' in a context and is not always and everywhere the same. As we will see, for Gadamer historical and cultural situatedness are essential to all our understanding.

I suggest that all ethical approaches (we must here avoid the term 'methods'), including both legalism and consequentialism, are unable to determine every moral judgement with absolute certainty. Moral judgement deals in terms of likelihood and probability, and works with provisional norms and partial understandings of context and motivation.

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[195] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 14-24.

[196] Williams, 'Critique', 103.

[197] *MA*, 102: he attributes this view to Conn and Sokolowski.

[198] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 450.

[199] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 460.

There is, I suggest, in most cases an inevitable gap between our judgement and certainty; there is an unfathomable remainder at the end of our deliberations. Finnis will allow no such compromise on his position; while utilitarianism, though able to compromise, fears for the integrity of its method: too much compromise and the method will no longer be identifiably utilitarian. Williams, discussing rule-utilitarianism, comments:

> I think ... that forms of utilitarianism which help themselves too liberally to the resources of indirectness lose their utilitarian rationale and end up as vanishingly forms of utilitarianism at all. ... It is a question of the *point* of utilitarianism.[200]

If the point of utilitarianism is to provide a complete ethical 'method' then it is probably true that indirect forms lose their rationale. However utilitarian considerations could perhaps become part of a broader system of ethical deliberation and so find a new 'point'.

Legalism and utilitarianism have a surprising amount in common: they both rigidly preserve the norm/context dichotomy; they are both based on Enlightenment notions of 'reason' and 'rationality'; they both seek to exclude feeling and emotion from moral decision-making, because of a concern to satisfy the canons of rational validation and 'objectivity'; they both abstract features of a decision from its total context; they both assert that there is only one right answer in a situation; and they both artificially restrict the range of morally relevant factors.

We need to learn to bring different ethical models into conversation and to give up the impossible dream of a single method providing universal objective judgements. Whether such a conversation is possible has been addressed by Alasdair MacIntyre[201] (who argues that it is not and that we must choose one system from among the alternatives) and Jeffrey Stout[202] (who, on the other hand, believes that apparent disagreements signify a substantial level of basic agreement and that such conversations are indeed possible). I would agree with Stout, though a good deal of effort may be required to reach mutual understanding: conversations will have to address rules, preferences, happiness and consequences. There will be debate about whether we should be maximising good or preventing evil. There will also be questions of relative

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[200] Williams, 'Critique', 81.

[201] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985).

[202] Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1988).

importance and deliberative priority, which will be different in relation to different agents. There will be judgements about which rules, and which consequences are relevant to a particular decision. Both legalism and utilitarianism are forms of abstraction which can leave them detached from real situations: both attempt to rule out ethical judgements based on feelings which can leave them detached from real people.

Finnis's insistence on 'intention' as the defining feature of an action is important, locating, as it does, the object of moral judgement neither simply in the action (behaviourally described) nor simply in the agent. I wish to suggest that moral truth 'emerges' (or, that goodness is located) in the interaction between agent and action within a historical, linguistic and cultural context; the inherited judgements of tradition and the exemplary lives of virtuous agents. There are possible parallels here with the notion of beauty – neither a feature of objects *per se*, nor entirely 'in the eye of the beholder' but, rather, located in the interaction of object and viewer within the context of tradition, culture and language; the creativity of artists; and the traditional judgements of previous critics. Words such as beauty, love and pleasure seem to me to be of a particular kind: they are words which inherently assume human experience; 'beauty' only has meaning when referring to the interaction of an object and a thinking subject; 'pleasure' seems to be the same. The truth of such statements does not seem to be located either in the nature of the object, nor simply in the opinion of the subject, rather the sense of these statements relies upon, and 'truth' is located in, the interaction of object and subject. This is an important concept, with parallels to discussions of metaphor in linguistics, to which we will return in Chapter Five.

Could it be that several approaches must somehow be combined; that the appropriate combinations may vary from one situation to another, especially between private cases and public cases; and that the adequacy of the resulting moral judgement must be assessed on 'aesthetic' criteria (fittingness, elegance) giving due regard to the qualities and characters of agents and the particularity of contexts? Sidgwick does not attempt a complete synthesis of the

> methods of right conduct, which are for the most part found more or less vaguely combined in the practical reasonings of ordinary men.[203]

[203] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 492.

However, he does discuss the mutual relations between egoism, intuitionism and utilitarianism.[204] Smart considers the possibility of a 'compromise theory' which combines considerations of utilitarianism and deontology, citing Ross's theory of Prima Facie Duties as an example.[205] He observes that such a 'balancing' may not be possible. This is self-evidently true but then the same charge can be levelled at Smart's own utilitarianism. The fact that something may not be achievable (or not perfectly achievable) does not mean that there is nothing at all to be gained, nor that the attempt should not be made. It may be that whilst utilitarianism alone and legalism alone cannot do justice to the dynamic complexity of human moral reasoning, utilitarian considerations, together with some notion of (non-absolute) moral norms can be combined, with other moral insights and language of qualitative distinctions, into a broader theory. This may be a long way from 'absolute truth' or 'scientific objectivity' but I will argue that it is true to the insights of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

We have considered many criticisms of moral absolutes and of utilitarianism. Their main failings seems to lie in a failure to appreciate (or a deliberate disregard for) the complexity, and significance for moral deliberation, of the context of our actions and choices (the twin failings of abstraction and reduction); and also in their reliance on Enlightenment reason. They also fail adequately to allow for the influence of history and tradition. It is the validity of such approaches which we are going to explore with Gadamer.

[204] Sidgwick, *Methods*, 492-505.

[205] Smart, 'Outline', 72-73.

Chapter Three

Gadamer's *Truth and Method*: an 'Ethical' Exegesis

In this chapter we will embark on an extended thought-experiment. Our principal question will be: if Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics can govern an interpretation of what ethics is, and how it works, and how it can be justified, then what would ethics look like? We will also need to ask whether such a hermeneutical ethics can provide satisfactory answers to the criticisms of legalism and utilitarianism which we identified in Chapter Two. As we read *Truth and Method*[1] it will be instructive mentally to replace 'text' with 'text-analogue' (e.g. another person or another tradition) and 'historical distance' with 'moral distance' (the gap in understanding between differing moral approaches). I have tried a number of ways to structure this material but ultimately felt that it was important to preserve the flow of *Truth and Method* so that we can trace the development of Gadamer's cumulative arguments. This chapter therefore follows the pattern of *Truth and Method* and adopts Gadamer's section headings. This exegesis is necessarily selective: prominence is given to those sections of *Truth and Method* that seem to me to have the most direct relevance to ethics, and those which are significant for the development of Gadamer's argument. I attempt to highlight the ethical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics but they are not discussed at any length until Chapter Four.

3.1 *Truth and Method*, Part One: Introduction

'The question of truth as it emerges in the experience of art'

In *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer develops a theory of truth and understanding based on experience. For Gadamer, we are all inevitably historically and culturally situated: there can be no such thing as a purely 'objective' observer or interpreter: there simply is no standpoint outside history and culture from which such observations could be made. However Gadamer does not see this as a weakness, rather it is only because of our historical and cultural situatedness that we can have any hope of understanding anything. We must be aware of the limitations which our backgrounds

[1] *TM.*

impose: real understanding arises from the fusion of the 'horizon' of the interpreter with the 'horizon' of the text.

The basis of Gadamer's argument in *Truth and Method* is a consideration of the experience of art. It is from aesthetics that Gadamer develops and extends his theory of understanding and truth. From a consideration of the truth of art Gadamer develops a theory which he generalises to the whole field of hermeneutics and to understanding in general. His purpose is to outline the features that are common to all modes of understanding.[2] For our purposes, we will focus on the implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics for ethical understanding.

In the first part of *Truth and Method* Gadamer is sharply critical of theories of 'aesthetic consciousness' which abstract the 'experience' of art from its connections with the real world of history, tradition and community. Gadamer's assessment of the truth of art and the contextual nature of the understanding of art force him to conclude that art must be understood like all other 'texts':

> *Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics.* ... hermeneutics must be so determined as a whole that it does justice to the experience of art. Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements – those of art and all other kinds of tradition – is formed and actualised.[3]

Gadamer's key insights are that historical and cultural situatedness though inevitable are actually essential to our understanding; that, in at least this respect, all forms of understanding are similar; and that it is impossible to abstract a pure aesthetic 'experience' from a work of art without reducing its true being (many works of art, for example have religious or secular life-function and were never intended as giving solely aesthetic pleasure);[4] understanding is part of an 'event of meaning'. For Gadamer, truth is not the exclusive preserve of science, or of scientific method. Works of art are not isolated from the world: not only interpretations of art but also the artworks themselves make claims to truth. I will suggest that our ethical interpretations and our experiences of the virtuous life, in ourselves and in others, can make similar claims to truth without the need to resort to 'scientific method'.

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2 *TM*, xxxi.

3 *TM*, 164-65, emphasis original.

4 *TM*, 77.

Gadamer does not explicitly develop his insights in relation to ethics although he makes passing reference, particularly in relation to taste and he does consider ethics in his section *The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle*.[5] Despite this, Gadamer's assertion that all forms of knowledge are substantially similar will require, if he is correct, that ethics too must be 'absorbed into hermeneutics'. Gadamer characterises Immanuel Kant as asking the question: what are the conditions of our knowledge by virtue of which modern science is possible, and how far does it extend? Gadamer himself asks a similar philosophical question: how is understanding possible? Having sought an answer to this question we may then be able to ask: what are the conditions of moral understanding, by virtue of which ethics is possible, and how far does it extend?

3.2 *Truth and Method*, Part One I: Transcending the aesthetic dimension

3.2.1 The significance of the humanist tradition for the human sciences

Gadamer is strongly critical of philosophers who attempt to show that 'the inductive method, basic to all experimental science' is also the only method valid in the human sciences.[6] He suggests that

> one has not rightly grasped [the] nature [of the human sciences] if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of regularity. The experience of the sociohistorical world cannot be raised to a science by the inductive procedure of the natural sciences ... historical research does not endeavour to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a universal rule. Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness ... not to attain knowledge of a law – e.g. how men, peoples, and states evolve – but to understand how this man, this people, or this state is what it has become ...[7]

Gadamer is right to highlight the peculiarities of the human sciences: whilst they may in fact seek patterns, regularities and predictions, there is an inevitable lacuna in their knowledge because of their inability fully to allow for the character of the context or motivation of the human agents involved. In history, the ruthless application of scientific method can remove all the truly human elements and end up distancing the investigator from the 'real' history of what he is examining. Science makes assumptions

[5] *TM*, 312-24.

[6] *TM*, 4.

[7] *TM*, 4.

about the nature and possibility of understanding and gives it an independent validity: Gadamer suggests this is illegitimate.

Gadamer argues that in the nineteenth century 'science' and 'knowledge', in all fields, were modelled on their paradigms in the natural sciences.[8] He suggests that this is inappropriate and that, in any case, the real heritage of the human sciences was the humanism of Herder. He suggests that the ideal of 'cultivating the human' (*Bildung zum Menschen*) was

> perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century, and it is this concept which is the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences of the nineteenth century.[9]

Gadamer offers an extended consideration of the 'guiding concepts of humanism': *Bildung* (culture), *Sensus communis,* Judgement, and Taste. He is keen to preserve the traditional humanist understandings of these terms and to retrieve them from their isolation in the field of aesthetics.

(1) The humanist understanding of *Bildung* is as a process of self-formation, education or cultivation though subsequently it comes to refer to the result rather than the process. Gadamer sees it as 'the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities'.[10] Gadamer quotes (with approval) Wilhelm von Humboldt:

> when in our language we say Bildung, we mean something both higher and more inward [than Kultur], namely the disposition of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavour, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character.[11]

He also suggests that Bildung is more than the exercise of one's own powers in developing character, rather:

> The rise of the word Bildung evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which man carries in his soul the image of God, after whom he is fashioned, and which man must cultivate in himself.[12]

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[8] See the discussion of Mill in *TM*, 3-4.

[9] *TM*, 9.

[10] *TM*, 10.

[11] *TM*, 10-11.

[12] *TM*, 11.

This notion of being and becoming, of developing and presenting what already latently exists will become an important and recurring theme for Gadamer, especially as he turns to consider 'play' and the ontology of art.[13] Gadamer's understanding of *Bildung* seems to incorporate both aesthetic sensibility and moral character. Aesthetic consciousness, though present in all, must be developed[14] as must conscience. Gadamer suggests that such a developed consciousness has much of the character of a sense:

> this consciousness accords well with the immediacy of the senses – i.e. it knows how to make sure distinctions and evaluations in the individual case without being able to give its reasons. Thus someone who has an aesthetic sense knows how to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly ... and whoever has a historical sense knows what is possible for an age and what is not, and has a sense of the otherness of the past in relation to the present.[15]

For Gadamer aesthetic consciousness consists in a 'trained receptivity to 'otherness'' and 'keeping oneself open ... to other more universal points of view'.[16] Science makes exclusive claims to be able to discover 'truth' but Gadamer suggests that there is another source of truth located in the concept of *Bildung*. For Gadamer, philosophy, art and history are modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.[17] Gadamer seems to be suggesting that there is a 'real world' beyond the scope of science which must be accessed and appropriated by means of our 'experience' (his prime example is the aesthetic experience).

(2) Gadamer, with G. B. Vico, understands *sensus communis* to mean 'not only that general faculty in all men but the sense that founds community'.[18] There are implicit criticisms here of Kant's understanding of the conditions of knowledge and of René Descartes' reliance on the individual thinking subject. Gadamer suggests that the *sensus communis* mediates unique positive knowledge and that the 'possibilities of rational proof and instruction do not fully exhaust the sphere of knowledge'.[19] He suggests that we have somewhat lost sight of this ancient tradition in our commitment to the modern concept of method. Noting the reductionism and 'impoverishment' of the human

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[13] *TM*, 101-34.

[14] *TM*, 17.

[15] *TM*, 17.

[16] *TM*, 17.

[17] *TM*, xxii.

[18] *TM*, 21.

[19] *TM*, 23.

sciences which have resulted he suggests that we should 'laboriously make our way back into this tradition'.[20] Gadamer invokes Aristotle's distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge (*phronesis* and *episteme*). Practical knowledge is a different kind of knowledge which is 'directed towards the concrete situation' and so must grasp an infinite variety of circumstances.[21] For Aristotle, the grasp and moral control of a situation require a 'direction of the will'. *Phronesis* is not simply a capacity but also a 'determination of moral being which cannot exist without the totality of the "ethical virtues"'.[22] It is not simply about practical astuteness or mere cunning; it also presupposes a moral sense which allows assessments of what is right. *Phronesis* is a large part of the *sensus communis* and it interacts with the moral virtues so that they inform and develop each other. Morality and history are related to the *sensus communis*: ethical traditions develop within communities where there is a consensus regarding the issues and virtues that 'matter'. Gadamer suggests that the *sensus communis* is found in all people but formed by the community. For Gadamer, the will is not directed by abstract universal reason, rather it is related to an actual and specific community or group. Developing a *sensus communis* is an essential part of the life of any community. Gadamer suggests that the *sensus communis* is the sense of the common good: it is acquired through living in a community and is formed by the community's structures and values. This contextual and communal form of good sense (common sense) is a

> cure for the moon-sickness of metaphysics ... [and] also contains the basis of a moral philosophy which 'really does justice to the life of society.'[23]

(3) Gadamer suggests that judgement does not simply follow reason but is also a faculty like the senses:

> In fact the logical basis of judgement – subsuming a particular under a universal, recognising something as an example of a rule – cannot be demonstrated. Thus judgement requires a principle to guide its application. In order to follow this principle another faculty of judgement would be needed, as Kant shrewdly noted. So it cannot be taught in the abstract but only practiced from case to case, and is therefore an ability more like the senses.[24]

For Kant and the German Enlightenment this entailed that judgement be considered one of the lower powers of the mind. Was this a valid criticism or has the emphasis on a

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[20] *TM*, 24.

[21] *TM*, 21.

[22] *TM*, 22.

[23] *TM*, 24.

[24] *TM*, 31.

particular conception of reason been responsible for the 'lost tradition' noted above and for the limitation and narrowing of the concepts of knowledge and understanding? For Kant, the *sensus communis* becomes narrowed to judgements of taste about what is beautiful (i.e. aesthetic taste) all else is to be based on reason. Did Kant go too far in excluding other judgements from the *sensus communis* and are those other judgements more like aesthetic judgements than Kant allowed? Gadamer certainly seems to be suggesting so.[25]

(4) Gadamer notes that the concept of taste was originally more moral than aesthetic until it was dramatically narrowed by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*. Prior to this, taste had concerned the ideals of genuine humanity and character which could produce a good society. Taste was not simply private but always sought to be 'good taste', with an implied ability to stand back from ourselves and our personal preferences. The agreement of an ideal community gives taste its normative power. Gadamer again suggests that taste has the character of a sense and can produce judgements without necessarily being able to give reasons for those judgements. He observes that we are particularly sensitive to what is tasteless:

> Sureness of taste is ... safety from the tasteless. It is a remarkable thing that we are especially sensitive to the negative in the decisions taste renders. The corresponding positive is not properly speaking what is tasteful, but what does not offend taste.[26]

Gadamer concludes, crucially, that 'the distinction between determinant and reflective judgement, on which Kant bases his critique of judgement is not absolute'.[27] Kant purified ethics from all aesthetics and feeling on the basis of this distinction. For Gadamer, the types of judgement and knowledge that Kant so rigidly separated are in fact substantially similar, differing in degree rather than kind. Gadamer, while allowing that aesthetic judgement is different from conceptual knowledge, does not allow that therefore truth claims may only be made in relation to the latter.

The ethical implications of this section are based on Gadamer's criticisms of scientific method in the human sciences; his recovery of humanist insights concerning *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgement and taste; and the notion of *phronesis*.

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[25] *TM*, 30-34.

[26] *TM*, 36.

[27] *TM*, 39.

One feature of hermeneutical ethics will be the normative influence of the *sensus communis* on interpersonal relationships as part of community life, and, by extension, to relationships between communities. If every individual is always engaged in *Bildung*, in self-formation and cultivation, moral formation could be considered in a similar light.

The idea that aesthetic consciousness has much of the character of a sense could perhaps be extended to 'moral sense' or conscience: thus someone who has moral sense can distinguish between the good and the evil, and has an instinct for moral judgement in other contexts and for other agents. This certainly seems to accord well with the popular notion of moral 'intuition' (that one instinctively knows when something is right) and the observation that similar moral 'problems' may require different solutions in different circumstances or for different people. This sense character of taste and the normative elements of the *sensus communis* will both have important consequences for ethics if a moral understanding of taste can be recovered.

> Both taste and judgement evaluate the object in relation to a whole in order to see ... whether it is 'fitting'. One must have a 'sense' for it – it cannot be demonstrated.[28]

If the distinction between determinant and reflective judgement can be overcome then this could provide a new basis for truth claims in relation to ethical statements, for a form of ethical realism. Morality (like philosophy, art and history) may be a mode of experience in which truth can be communicated.

3.2.2 The subjectivization of aesthetics through the Kantian critique

Gadamer is highly critical of the subjectivization of aesthetics in Kant and of the resulting abstraction of aesthetic experience. In his *Critique of Judgement* Kant investigates the foundations of taste. He addresses the tension (previously addressed by Hume[29]) of the apparently subjective, individual, nature of judgements of taste ('beauty is in the eye of the beholder', 'there's no disputing of taste') with the concept of good and bad taste (implying that some judgements are wrong) and the implied claim to universality ('this is beautiful' implies an agreement not required by 'I think this is

[28] *TM*, 38.

[29] David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', [1757], in Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 137-50.

beautiful'). Kant's aesthetics, grounded on unprincipled judgements of taste, acknowledges that there is no empirical universality of taste grounded in our common human nature, and accepts an *a priori* claim to universality. However, in the process, aesthetics becomes purely a matter of subjective feeling and is denied any significance as knowledge.

The basis of Gadamer's critique of Kant is the nature of the 'aesthetic experience'. He argues that there are two meanings of 'experience' (*Erlebnis*): first, an event in which something is experienced and, second, the permanent residue of this event in the person having the experience. It is the latter that gives an experience its lasting importance: the experience establishes itself in memory with a lasting meaning, a meaning which cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination. This sort of experience is not abstracted, it is not isolated in time and divorced from its connections to the 'real world'. Gadamer goes on to argue that the aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among many but represents the essence of experience itself. If so, then ethical experiences will be of a similar nature. He is critical of the abstraction of the aesthetic experience in Kant, especially as many great works of art have a function in life (both secular and religious). He argues that Kant's abstraction alters, or reduces, the 'true being' of these works of art.[30]

Gadamer is critical of the concept of aesthetic consciousness and cultivation (*Bildung*) as it has developed since Kant, especially in the work of Schiller where taste and judgement are relegated to secondary roles. Artistic production is now seen as an independent area for the operation of genius; taste in production is no longer required, merely in appreciation. Gadamer links the denial of truth in the aesthetic with its abstraction from its context into simple appearance. He argues that this concept of an abstracted aesthetic consciousness simply does not do justice to the true nature of aesthetic experience with its lasting significance for the observer. Gadamer also dismisses the idea that there can be universally valid judgements of aesthetic value from some objective standpoint outside history and culture:

> Even [a society's] artistic interests are not arbitrary or in principle universal, but what artists create and what the society values belong together in the unity of a style of life and an ideal of taste.[31]

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[30] *TM*, 77.

[31] *TM*, 84-85.

All perception already involves understanding: what we 'see' depends upon our differentiation of the sensory inputs and our expectations of what we are likely to see. The notion of 'pure perception', in which we have removed all expectation and imagining, can only ever be an unattainable limiting case. Even the simple fact that we attempt to see or understand something implies that we expect there is something to be seen or understood and we will attempt to assimilate the sensory inputs to known categories and patterns, as optical illusions demonstrate. All understanding exists, and can only exist, as part of the 'hermeneutic continuity of human existence'.[32]

> The pantheon of art is not a timeless presence which offers itself to pure aesthetic consciousness but the assembled achievements of the human mind as it has realised itself historically.[33]

All of this must take place in a 'hermeneutic community'. To experience a work of art (or a virtuous life) is to share in the knowledge which it contains. The abstraction of the subjective aesthetic consciousness, which Gadamer criticises, destroys the continuity of the work. The existence of a work of art consists partly in its being experienced by an observer within a community and a tradition of understanding. Gadamer, then, is seeking to do justice to the truth of aesthetic experience and overcome the radical subjectivization of the aesthetic that began with Kant. Aesthetic experience is, he suggests, a mode of knowledge which conveys truth.

The ethical implications of this section are based on Gadamer's critique of abstraction and the 'aesthetic consciousness'; the nature of experience; and the importance of judgement. Also if all understanding exists as part of the hermeneutic continuity of human existence then ethical knowledge and understanding too can only exist as part of a tradition of understanding; and the virtuous lives of the saints are also the assembled achievements of the human mind as it has realised itself historically. Recently there has been considerable interest in the overlap of aesthetics and ethics[34] together with a reconsideration of the objectivity of moral knowledge[35] and the nature of moral value.[36]

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[32] *TM*, 96.

[33] *TM*, 97.

[34] Jerrold Levinson, 'Introduction: Aesthetics and Ethics', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-25; Michael Tanner, 'Aesthetics and Ethics', in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy - CD-Rom Version 1.1* (London: Routledge, 1999); Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral', *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992), 219-40; Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), 355-64

[35] See Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Richard W. Miller, 'Three Versions of Objectivity: Aesthetic, Moral and Scientific', in Levinson (ed.),

3.2.3 Retrieving the question of artistic truth

Gadamer argues that concepts of the aesthetic, such as imitation, appearance, and illusion, imply a relation to something from which aesthetics itself is different. He prefers the 'return to the aesthetic experience' of phenomenology and the assertion that there is truth in the experience itself:

> seeking to understand experiences presupposes that there is truth in them ... we can only do justice to art in the larger context of truth in the human sciences.[37]

Gadamer is keen to retrieve an understanding of taste which restores its moral, communal and cognitive dimensions and restores it to a primary role in the production of art, not simply a subjective role in its appreciation.

Gadamer is critical of the understanding of *Bildung* as it has developed since Kant because of its narrowing to include only aesthetic cultivation where aesthetic experiences are abstracted from their context in community and tradition. The 'work of art' and the 'aesthetic experience' depend upon a process of abstraction: everything in a work which is related to its context must be disregarded. Gadamer calls this process 'aesthetic differentiation'.[38] He argues that the ontological definition of the aesthetic has shifted towards mere 'appearance' because of the hegemony of the natural sciences: the claim that only scientific method can lead to truth. For Gadamer, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience includes a recognition of truth:

> Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly not inferior to it? And is not the task of aesthetics precisely to ground the fact that the experience (Erfahrung) of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind ... but still knowledge, i.e. conveying truth?[39]

Aesthetic phenomena may reveal to us the limits of our understanding but there is no vantage point from which we could see these limits or set ourselves outside them.

Aesthetics and Ethics, 26-58; Peter Railton, 'Moral Realism: Prospects and Problems', in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (eds.), *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 49-81; Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Cf. J. L. Mackie, 'The Subjectivity of Values', in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 95-118.

[36] Peter Railton, 'Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism', in Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics*, 59-105.

[37] *TM*, 99.

[38] *TM*, 85.

[39] *TM*, 97-98.

> For this reason we must adopt a standpoint in relation to art and the beautiful that does not pretend to immediacy but corresponds to the historical nature of the human condition.[40]

For Gadamer, experience becomes the dominant concept in aesthetics:

> our concern is to view the experience of art in such a way that it is understood as experience. The experience of art should not be falsified by being turned into a possession of aesthetic culture, thus neutralising its special claim. We will see that this involves a far-reaching hermeneutical consequence, for *all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event.*[41]

The experience of art (or ethics) cannot present perfect truth in terms of final knowledge but it is not a discontinuous experience of aesthetic (or moral) consciousness; it is necessarily connected with the 'real world' of history, tradition and culture. Jean Grondin makes the important observation that Gadamer is not a postmodern thinker.[42] Postmodernism's rejection of method leads to the questioning of the whole idea of truth, the adequacy of consciousness, and reality itself. For postmodernists there can only ever be 'interpretations' or 'perspectives'.

> In Gadamer's view, the great misunderstanding of postmodernism lies here. It still follows Descartes in making knowledge and truth dependent on the idea of method.[43]

Gadamer is critical of any suggestion that 'method' is the only way to truth and argues that all truth, including scientific truth, is inevitably context bound and perspectival.

The ethical implications of this section are based on Gadamer's continued critique of abstraction and recovery of the moral dimensions of taste. Such a conception of taste may have parallels with our understanding of conscience in ethics. Gadamer's hermeneutics invites us to reconsider our notions of 'understanding' itself and of truth.

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[40] *TM*, 97.

[41] *TM*, 99, emphasis original.

[42] Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Chesham: Acumen Publishing, 2003).

[43] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 3.

3.3 *Truth and Method*, Part One II: The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance

3.3.1 Play as the clue to ontological explanation

In considering the subjective and objective dimensions of art, Gadamer now makes a significant reversal: the subject of aesthetic experience is not the person who experiences it but the work itself. Gadamer adopts the word 'play' to describe the mode of existence of a work of art. Play is a common concept in aesthetics, especially in Kant's concept of the free play of imagination and understanding. This though is a subjective understanding of play which Gadamer rejects in favour of his definition in terms of ontology:

> When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself.[44]

Gadamer extrapolates from the linguistic use of the word 'play' (e.g. when used of light, parts of machinery or waves) to suggest that play is not necessarily about 'games' with 'players'. Play he suggests exists without players but only reaches presentation through the players. Play is about movement and the mode of being of play is similar to the 'mobile form of nature'.[45]

This understanding of play might seem to be a little strained: it is hard to conceive of 'play', in its usual sense, without players (or waves, or machinery) in at least some stages of its existence. Play may exist within a tradition and community of players and may be said to have an independent existence once created but for it to exist without any players seems implausible. However, Gadamer is not using the word in its usual sense. For him play is about self-presentation and movement, about a mode of being. Gadamer quotes Schlegel:

> All the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art.[46]

Is the world self-creating? If art (and 'play') can have an existence independent of players then perhaps so, but to describe the ontology of nature as play seems to assume the role of God as player: creation is somehow God's self-presentation. For Christians

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[44] *TM*, 101.

[45] *TM*, 105.

[46] *TM*, 105.

of course, this would be a reasonable assumption, and with it Gadamer's logic certainly follows. Many of Gadamer's insights at this point can be adopted without necessarily following his definition of 'play'. Gadamer's language of play seems to accord with the language of 'being' and 'becoming': art exists in itself but only comes to its true potential in the interaction with a viewer. For Gadamer, play is about interaction with others[47] and about self-presentation, but 'all presentation is potentially a representation *for someone*': meaning exists in the event or interaction between the work and the audience. For Gadamer the main purpose of play is not to achieve a particular result or to solve a task, rather it is about 'ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself'.[48] He links play, self-presentation and ontology:

> Play is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation. But self-presentation is a universal ontological characteristic of nature.[49]

This seems circular as the assertion that self-presentation is an ontological characteristic of nature derives from Gadamer's assertion that play is the mode of being of nature.

Gadamer suggests that once play is realised it can take on the character of a work or a 'structure'.[50] In the same way people can be transformed by their encounter with art (and ethics). One can really only encounter a work of art when it is 'performed':[51] when transformation occurs. It is the interplay and movement in art, in 'play' and in 'becoming' that brings about a change. Gadamer describes this as a 'transformation into the true'.[52] In being presented what already exists in play emerges (or becomes):

> What we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how true it is – i.e. to what extent one recognises something and oneself ... In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it.[53]

Having reiterated the inevitable imbedded nature of aesthetics, Gadamer repeats his criticism of aesthetic differentiation (abstraction) and aesthetic consciousness as an isolated phenomenon:

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[47] *TM*, 106.

[48] *TM*, 107.

[49] *TM*, 108.

[50] *TM*, 110.

[51] Even literature involves 'an internal reading'; and the plastic arts have a *context* in which they are encountered: both can thus plausibly be said to be 'performed'.

[52] *TM*, 112.

[53] *TM*, 114.

> My thesis then is that the being of art cannot be defined as an object of aesthetic consciousness because, on the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is part of the event of being that occurs in presentation, and belongs essentially to play as play.[54]

Through this process of presentation and transformation, truth is mediated. However, this truth cannot be separated from the medium: the work and the truth are inextricably linked to the form of presentation.[55] 'Aesthetic being' depends on being presented. For Gadamer, this is a strength not a weakness. It is not a deficiency or some lack of autonomous meaning; rather it is part of its very essence. The spectator is an essential element. This gives the aesthetic (and ethical) an essential temporal dimension. Gadamer illustrates this by considering festivals. In the same way that a work of art is to be repeatedly presented, it is in the nature of a festival to be celebrated regularly. Each celebration will be different, if only because of changes in the surrounding events. So, part of the essence of a festival (and of art) is to be always different. Gadamer suggests that something which exists by always being something different is temporal in a much more radical sense than something that belongs only to history. So for example, 'Christmas' is more temporal than 'Christmas 2001' and we are mistaken to attempt to identify a 'timeless essence' of Christmas. The essence of the festival (and of the work of art, and of the exemplary life) lies not in some objective essence 'outside' time; rather it lies in its inescapable temporality.[56]

Gadamer next considers the definition of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*: a definition which expressly invokes the spectator's frame of mind. This presumes that the spectator can understand the language and the story of the play; only then can the encounter with tragedy become a self-encounter. There must be a community and tradition within which an event of meaning can occur.

> For the writer, free invention is always only one side of a mediation conditioned by values already given ... The writer's free invention is the presentation of a common truth that is binding on the writer also ... He himself stands in the same tradition as the public that he is addressing.[57]

The public who are addressed have a responsibility here too if this is to become a genuine self-encounter. It is not simply a responsibility to recreate the past but, rather,

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[54] *TM*, 116.

[55] *TM*, 120.

[56] *TM*, 122-24.

[57] *TM*, 133.

to receive and apply the 'common truth' which it presents. Gadamer notes Hegel's assertion that 'the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life'.[58]

The ethical implications of this section are based on Gadamer's notions of play and self-presentation. Perhaps ethics is less about 'solving a task' and more about 'ordering movement'. Perhaps the nature (ontology) of ethics is similar to that of art: i.e. it cannot be abstracted because the being of ethics is part of the event of being that we see in people's lives and belongs to our self-presentation or becoming. The truth and meaning of ethical statements are located in an event of meaning occurring between people. It is therefore inevitably bound to its context and tradition. Just as readers must engage in thoughtful mediation between the past and contemporary life, so in ethics we should engage in thoughtful mediation between the 'text' (represented by a real text or another person) and ourselves to overcome not historical distance but moral distance.

3.3.2 Aesthetic and hermeneutic consequences

Gadamer's enquiry into aesthetics forms part of a larger enquiry into the human sciences and their claim to truth. Gadamer argues that their use of method, based on the natural sciences, is inappropriate. The obvious alternative is to suggest that truth in the human sciences should be understood on a similar model to that of aesthetics. Gadamer's concern is that the prevailing understanding of aesthetics consigns it to the periphery of society, labelling it as subjective experience, and denies it a role in mediating truth. Also, aesthetics detaches art from its situation:

> By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it up.[59]

The experience of art is, for Gadamer, an experience of truth but one in which the viewer knows that he is always involved; truth is about participation in an 'event of meaning'. Historicism presupposes a distance between a work of art and the viewer, this distance disappears under Gadamer's notions of presentation and participation. We are not masters of our aesthetic experiences; they are about being (the being of the work of art and of the viewer) as much as about knowledge. We encounter truth as we

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[58] *TM*, 169.

[59] *TM*, 135.

participate in the event. A work of art, understood in this sense, as an event of being, cannot properly be understood as an object of aesthetic consciousness. Gadamer characterises the mode of being of art in terms of presentation which includes play and picture, communion and representation. A work of art is an event of presentation:[60]

> it is really true that the divine becomes picturable only through the word and image. Thus the religious picture has an exemplary significance. In it we can see without any doubt that a picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied. It is clear from this example that art, as a whole and in a universal sense, increases the picturability of being. Word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is.[61]

The abstraction of art into mere 'framed pictures' by the aesthetic consciousness cannot be primary for Gadamer; 'the picture contains an indissoluble connection with its world.'[62] The work of art 'in itself' proves to be a pure abstraction. Gadamer criticises the approach of the aesthetic consciousness to literary art in which it is only form, and not content, which matters, arguing that our understanding is not concerned with the formal achievement of a work of art but with what it says to us.[63] He is critical of the hermeneutics implicit in the human sciences because interpretation is no longer about truth. Rather it is about recreating the experience of the artist: by attempting to understand either the mind of the artist or the historical context. Gadamer argues that these variants of hermeneutics (the psychologising and the historicist) actually exclude hermeneutics from the realms of truth and knowledge without even realising it.

Having reclaimed the 'truth' in art, Gadamer now has to reclaim truth for all of hermeneutics. He argues that his criticism of aesthetic consciousness has implications for the whole of hermeneutics: for our understanding of 'understanding'. Aesthetics must become part of hermeneutics and hermeneutics itself must become more comprehensive.

> Understanding must be conceived as part of the event of meaning which occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements – those of art and all other kinds of tradition – is formed and actualized.[64]

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[60] *TM*, 144.

[61] *TM*, 143.

[62] *TM*, 144.

[63] *TM*, 163.

[64] *TM*, 165.

Gadamer observes that historical consciousness is largely responsible for the centrality of hermeneutics in the human sciences (anything which is estranged from its original context requires interpretation). He goes on to argue that the prevailing form of hermeneutics, which he attributes primarily to Wilhelm Dilthey, is simply not adequate for the task because of its exclusion of questions of truth. Gadamer continues with art as an example of understanding and asks what the approach of hermeneutics should be in relation to it. He considers the approaches of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Hegel, characterising these as reconstruction and integration respectively. Consciousness of loss in relation to tradition motivates both, but they approach the hermeneutic task quite differently. Schleiermacher is wholly concerned with reconstructing the work as originally constituted. Hence his emphasis on reconstructing the 'world' to which the work belonged: establishing the situation, the intention of the author, performing in the original style. According to Schleiermacher historical enquiry opens the possibility of recovering what has been lost. Gadamer concedes the importance of such approaches but questions whether what we obtain is the 'real' meaning of the work and is sceptical of the suggestion that understanding involves a 'second creation' of the work. He argues that it is in fact impossible accurately to reconstruct the original context of a work of art. All our attempts at reconstruction can never reproduce an 'original' but only a derivative and cultural understanding. In any case, detaching a work of art from its contemporary context fixes its 'meaning' in the past.

> Similarly a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as reconstructing the original would be no more than handing on a dead meaning.[65]

Gadamer prefers the approach of Hegel who accepts the futility of restoration and sees all 'historical' approaches as external activities while the authentic response is an internal one that involves the viewer in a thinking relation with the past: it is the self-consciousness of spirit that comprehends the truth of art.

The ethical implications of this section lie in Gadamer's conclusion that we must undertake a critique not just of aesthetic consciousness but also of historical consciousness (as manifested in historicism) because we are concerned not with subjective experience, nor with reconstruction of the past but, rather, with 'the truth that manifests itself in art and history'.[66] This represents a further critique of abstraction and of the claims of scientific method to represent the only access to truth.

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[65] *TM*, 167.

[66] *TM*, 169, emphasis mine.

3.4 *Truth and Method*, Part Two: Introduction.

'The extension of the question of truth to understanding in the human sciences'

In Part Two of *Truth and Method* Gadamer seeks to elucidate the universality of the hermeneutic problem. He is highly critical of the tendency to deny the finitude of human understanding and to simply assert that all we need is a better method or technique. His criticisms are largely directed at the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, criticising the former's emphasis on reconstruction and the latter's reliance on method based on the model of the natural sciences.

Gadamer's basic contention is that Romanticism has relocated the aim of understanding from 'truth' (based on content) to 'meaning' (based on form and expression). Meaning becomes merely the expression of an era or individual rather than a truth: this parallels his arguments about aesthetic truth. Understanding no longer relates to the text's subject matter but simply to the text itself: what the author meant and expressed. Gadamer wishes to reclaim the truth of hermeneutical experience in the human sciences and to resist the hegemony of scientific method as the only guarantor of truth.

3.5 *Truth and Method*, Part Two I: Historical Preparation

3.5.1 The questionableness of romantic hermeneutics and its application to the study of history

Gadamer wishes to follow Hegel rather than Schleiermacher, suggesting that hermeneutics must take a new turn. He traces the historical development of hermeneutics along two paths: theological and philological. Considering the interpretation of scripture he observes that 'its literal meaning is not univocally intelligible in every place and at every moment'.[67] He then introduces the concept of the hermeneutic circle: parts of a text are understood in the light of the whole and the whole is understood in the light of the parts. Historicism suggests that the context of world history is itself a whole, within which texts and other objects must find their meaning. Ultimately there arose the conception of 'a universal hermeneutics for which the special exemplariness of tradition is no longer a presupposition of the hermeneutical task'.[68]

[67] *TM*, 175.

[68] *TM*, 178.

Gadamer characterises Schleiermacher as rejecting all Enlightenment ideas of a common human nature and so having to redefine our relationship with tradition: neither Scripture nor reason could provide a foundation for textual understanding. He sees Schleiermacher as attempting to isolate the procedure of understanding, trying to make it an independent method.[69]

For Gadamer what is to be understood when we try to grasp a text or speech is not just a thought, seen as part of another's life or as an aesthetic creation, but rather a truth which involves both the author and the reader (or hearer or viewer). Gadamer criticises Schleiermacher's 'psychological' approach where what is to be understood is the mind of the author/speaker. Understanding is, for Schleiermacher, a reproduction of an original production:

> all speech and all texts are basically related to the art of understanding, hermeneutics, and this explains the connection between rhetoric (which is a part of aesthetics) and hermeneutics; every act of understanding is for Schleiermacher the inverse of an act of speech, the reconstruction of a construction. Thus hermeneutics is a kind of inversion of rhetoric and poetics.[70]

Schleiermacher applies the considerations of the hermeneutic circle to the psychology of the author: an individual thought can only be properly understood as part of a whole life. Schleiermacher considers that barriers to understanding can be removed by the reader overcoming their prejudices and 'identifying' with the author. But this act of putting oneself in the author's context is, for Schleiermacher, a precondition to the act of understanding and not an integral part of it. Schleiermacher's emphasis on psychology leads him to suggest that the task of understanding is to 'understand an author better than he understood himself.' Gadamer suggests that Schleiermacher is far too optimistic about our ability to overcome our prejudices and fully to identify with an author; and also that, even on the basis of Schleiermacher's own assessments, this identification cannot be separated from the act of understanding.[71]

Gadamer is sharply critical of this psychological 'turn' in hermeneutics: hermeneutics is no longer about the well-foundedness of truth and meaning but is now about the reconstruction of an unconscious process. Texts are purely expressive phenomena;

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[69] *TM*, 185.

[70] *TM*, 189.

[71] *TM*, 192.

Schleiermacher detaches them from any dogmatic interest, and indeed from any claim to truth.

> This would clearly indicate the position of Schleiermacher and the romantics. In creating a universal hermeneutics they expel critique based on understanding the subject matter from the sphere of scholarly interpretation.[72]

Rather than this emphasis on 'reconstruction', Gadamer prefers the Hegelian concept of 'integration': truth emerges as text and contemporary consciousness combine in a 'fusion of horizons'. Just as the 'truth' of a work of art is only completed in a contemporary 'presentation', the truth of a text is only revealed in its interaction with contemporary understanding. We can only understand texts from the past, or others from different traditions, in the light of our own worldview, our own categories and, crucially, our own language. Grondin is critical of Gadamer for his rigid opposition to the psychological aim of understanding the mind of the author and for his criticisms of psychologism.[73] However, Gadamer is emphasising the centrality of truth and not simply meaning or expression. Gadamer's later comments about openness to others and about dialogue provide the recognition of the reasons for another's position that Grondin urges. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is about more than meaning, authorial intention and expression; the rhetorical intention is always the expression *of something.*

Schleiermacher was concerned with the exact interpretation of particular texts, and with how speech is to be understood. The historical school moved beyond Schleiermacher's hermeneutics in an attempt to understand universal history, the whole history of humankind. Particular texts served only as sources; as the parts from which the whole of universal history could be understood. This approach is best exemplified in the work of Dilthey. He applies the hermeneutical method to history itself; historical reality becomes a text which is to be understood. Gadamer suggests that Dilthey's approach represents a culmination or new formulation of earlier work by Herman Ranke and Johann Droysen. He criticises them for their attempts to defend the scientific nature of their discipline. He argues that once they have abandoned any conception of an a priori teleology (as found in Hegel) then

> there exists neither an end of history nor anything outside it. Hence the whole continuity of universal history can be understood only from historical tradition itself. But this is precisely the claim of literary hermeneutics, namely that the

[72] *TM*, 196.

[73] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 59.

> meaning of a text can be understood from itself. *Thus the foundation for the study of history is hermeneutics.*[74]

The historical school urged the self-effacement of the historian: just as scientific observation should be independent of the observer, so should the observation of historical phenomena. But history is not at its end, and so is not a finite 'text', and the interpreters of history are embedded within it; there simply is no 'scientific' vantage point outside history. Alternatively, the historical school appeals to aesthetic categories by urging the kind of abstraction seen in the aesthetic consciousness (of which as we have seen Gadamer is fiercely critical). The historian is to consider events as expressions of an era and to contemplate them subjectively: the mode of aesthetic consciousness here provides the necessary self-effacement. Gadamer argues that here again the historical school fails to take adequate note of the facts that the historian is a part of history and that history is always a concern for us; there simply is no aesthetic vantage point outside history either.

Ranke argues that no preconceived idea concerning the significance of history should prejudice historical research but, as Gadamer points out, 'the self-evident assumption of historical research is that history constitutes a unity'.[75] The questions of history only exist because 'History' is part of the tradition it seeks to explain. Gadamer is happy to recognise the historical thought of Droysen as 'more acute' than Ranke's but even here Gadamer concludes that the aim of historical research is to reconstruct the great text of history from the fragments of tradition; an approach which relies on aesthetic-hermeneutic categories.[76] Droysen understood historical phenomena as the expressions of 'moral powers' which formed the 'actual reality of history'.[77] So the moral power of the individual becomes a historical power because it is the moral sphere that is lasting and powerful in history. Gadamer characterises Droysen's understanding of this mediation:

> The mediate moral world moves in such a way that everyone participates in it, but in different ways. Some preserve existing conditions by continuing to do the customary thing, while others have new ideas and express them. The continuity of the historical process consists in this constant overcoming of what is, through criticism based on what ought to be.[78]

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[74] *TM*, 199.

[75] *TM*, 208.

[76] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 65.

[77] *TM*, 214.

[78] *TM*, 214.

The individual and the historian participate in the moral world but only from the limitations of given moral spheres (such as nationality, politics and religion). It is from the 'concrete conditions of his own historical existence'[79] that the individual tries to understand. Gadamer suggests that for Droysen history ultimately depends on 'the mystery of the person that is ultimately unfathomable by research'.[80] However this distance also represents a kind of 'proximity': the historian cannot isolate historical events for 'objective' investigation. Rather, because of the historian's familiarity with the moral world and the prior understanding of tradition the historian is

> integrated with his object in a way completely different from the way a natural scientist is bound to his. 'Hearsay' is here not bad evidence but the only evidence possible.[81]

There are very significant implications for ethics in Gadamer' concepts of the hermeneutic circle and the fusion of horizons, together with his continued critique of abstraction and his emphasis on the nature and communication of truth.

3.5.2 Dilthey's entanglement in the aporias of historicism

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer regularly returns to the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey.[82] This is a significant and pivotal section in Gadamer's argument and here his differences with Dilthey, though implicit throughout, become explicit. Gadamer argues that Dilthey is torn between idealism and empiricism, between philosophy and experience. Dilthey is attempting 'to provide a philosophical foundation for the human sciences' and his task is 'to construct an epistemological basis between historical experience and the idealistic heritage of the historical school'.[83] The historical school needed a philosophical basis for historical knowledge similar to that which Kant had provided for the natural sciences. However, while Kant's achievement provided the justification for science's claims it did so only by clearly delineating the sphere within which such claims could

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[79] *TM*, 215.

[80] *TM*, 216.

[81] *TM*, 217.

[82] See e.g. H. P. Rickman (ed.), *W. Dilthey: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Wilhelm Dilthey, 'The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life-Expressions' [1900], in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 152-64; Wilhelm Dilthey, 'Awareness, Reality: Time (from 'Draft for a Critique of Historical Reason')' [1900], in Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader*, 149-51.

[83] *TM*, 219.

be made: he had defined the conditions of possibility and a methodology. The problem for the historical school is one of epistemology: how can we know anything about history? Hegel's rational construction of world history had been rejected and historical knowledge limited to experience. Dilthey was keen to demonstrate that historical experience could become a science and his approach was to provide the human sciences with a methodology. This emphasis on method is the target of Gadamer's sustained attack.

Dilthey concluded that he could not simply transpose Kant's work on scientific knowledge to questions of historical knowledge:

> The first condition of possibility of a science of history is that I myself am a historical being, that the person studying history is the person making history.[84]

Whilst Gadamer does not deny this he argues that this identification of the historical subject with historical object only serves to conceal the epistemological problem: how does an individual's experience come to constitute 'history' which is not experienced by any individual but rather by, for example, a community, generation or nation? Gadamer observes that this is a crucial step for Dilthey's epistemological project. The problem, which Dilthey recognised, is making the transition from a 'psychological to a hermeneutical grounding of the human sciences'.[85]

Dilthey hopes that 'historical consciousness', our awareness of the historicity of life, will provide a solution to the problem of historical knowledge. Our awareness allows us to shake off the effects of our historical situatedness and study history objectively. Gadamer argues that because we are such thoroughly historical beings there is no possibility of genuinely objective knowledge that transcends our historical condition and our prejudices.[86] For Gadamer 'historical consciousness' contains an internal contradiction. Dilthey attempted to 'legitimate the knowledge of what was historically conditioned as an achievement of objective science'.[87] A life could be understood through the hermeneutical approach to the whole and the parts. Whilst Dilthey accepted that an age should be understood on its own terms he believed that similar principles

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[84] Quoted in *TM*, 222.

[85] *TM*, 224.

[86] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 68.

[87] *TM*, 231.

could be applied to increasingly large historical units resulting ultimately in an understanding of universal history. As Gadamer points out:

> Applying this schema presumes, of course, that one can overcome the fact that the historical observer is tied to time and place.[88]

Such overcoming is the claim of historical consciousness: the claim to a universal and objective understanding of history:

> fundamentally [Dilthey] regards this kind of understanding ... as obtainable through scientific method. He explicitly justifies the human sciences' use of comparative methods by saying that their task is to overcome the accidental limits imposed by one's own range of experience and 'to rise to truths of greater universality'.[89]

Gadamer questions Dilthey's theory at precisely this point, observing that for true comparison both objects must be at the disposal of the subject, a condition which cannot be fulfilled by historical knowledge.

Dilthey argues that philosophy and hermeneutics are grounded in life; individuality is not primary but arises out of lived experience. Any historical idea is 'limited by the course of its effect'. However, for Dilthey, the concept of 'objective spirit' is still central. Gadamer characterises Dilthey's understanding of the primary question:

> How is the power of the individual related to what exists beyond and prior to him: objective spirit?[90]

Gadamer sees in this a failure to escape from the consequences of the idealist philosophy of Hegel.[91] Dilthey has simply replaced absolute spirit with historical consciousness: the spirit knows itself through historical phenomena:

> It is not in the speculative knowledge of the concept, but in historical consciousness that spirit's knowledge of itself is consummated.[92]

Gadamer is once more critical of Dilthey in this identification of historical consciousness with a form of self-knowledge.[93] Whilst a subject can undoubtedly adopt a reflexive attitude to his own historicity Gadamer argues that he can never discover the full extent of his determination by historical experience. We cannot identify all of our prejudices and we can never identify all of the historical influences that give rise to

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[88] *TM*, 231.

[89] *TM*, 233. He is quoting Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 99.

[90] *TM*, 226.

[91] *TM*, 228.

[92] *TM*, 229.

[93] *TM*, 235.

them. For Gadamer historical consciousness is 'being more than knowledge' and, 'for a historical being, historicity itself is never resolved in self-knowledge'.[94]

Gadamer goes on to criticise Dilthey for his Cartesian foundationalism and emphasis on scientific method. Dilthey, he argues, follows romantic hermeneutics in seeing the historical world as a text to be deciphered:

> Dilthey ultimately conceives inquiring into the historical past as deciphering and not as historical experience (Erfahrung).[95]

From this starting point he

> succeeds in harmonizing the human sciences with the methodological criteria of the natural sciences.

For Gadamer, this merely demonstrates the huge pressure exerted by the methodology of modern science which is, however, ultimately inadequate to the task of providing an epistemological grounding to the human sciences. We cannot interpret the 'hermeneutic manifestations of life from the categories of modern science'.[96] Gadamer is determined to provide an account of the human sciences based on historical experience, and to find a different grounding for the truth they reveal.[97]

The ethical significance of this section lies in Gadamer's continued critique of scientific method in the human sciences and the inescapable historical situatedness of human beings. By analogy, 'the person studying ethics is the person making ethics': our moral lives have significance not just for ourselves but for our communities. However abstractly we try to conceive of ethics, we can never escape from the fact that we too are continually faced with situations that require moral deliberation. Even in reflection, we cannot overcome the limits of our own range of experience: moral deliberation can never satisfy the conditions for true comparison: one cannot truly 'get inside someone else's head'. We must provide a properly historical account of ethics and find for it a grounding other than the categories and methods of science.

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[94] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 68.

[95] *TM*, 241.

[96] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 70.

[97] *TM*, 242.

3.5.3 Overcoming the epistemological problem through phenomenological research

Gadamer's proposal for overcoming the epistemological problem is to turn to phenomenology and in particular the work of Martin Heidegger, though he begins with a consideration of the work of Edmund Husserl and Count Yorck.[98] Grondin suggests that Gadamer is drawing heavily on the early work of Heidegger on the hermeneutics of facticity. However, since this work was at the time unpublished Gadamer has to build his argument on the basis of *Being and Time* together with a consideration of these other authors. This certainly seems to be a plausible explanation for the 'rather elliptical character'[99] of this section of *Truth and Method.*

Gadamer borrows from Husserl the important concept of 'horizon':

> With this concept ... Husserl is obviously seeking to capture the way all limited intentionality of meaning merges into the fundamental continuity of the whole. A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further.[100]

Here again we see the hermeneutic concept of the part and the whole, the 'part' being bounded by a 'horizon'. Husserl refers to an all-embracing world horizon as a 'world of life' (*Lebenswelt*) which Gadamer describes as

> the world in which we are immersed in the natural attitude that never becomes an object as such for us, but that represents the pregiven basis of all experience ... It is clear that the life-world is always at the same time a communal world that involves being with other people as well.[101]

This concept of 'horizon' will become central to Gadamer's hermeneutics.

The return to 'things in themselves' in Husserl's phenomenology is the key to liberating philosophy from scientific methodology: though Gadamer argues that Husserl does not go far enough and that it is Heidegger who really achieves this. Husserl argues that 'subjectivity' is not the opposite of 'objectivity' as this would imply an 'objective' concept of subjectivity. Instead he proposes 'correlation research': where the relation is primary and the poles, of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', are contained within this relation:

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98 *TM*, 242-54.

99 Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 72.

100 *TM*, 245.

101 *TM*, 247.

> 'The naivete of talk about "objectivity" which completely ignores experiencing, knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements, the naivete of the scientist concerned with nature, with the world in general, who is blind to the fact that all the truths that he acquires as objective, and the objective world itself that is the substratum in his formulas is his own life construct that has grown within him, is, of course, no longer possible, when life comes on the scene', writes Husserl with regard to Hume.[102]

For Gadamer this is what it really means for philosophy and hermeneutics to be grounded in life.

Heidegger asserts the inescapable temporality of being and the impossibility of any ultimate foundation. Everything must be understood from the experience of temporality:

> Thus it was clear that Heidegger's project of a fundamental ontology had to place the problem of history in the foreground. But it soon emerged that what constituted the significance of Heidegger's fundamental ontology was not that it was the solution to the problem of historicism, and certainly not a more original grounding of science, nor even, as with Husserl, philosophy's ultimate grounding of itself; rather, the whole idea of grounding itself underwent a total reversal.[103]

Being and objectivity can only be understood in terms of the temporality and historicity of Dasein: temporality is ontologically definitive of subjectivity. The 'knower' and the 'known' both have the mode of being of 'historicity'.[104] Heidegger's primary concern was the question of being, but his phenomenology and his analysis of Dasein's historicity meant that he was able to 'move beyond the complications on which Dilthey's and Husserl's investigations into the fundamental concepts of the human sciences had foundered.'[105] Understanding is the ontological basis of Dasein, it is Dasein's mode of being: the knowledge attained by the natural sciences and that attained by the human sciences are parts contained within this greater whole. This is the decisive moment for Gadamer. Understanding is not about method; rather, it is part of the 'being' of life itself. Because understanding is temporal it can only ever be provisional, we can never master a situation once and for all:

> Hermeneutics is not the title of a philosophical project that aspires to complete understanding, but the name of vigilance in thought which rests on its absence.[106]

For Gadamer, understanding is always an interaction between a historical subject and a historical object but it also arises out of history as an addition to a tradition: it is a

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[102] *TM*, 249.

[103] *TM*, 257.

[104] *TM*, 261.

[105] *TM*, 258.

[106] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 75.

participative 'event' of meaning. Dasein always has a past as well as a future ('thrown-ness' as well as 'projection') and always has the condition of finitude. To speak of certainty or of ultimate foundations represents a forgetfulness of temporality.[107]

In this section, Gadamer has cleared the ground: he argues that Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, with its concept of being, its radicalisation of history and its dispossession of human subjectivity, frees hermeneutics from the problems of epistemology inherent in Dilthey. In particular it avoids the use of Cartesian categories of modern science. There simply is no objective standpoint outside history from which to view the world or one's own being. Gadamer can now further develop his own hermeneutics.

The ethical significance of this section lies in the concept of horizon and the characterisation of objectivity and subjectivity. Perhaps talk of subjectivity and objectivity in ethics constitutes a similar false dichotomy? Does ethical truth perhaps emerge in the interaction between subject and object (agent and context)? As historically situated beings, does our ethical 'horizon' constitute an inescapable 'situation' for our ethical reflection? If, like aesthetics, ethics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics[108] then complete understanding in ethics will also be a vain hope, and vigilance to be preferred.

3.6 *Truth and Method*, Part Two II: Elements of a theory of hermeneutic experience

3.6.1 The elevation of the historicity of understanding to the status of a hermeneutic principle

Gadamer moves on to consider how we are properly to acknowledge the historical dimension of all understanding. He begins by looking at Heidegger's accounts of the hermeneutic circle and of prejudices (the fore-structure of understanding). For Heidegger the hermeneutic circle is not vicious, rather it contains the positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.[109] The circle is not to be avoided; rather, it

[107] *TM*, 262-64.

[108] *TM*, 164-65.

[109] Quoted in *TM*, 266.

must be entered into in the right way: by becoming aware of our prejudices. Like a text, life can only be understood in the relationship between the whole and the parts.

In any event of understanding we must 'remain open to the meaning of the other person or text',[110] we must be sensitive to the otherness of the person or text. We cannot do this by attempting to adopt a posture of objective neutrality (in any case our prejudices render such a posture unattainable); rather we should 'foreground' our prejudices to be aware of our bias. We must remain open to the possibility that our prejudices will be challenged and may be changed by the 'event of meaning' involved in understanding the other. Heidegger demonstrated that even our best efforts simply to read a text 'at face value' already involve a significant fore-structure of understanding. Gadamer suggests that 'the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power'.[111] In the Enlightenment, the word 'prejudice' acquires its negative connotation rather than simply denoting a provisional judgement. For Enlightenment rationalism, all judgements must have an objective methodological justification: all other judgements are simply unfounded. This reflects the emphasis of science on Cartesian doubt: nothing is certain that can in any way be doubted until those doubts have been rigorously tested by an appropriate method. Myth must retreat in the face of reason. Gadamer observes that whilst romanticism reverses the Enlightenment's evaluation (favouring the 'mythical' and the 'old') it nonetheless perpetuates 'the abstract contrast between myth and reason'.[112] He suggests that the romantic critique of the Enlightenment ends in historicism which seeks also to overcome all prejudice in its search for objective history. Gadamer comments that;

> The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness.[113]

Gadamer argues that being situated within a tradition is not an escapable limitation; rather we are completely and inevitably context-bound, including our reason. There is no such thing as absolute reason; rather our reason is constantly dependent upon the context in which it operates.

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[110] *TM*, 268.

[111] *TM*, 270.

[112] *TM*, 273.

[113] *TM*, 276.

> In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of an individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being.[114]

For Gadamer, as for Heidegger, prejudices are a necessary condition of understanding. What appears to reason to be simply a limiting feature is actually a constitutive part of our historical reality. Gadamer asserts that there are legitimate prejudices which aid our understanding and others which give rise to misunderstanding. While he asserts that prejudices must finally be justified by reason[115] he defers any consideration of how we are to recognise these legitimate prejudices. Some critics argue that Gadamer never satisfactorily addresses this particular issue.[116] He does say that we can never reliably differentiate our prejudices in advance; rather they are separated only in the process of understanding itself.[117]

Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate both authority and tradition, reversing their subordination to reason.[118] Whilst agreeing that authority, if allowed to displace individual judgement can be a source of illegitimate prejudices this does not 'preclude its being a source of truth'.[119] He argues that the human sciences are mistaken in their attempts to reduce their historicality simply to a matter of prejudices which must be overcome. There is a danger that in focussing on one kind of truth (verifiable by scientific method) other truth may be missed. There is no 'object of research' in the human sciences as in the natural sciences. We bring the questions of the present to bear upon tradition but can never attain to a 'perfect knowledge of history'. Gadamer suggests that the object of the natural sciences 'can be described idealiter as what would be known in the perfect knowledge of nature' whilst this can not be said of history;[120] though even science is

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[114] *TM*, 277, emphasis original.

[115] *TM*, 273.

[116] See e.g. Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 12-18.

[117] *TM*, 295-96.

[118] *TM*, 277.

[119] *TM*, 279.

[120] *TM*, 285.

motivated by the concerns of the present and the current interests of scientists: it too is 'carried along by the historical movement of life itself'.[121]

Gadamer concludes a discussion of 'the classical', in which he emphasises both its normative power and its historical contingency, by suggesting that while romanticism had attempted to free the interpreter from all historical conditions (by an appeal to universal human nature) hermeneutics had finally recognised the historical nature of events and of understanding itself:

> Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method.[122]

Gadamer next considers the implications for hermeneutics of being historical and belonging to a tradition; he considers the effect on understanding of 'temporal distance'. He begins by noting Schleiermacher's description of the hermeneutic circle in both 'objective' and 'subjective' terms: texts belong in the context of a writer's work and of all literature but at the same time they belong in the context of a writer's creative life. Following Heidegger, Gadamer suggests that understanding is always determined by prejudices and that the hermeneutic circle can never completely disappear:

> The circle of whole and part is not dissolved in perfect understanding but, on the contrary, is most fully realized. The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding.[123]

Gadamer observes that hermeneutics always assumes that an interpreter has an interest in the subject matter of a traditionary text and a connection to the tradition of which the text is also a part. However there is no guaranteed agreement; rather the work of hermeneutics is based on 'a polarity of familiarity and strangeness'.[124] There are

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[121] *TM*, 284.

[122] *TM*, 290, emphasis original.

[123] *TM*, 293.

[124] *TM*, 295.

tensions between these aspects and also between a text's temporal distance and its belonging to a tradition. 'The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between'.[125] Hermeneutics must clarify the conditions for understanding to occur in this 'in-between'. It is not possible to identify legitimate prejudices in advance but only in the process of understanding. In asking how this happens hermeneutics must 'foreground what has remained entirely peripheral in previous hermeneutics: temporal distance and its significance for understanding'.[126]

Gadamer does not see temporal distance as simply negative; rather 'it is the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted'.[127] Rather than being a limiting factor in understanding, temporal distance is, for Gadamer, the positive bearer of meaning; the settled wisdom of custom and tradition. He observes:

> Often temporal distance can solve the question of critique in hermeneutics, namely how to distinguish true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand.[128]

Grondin suggests that here Gadamer has gone too far in establishing understanding on the culmination of tradition to such an extent. In particular he suggests that Gadamer's proposal leaves significant problems in relation to contemporary texts and also with the consolidation of mistaken interpretations by tradition. However, Gadamer comments further.

> I have softened the original text ('It is only temporal distance that can solve ...'): it is distance, not only temporal distance, that makes this hermeneutic problem solvable.[129]

In relation to contemporary texts there will inevitably be different kinds of distance: different traditions, different contexts, and different prejudices will give rise to cultural distance and what I have referred to as 'moral distance'. Gadamer observes that suspension of prejudices logically implies a questioning stance: approaching a text in this way opens up possibilities and keeps them open. We do not simply suspend our own prejudices in order to accept the text or other person without question. We must put our own prejudices 'at risk' in the encounter being prepared for them to be modified or discarded as a result of the 'conversation'.[130]

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[125] *TM*, 295.

[126] *TM*, 296.

[127] *TM*, 297.

[128] *TM*, 298, emphasis original.

[129] *TM*, 298.

[130] *TM*, 299.

Having considered the question of temporal distance, Gadamer now considers 'The principle of history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*)' which Grondin, rightly, considers to be the 'speculative summit of the work' and the principle which the rest of *Truth and Method* develops.[131] In any act of understanding we must recognise that we are already conditioned by history in, for example, our assessments of which lines of inquiry are worth following and which objects are considered worthy of study. Even when we believe we are approaching something from an objective and 'ahistorical' standpoint we cannot escape the effects of history. In this regard even science is conditioned by history. We must become aware of effective history:

> historically effected consciousness (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein) is an element in the act of understanding itself and ... is already effectual in finding the right questions to ask.[132]

To be conscious of being affected by history is what constitutes an awareness of our hermeneutical situation: the situation we find ourselves in with regard to a tradition we are trying to understand.[133] This is a situation which we can never fully grasp, simply because we are historical beings. These limitations of a situation constitute its 'horizon'; similarly, a traditionary text has a historical horizon. These horizons are never 'closed': individuals understand as part of a community and a tradition. Historically identified cultures also interact. Any suggestion of a closed horizon around a culture can only be an abstraction. Ultimately all our horizons and all historical horizons constitute the one great horizon of history in which human life exists.[134] We need to learn to look beyond what is close at hand so that we may see it in proportion. The horizon of the present is continually changing as we risk our prejudices and attempt to understand our own traditions:

> There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.[135]

The ethical implications of this section lie in Gadamer's emphasis on our historical situatedness; the nature of prejudice; the concept of temporal distance which might be extended to 'moral distance'; and the notion of history of effect (or 'effective history'). I will argue in Chapter Four that we should think of ethical understanding too as

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[131] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 90.

[132] *TM*, 301.

[133] *TM*, 302.

[134] *TM*, 304.

[135] *TM*, 306.

participating in an event of tradition and subject to the constraints of the same hermeneutic circle. Gadamer now turns to consider a central problem of hermeneutics: the question of application, which he suggests is to be found in all understanding.

3.6.2 The recovery of the fundamental hermeneutic problem

Gadamer agrees with romanticism that interpretation is not consequent upon understanding but is rather a constant component of all understanding. However, for the romantics, application was separate and distinct, following on from successful understanding/interpretation. Gadamer argues that this too is a false dichotomy: understanding any text always involves the context of the interpreter:

> Formerly it was considered obvious that the task of hermeneutics was to adapt the text's meaning to the concrete situation to which the text is speaking.[136]

What matters is what the text 'says' to a given interpreter in a given situation. All texts must be understood differently in different situations; application is always involved. For Gadamer, understanding, interpretation and application are all integral to the hermeneutical process.

Gadamer also asserts the continuity of philological, legal and theological hermeneutics, arguing that it was the concept of historical consciousness in romanticism that resulted in philological hermeneutics coming to be seen as a distinct discipline. Gadamer wants to redefine a hermeneutics of the human sciences which is continuous with legal and theological hermeneutics:

> The meaning of a law that emerges in its normative application is fundamentally no different from the meaning reached in understanding a text.[137]

To give this account of application a philosophical basis, Gadamer turns to Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle, he suggests, freed ethics from metaphysics by locating it in human action (virtue is based on practice and 'ethos'):

> Human civilization differs essentially from nature in that it is not simply a place where capacities and powers work themselves out; man becomes what he is through what he does and how he behaves—i.e., he behaves in a certain way because of what he has become. Thus Aristotle sees ethos as differing from physis in being a sphere in which the laws of nature do not operate, yet not a

[136] *TM*, 308.
[137] *TM*, 311.

> sphere of lawlessness but of human institutions and human modes of behaviour which are mutable, and like rules only to a limited degree.[138]

Gadamer then poses a very important question: whether it is possible to have a purely philosophical knowledge of the moral being of humankind, that is, knowledge that does not arise with experience. Gadamer, following Aristotle, suggests not: individuals encounter the good not in abstract propositions but in the concrete situations of everyday life. Moral decisions relate to actions in context:

> Thus, it is essential that philosophical ethics have the right approach, so that it does not usurp the place of moral consciousness and yet does not seek a purely theoretical and 'historical' knowledge either but, by outlining phenomena, helps moral consciousness to attain clarity concerning itself.[139]

Gadamer's stated purpose in returning to the ethics of Aristotle is to lend weight to his claims about the 'alienation of the interpreter from the interpreted by the objectifying methods of modern science'.[140] Gadamer now turns to a discussion of three forms of knowledge: theoretical knowledge (*episteme*), practical knowledge (*techne*) and moral knowledge (*phronesis*).[141] The last two, which guide action, include the task of application, which Gadamer has identified as the central task of hermeneutics. However the two are not the same: an individual's character is not accessible in the same way as a craftsman's material. The individual is always subject to the influences of tradition and community; and character is not always amenable to manipulation.

From this, Gadamer concludes that philological and legal hermeneutics are, in fact, very similar. Jurists must distinguish between the original meaning of a law and its application to specific cases: its normative content is partially determined by how it is applied.[142] In fact, a law can have no meaning at all without the possibility of its being applied. Case law is simply an account of the historical effect of the law: understanding is the mediation between past and present; between statute law, case law and the case at hand. Application is not consequent upon a prior understanding; rather it is an integral part of all understanding. Legal hermeneutics is essentially the same as both philological and theological hermeneutics. This unity does not consist in historical or

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[138] *TM*, 312.

[139] *TM*, 313.

[140] *TM*, 314.

[141] See also Robert Song, 'Wisdom as the End of Morality', in Stephen C. Barton (ed.), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 295-306.

[142] *TM*, 326.

scientific method but in the fact that they all find 'their true ground in historically effected consciousness'.[143] This is the 'great conclusion of hermeneutics in the human sciences'.[144]

The implications of this section concern the distinction between understanding and application in ethics. Gadamer might argue that moral hermeneutics is also like legal hermeneutics: moral knowledge can only be gained from experience in the exercise of *phronesis* and ethics has much to learn from the model of case-law.

3.6.3 Analysis of historically effected consciousness

Gadamer consistently appeals to Hegel in his efforts to overcome historicism. Hegel appreciated that understanding is not simply an attempt to reconstruct past meaning – rather it inescapably involves contemporary application. Historically effected consciousness is not simply another form of 'objective' inquiry; as a consciousness of a particular text it is always already involved in the history of the work. The usual concept of consciousness, however, implies reflexivity, the ability to *stand apart* from the thing of which it is conscious. At this point, Gadamer is concerned to distance historically effected consciousness from Hegel's reflective philosophy.

Romantic hermeneutics strives for perfect enlightenment: 'the complete limitlessness of our historical horizon ... [and] the abolition of our finiteness in the infinity of knowledge ...'[145] The problem for Gadamer is that the appeal to hermeneutic experience, like other appeals to immediacy, may itself be self-refuting if 'it is not in itself an immediate relation, but a reflexive activity'.[146] However, Gadamer's historically effected consciousness is never completely dissolved in reflection. Whilst this may give rise to charges of relativism, Gadamer, following Heidegger, is not unduly concerned. He argues that one can only speak of 'relativism' if one accepts the possibility of absolute knowledge: they are two sides of the same coin. For Gadamer, the division into absolute truth or relativism is a false dichotomy: Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity demonstrate that all absolute foundations depend upon a denial

[143] *TM*, 340.
[144] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 110.
[145] *TM*, 341-42.
[146] *TM*, 344.

of our temporality. Hermeneutics does not seek absolute certainty. Historically effected consciousness makes no reflective claim to universal validity; rather, Gadamer sees it as part of the essence of hermeneutic experience, a condition of understanding.

Gadamer argues against the understanding of experience in the natural sciences (and its parallel in the historico-critical method), suggesting that here its meaning has become severely restricted and that it simply ignores the 'inner historicity of experience':[147] results must be verifiable and repeatable, hence their historicity is denied. In a discussion of Husserl's attempts to address this problem, Gadamer comments that 'language is already present in any acquisition of experience'[148] and that 'pure reason' is simply a fantasy as we are completely unable to free ourselves from the prejudices and predispositions of our language. Gadamer, however, sees this not as a negative constraint, rather 'language is a positive condition of, and guide to, experience itself'.[149] Experience tends to work on the basis of inductive reasoning rather than logical deduction. There is a role here for memory (of previous experiences): universal concepts are acquired by learning. The universality of experience is not that implied in the scientific understanding of experience but that required by the historicality and linguisticality of all understanding.

For Gadamer, experience is often a negative process. It is not simply about generating universal concepts: new experiences challenge our previous false generalisations. The structure of experience is ultimately dialectical. This negativity is seen in the development of 'wisdom': the 'experienced' person is radically undogmatic, open to new experiences and willing to learn.

> The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself ... Experience in this sense belongs to the historical nature of man.[150]

We need to learn by experience the limitations of our understanding. The fundamental experience is that of our own historicity. Grondin observes that Aristotle placed 'experience' (*empeiria*) at the 'mid-point between isolated perceptions and conceptual universality'. It is our experience that becomes our knowledge:

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[147] *TM*, 346.

[148] *TM*, 348.

[149] *TM*, 350.

[150] *TM*, 355-56.

> The person who reaches experience from the height of great abstract principles is not a person of experience, nor very wise either. The *empeiria* does not enjoy less of a 'universality', which is neither that of a concept nor that of repeated observations. It is the universality of the finitude of experience and the experience of finitude itself.[151]

Openness to tradition is a characteristic of historically effected consciousness and this structure of openness in hermeneutics brings Gadamer back to the concept of the question. We must acknowledge the reality of experience and be conscious of what we do not know. A question has its own horizon: a set of presuppositions within which can be seen what still remains open.[152] In answering a question both positive and negative judgements are involved: establishing what is the case, but also excluding what is wrong. Gadamer argues that Aristotle accords priority to the question and concludes that this priority implies that 'method' must be inappropriate to knowledge as there is no foolproof method that can be learned for asking questions. The ability to identify what is questionable is born of experience and the question provides the conditions for a productive dialectic which can result in knowledge. 'The art of questioning ... is the art of conducting a real dialogue.'[153] For Gadamer, the model of 'conversation', establishing understanding through spoken language, characterises the task of hermeneutics in relation to written texts. Language and concepts here too communicate meaning as part of a 'conversation'.

In his attempt to provide a 'logic of question and answer' Gadamer turns to R. G. Collingwood who argues that 'We can understand a text only when we understand the question to which it is an answer.'[154] We must assume that the answer is adequate to the question: we expect coherence. Gadamer describes this as the 'fore-conception of completeness'.[155] If we can understand historical events 'only when we reconstruct the question to which the historical actions of the persons involved were the answer'[156] perhaps we can only understand ethical 'events' when we reconstruct the question to which the ethical actions of the persons involved were the answer. Because of our historicity our horizons can only ever be temporary, our understanding moves within

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[151] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 118.

[152] *TM*, 363.

[153] *TM*, 367.

[154] Quoted in *TM*, 370.

[155] *TM*, 294.

[156] *TM*, 371.

our horizons while we are formed by history. Our understanding itself becomes an event within a tradition. A reconstructed question never stands within its original horizon; rather it becomes part of our horizon. This 'fusion of horizons' is part of genuine understanding: we 'regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them'.[157]

Gadamer argues that the logic of question and answer puts an end to talk about permanent 'problems'. The identity of any such problem is an 'empty abstraction':

> There is no such thing, in fact, as a point outside history from which the identity of a problem can be conceived within the vicissitudes of the history of attempts to solve it.[158]

'Problems' of this sort are detached from any 'motivated context of questioning' and become insoluble 'unasked' questions.[159] Are ethical 'problems' (the kind to which absolute laws might provide an answer) also empty abstractions, simply addressing unasked questions? It is the dialectic of question and answer that gives understanding the character of a 'conversation'. Historically effected consciousness renounces any claim to absolute knowledge and seeks understanding through a fusion of horizons. It is Gadamer's 'directing idea' that

> *the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language* ... It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs – whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us – is the coming-into-language of the thing itself ... Whereas up to now we have framed the constitutive significance of the question for the hermeneutical phenomenon in terms of conversation, we must now demonstrate the linguisticality of dialogue, which is the basis of the question, as an element of hermeneutics.[160]

Like application, language is not consequent upon understanding; rather it is a condition of understanding: the interlocutors must find a common language if the subject matter is to be understood. This sets the scene for Part Three.

The ethical implications of this section concern Gadamer's description of the nature of experience; and his further critique of abstraction. Is what we have characterised as abstracted ethics also making 'an unfounded claim to universal validity'? Do the charges of 'relativism' made against, for example, situationism and proportionalism rely

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[157] *TM*, 374.

[158] *TM*, 375.

[159] *TM*, 376.

[160] *TM*, 378, emphasis original.

on a similar belief in absolute knowledge? Gadamer also introduces the important notion of 'openness' and the discipline of question and answer.

3.7 *Truth and Method*, Part Three: Introduction.

'The ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language'

Gadamer's considerations of hermeneutics in terms of 'conversation' and the 'dialectic of question and answer' culminate in a consideration of the linguisticality of all understanding and the role of language in experience. In this Gadamer follows Heidegger's turn to language: a turn which, together with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, was to become a major feature of twentieth-century philosophy, paving the way for the work of Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty among others. Part Three of *Truth and Method*, then, has far-reaching implications and connections. It will not be possible in this thesis to follow up all these lines of criticism and development. However in Chapter Five, in dialogue with the work of Mark Johnson, we will consider the inescapable linguisticality of understanding, the metaphorical nature of language, and the processes of concept formation , which together have significant implications for our understanding of moral notions and moral deliberation.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer takes an 'ontological turn'[161]:

> an investigation of the Being of historical life comes out of a clarification of historical living in its fullness, i.e. the activity that it is. This activity, however, turns out to be linguistic, such that language shows itself to be the Being of historical life.[162]

For Gadamer language is the 'real medium of human being'.[163] It is not consequential upon thought; it is not simply an instrument which we use to put 'reality' into linguistic form:

> Gadamer demystifies Heidegger's insight into language: human beings live within language as the air they breathe rather than as an instrument they deploy at will. They exist conversationally in relation to everything that is.[164]

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[161] *TM*, 381, 438.

[162] Günter Figal, 'The Doing of the Thing Itself: Gadamer's Hermeneutic Ontology of Language', in Robert J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 102-25, at 104.

[163] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 68.

Language is the 'horizon of being'[165] and whilst we may lament the limitations of our language they are not something from which we can ever escape. Just as our historical situatedness is both a source of limitations for our understanding but also a condition of our understanding, so is our linguistic situatedness. For Gadamer understanding a text (or text-analogue) or event is not about the scientific grasp of an 'object'. Rather, it is a 'conversation' in which the subject is always already involved; in which both parties 'speak'; in which the subject's prejudices are put at risk; and which is to be seen as following a similar pattern to two people 'reaching an agreement' (*Verständigung*).

3.8 *Truth and Method*, Part Three

3.8.1 Language as the medium of hermeneutic experience

Gadamer continues his consideration of language by exploring further his notion of 'conversation', arguing that we 'become involved' in conversation rather than 'conducting' it, that a conversation has a life of its own, and that truth can emerge from the interaction. The event of meaning which constitutes understanding is itself constituted linguistically. The text and the interpreter are always already embedded in language: for there to be any meaningful exchange or understanding there has to be a common language of discourse.[166] In genuine conversation we consider an interlocutor's contribution in terms of how it addresses us: what it has to say to us rather than what it says about them. Gadamer makes a crucial extension to his theory by arguing that understanding texts is best understood on the model of conversation, of two people 'coming to an understanding'.[167] The subject matter is given expression in the interpreter's participation in a 'conversation' with the text. Language is not a tool to be used in the hermeneutical enterprise; rather, like interpretation and application, it is a constituent part of understanding itself. In the relationship between text and interpreter the subject matter is 'brought' into language: the horizon of the text and the horizon of

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[164] Fred Lawrence, 'Gadamer, the Hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology', in Dostal (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 167-200, at 184.

[165] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 154.

[166] *TM*, 385.

[167] *TM*, 387.

the interpreter are fused.[168] 'Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs'.[169]

Tradition too is verbally constituted. What is handed down to us in myths, legends and stories, in oral and written traditions, is verbal in character. The bearer of tradition is a communal memory expressed in language. For Gadamer the approach to a 'text' is quite distinct from Schleiermacher's insistence on understanding the mind of the author. The truth which emerges in the conversation with the text does not depend on our ability to make this psychological connection:

> The horizon of understanding cannot be limited either by what the writer originally had in mind or by the horizon of the person to whom it was originally addressed.[170]

All such limitations are, according to Gadamer, simply abstractions from the whole history of the text and its history of interpretation. Rather we should ask 'What is the text's claim to truth in the face of this multifarious mixture of past and future?'[171] This is a further example of the dialectic of question and answer.

Our language may not conform easily to that of a text. Gadamer points out the dangers of unthinkingly using our concepts to describe historical objects or events thereby effacing real differences with linguistic familiarity:

> Despite his scientific method, [the historian] behaves just like everyone else – as a child of his time who is unquestioningly dominated by the concepts and prejudices of his own age.[172]

When one becomes aware of one's prejudices and the historicality of one's concepts there are two options: to attempt to erase one's prejudices and to adopt the concepts of the text's era (to adopt an 'objective' standpoint); or to foreground one's prejudices and attempt to mediate between the concepts of the text and one's own. Gadamer is scathingly critical of the first option:

> To think historically always involves mediating between [the concepts of the past] and one's own thinking. To try to escape from one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning

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[168] *TM*, 388.

[169] *TM*, 389.

[170] *TM*, 395.

[171] *TM*, 395.

[172] *TM*, 396.

> can really be made to speak for us ... Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs.[173]

We are not always able to express what we feel and indeed Gadamer suggests that we can never say *everything* we would wish despite language's apparently limitless capacity for extension and innovation. Gadamer argues that being limited to a 'situation' in this way does not necessarily mean that an interpretation's claim to truth must be only 'occasional' or 'subjective'. Instead he argues that the verbal nature of the interpretation, its expression in language, always implies the possibility of communicating with others and thereby generating a communal understanding. For Gadamer, thought and language, just like understanding and interpretation, are indissoluble.

> We can only think in a language ... we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own.[174]

Concepts are embedded within our language: so much so that we are usually completely unaware of them. However Gadamer suggests that they are not fixed but are constantly being revised in the light of experience and dialogue:

> the capacity to use familiar words is not based on an act of logical subsumption, through which a particular is placed under a universal concept. Let us remember, rather, that understanding always includes an element of application and thus produces an ongoing process of concept formation.[175]

Gadamer is sharply critical of the 'instrumentalist devaluation' of language in modern linguistics and philosophy. He compares this to the 'complete unconsciousness' of language in classical Greece (where there was no word for 'language') and suggests that this change in attitude has allowed 'language' to become an object of scientific study in which form can be totally separated from content.[176] He argues that this is an inadequate conception:

> The language that lives in speech – which comprehends all understanding, including that of the interpreter of texts – is so much bound up with thinking and interpretation that we have too little left if we ignore the actual content of what languages hand down to us and try to consider language only as form.[177]

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[173] *TM*, 397.

[174] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 62.

[175] *TM*, 403.

[176] *TM*, 404.

[177] *TM*, 405.

Language then has a universal significance; everything intelligible that exists must be accessible to understanding and interpretation and this is achieved through the verbal forms of language. Hence Gadamer's famous slogan 'Being that can be understood is language' (*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.*)[178]

The ethical implication of this section is that language is not just the medium of hermeneutic experience but also the medium of ethical experience. We are inescapably situated within language, just as we are inescapably situated within history.

3.8.2 The development of the concept of language in the history of Western thought

Gadamer considers two theories of language.[179] He is critical of both the 'conventionalist' theory (in which words are arbitrarily applied to objects with their only source of meaning in communal usage and convention) and the 'similarity' theory (in which there is conformity between a word and its object, words are 'fitting' or appropriate to the objects they describe). Gadamer argues that 'customary usage' sets limits to both theories: the meaning of words cannot be arbitrarily changed if communication is to be maintained, and it is hardly fair to criticise words for inaccurately representing objects when language is a feature of human beings not of objects. Gadamer suggests that both theories are guilty of too instrumentalist a conception of language, assuming that we can somehow know about objects 'before' using language to describe them. Gadamer therefore suggests that both theories 'start too late'.[180] He is relentlessly critical of instrumentalist theories of language, arguing instead that both thought and experience are always already immersed completely in language and that 'truth' does not reside in words but in dialogue. Gadamer observes that using a 'technical term' involves fixing the meaning of a word by limiting its variability and semantic range, limiting it to one particular concept. However, this process happens continually in language and not just in relation to technical terms. The 'death' of metaphors represents a communally agreed restriction of a word's meaning. Problems arise when we forget the heritage of our words and assume that they have

[178] *TM*, 474.
[179] *TM*, 406.
[180] *TM*, 406.

literal meanings, offering access to absolute truth. We cannot stand 'outside' language and understand things 'in themselves'; language goes 'all the way down'. Everything we do and everything we are conscious of is mediated by language. Language dominates our conceptual schemes and worldviews. There simply is no realm of 'pure' thought apart from language.

Gadamer asserts 'the fundamental metaphorical nature' of language implied by the constant process of concept formation:

> However certainly speaking implies using pre-established words with general meanings, at the same time, a constant process of concept formation is going on, by means of which the life of a language develops. [181]

Here, reason works inductively from grasping resemblances rather than deductively from subsuming particulars under universals. Gadamer suggests that just as individual words only acquire meaning in discourse, so knowledge can only be achieved within a 'relational structure' of ideas. These observations are further examples of the principle of the hermeneutic circle.

Once more Gadamer is critical of the scientific ideal of 'logical proof':

> accepting the ideal of logical proof as a yardstick ... has robbed the logical achievement of language of its legitimacy. That achievement is recognized only from the point of view of rhetoric and is understood there as the artistic device of metaphor. The logical ideal of the ordered arrangement of concepts takes precedence over the living metaphoricity of language, on which all natural concept formation depends. For only a grammar based on logic will distinguish between the proper and the metaphorical meaning of a word. What originally constituted the basis of the life of language and its logical productivity, the spontaneous and inventive seeking out of similarities by means of which it is possible to order things, is now marginalized and instrumentalized into a rhetorical figure called metaphor.[182]

Discursive multiplicity is conceptual as well as verbal. 'Natural concept formation that keeps pace with language ... very often takes place as a result of accidents and relations.' [183] Univocity is an abstraction from these relationships of meaning. Such abstraction may be useful and even, in the extreme case of science, essential but it should be remembered that

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[181] *TM*, 429.

[182] *TM*, 434.

[183] *TM*, 428.

> to regard the metaphorical use of a word as not its real sense is the prejudice of a theory of logic that is alien to language. [184]

The work of concept formation is a communal enterprise. 'Common usage' guides as well as limits the development of language.

The ethical implications of this section concern the metaphorical nature of our moral language and the illegitimacy of its instrumental use; together with the process of concept formation involved in the development of our moral notions.

3.8.3 Language as horizon of a hermeneutic ontology

Richard Bernstein notes that Gadamer's project is ontological:

> Following Heidegger, Gadamer argues that the essential character of our being-in-the-world is to be individuals who understand the happening of truth through language.[185]

Gadamer is seeking to keep his distance from 'the modern philosophy and science of language' which concentrates on the form of languages and studies different human languages comparatively. He contends that the conception of language as form, separated from content, is an abstraction which must be reversed:

> Verbal form and traditionary content cannot be separated in the hermeneutic experience. If every language is a view of the world it is so not primarily because it is a particular type of language (in the way that linguists view language) but because of what is said or handed down in this language.[186]

For Gadamer, language is not simply 'one of man's possessions in the world'.[187] Rather it is language itself that allows humankind to be aware of a 'world' at all. Humboldt maintained that as an individual grows into a linguistic community (as they learn the language) they are introduced to a shared perspective on the world. Gadamer concludes that 'language has no independent existence apart from the world that comes to language within it'.[188] The communal dimension of language and its inherent orientation toward application are fundamentally constitutive of language rather than

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[184] *TM*, 429.

[185] Richard J. Bernstein, 'The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory, and Deconstruction', in Dostal (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 267-82, at 271.

[186] *TM*, 441.

[187] *TM*, 443.

[188] *TM*, 443.

occasional elements. 'Man's being in the world is primordially linguistic'.[189] The suggestion here seems to be that for human beings all our experience of the world is mediated through language: language mediates the encounter between human being and world (or object, or 'other'). Truth does not exist in language but in the interaction which language mediates as the world is brought into being in language. Gadamer is critical of the Cartesian foundations of science arguing that the understanding of hermeneutical experience which he has outlined demands that 'we go beyond the idea of the object, and the objectivity of understanding, toward the idea that subject and object belong together'.[190] Gadamer asserts that language 'has its true being only in dialogue, *in coming to an understanding*'.[191] He argues that all human communities are in fact linguistic communities, in which language is formed and evolves. Just as we can increase our understanding by correlating ('fusing') perspectives (horizons) within language, so also we can increase our understanding by entering into other language-worlds, other traditions. Our experiences are not exclusive but are fundamentally open to others. This wider dialogue can allow us to overcome some of the limitations of our own language-world. Our verbal nature and limitations are not barriers to understanding but are conditions of its possibility in the same way that our communal and historical situatedness are conditions of understanding as Brice Wachterhauser notes:

> The fact that knowledge is always dependent on historical, linguistic, and normative conditions, which constitute a relative standpoint, is not an inherent danger to knowledge, but a condition of its possibility.[192]

We must acknowledge that we are conditioned by language and history and that there simply is no 'objective', i.e. unconditioned', standpoint. Gadamer dismisses concerns about the suggestion that he himself is making an 'absolute' claim to truth here:

> In particular it is no objection to affirming that we are thus fundamentally conditioned to say that this affirmation is intended to be absolutely and unconditionally true, and therefore cannot be applied to itself without contradiction. The consciousness of being conditioned does not supersede our conditionedness. It is one of the prejudices of reflective philosophy that it understands matters that are not at all on the same logical level as standing in propositional relationships. Thus the reflective argument is out of place here. For we are not dealing with relationships between judgements which have to be kept

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[189] *TM*, 443.

[190] *TM*, 461.

[191] *TM*, 446, emphasis original.

[192] Brice Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth', in Dostal (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 52-78, at 72.

> free from contradictions but with life relationships. Our verbal experience of the world has the capacity to embrace the most varied relationships of life.[193]

The limitations of our language imply that we can never fully express 'what we mean': all human speaking is finite. Again we encounter the hermeneutic circle; words can only be understood in terms of a whole language, and vice versa. Saying what one means is never simply positive: to say that an object 'is' something in particular always implies that it 'is not' something else. Words do not simply relate to objects but 'words in relation' refer to 'objects in relation'. Whatever has been said can always be said in another way. We can always understand things, and understand ourselves, differently. This 'speculative'[194] nature of language constitutes 'the hermeneutic promise of universality'.[195]

The objectifying language of scientific method is an abstraction; a necessary abstraction for the purposes of science, but an abstraction nonetheless. The universal claims of scientific method represent an illegitimate attempt to expand the scientific notion of understanding, which in truth is only a particular part of the wider hermeneutical experience in the medium of language. The concepts of 'art' and 'history' are 'modes of understanding that emerge from the universal mode of hermeneutical being as forms of hermeneutic experience'.[196] Should we now say the same for 'ethics'? In Chapter Four we will explore in more detail the implications for ethics of Gadamer's *Truth and Method.*

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[193] *TM*, 448.

[194] *TM*, 466-67.

[195] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 148.

[196] *TM*, 476.

Chapter Four

Significance and Criticism: the Ethical Implications of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*

At the beginning of our explorations of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* we embarked on an extended thought-experiment: posing the question 'if Gadamer's hermeneutics can govern an interpretation of what ethics is, and how it works, and how it can be justified, then what would ethics look like?' It is now time to begin to evaluate this thought-experiment. With this in mind, in this chapter I wish to explore the implications for ethics of Gadamer's hermeneutics as developed in *Truth and Method* and described in the previous chapter (section 4.1). My main contention in the light of Gadamer's work is that ethics must consciously adopt a stance that is thoroughly hermeneutical. We have seen how Gadamer has developed a sustained critique of the notion of universal truth and of the use of 'scientific method' in the human sciences. Thus Gadamer's hermeneutics will have serious implications for the concept of moral absolutes and for the method of utilitarianism, which would support my critique in Chapter Two: it is those implications which I hope to draw out in this chapter. I hope to demonstrate that Gadamer's hermeneutics can provide a sound philosophical approach to moral judgements, and that contextual moral truths can be properly asserted without recourse to scientific models of validation. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* has been criticised since its publication and I will consider some of these criticisms in order to assess their impact on my main thesis (section 4.2). I will also look briefly at some developments of Gadamer's work to see whether these might be applicable to ethics conceived as a hermeneutical endeavour (section 4.3).

4.1 The significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics

Gadamer concludes *Truth and Method* with this paragraph:

> Thus there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudice, however much the will of our knowledge must be directed toward escaping their thrall. Throughout our investigation it has emerged that the certainty achieved by using scientific methods does not suffice to guarantee truth. This especially applies to the human sciences, but it does not mean that they are less scientific; on the contrary, it justifies the claim to special human significance that they have always made. The fact that in such knowledge the knower's own being comes

> into play certainly shows the limits of method, but not of science. Rather, what the tool of method does not achieve must – and really can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth.[1]

There is no special claim which would allow ethics immunity from these observations. If there is no understanding that is free from all prejudice and if scientific method is insufficient to guarantee truth then this applies as much to ethics as to any other form of human understanding. Gadamer's emphasis on our historical situatedness and the sheer impossibility of 'an objective standpoint' represents a significant challenge to Enlightenment emphases on universal reason and objectivity. Gadamer also challenges Kant's subjectivization of the aesthetic, arguing that aesthetic experience is also rooted in our historical situatedness. He argues that understanding and meaning operate at the level of practical concern and not merely theoretical observation. In fact, Gadamer's hermeneutics is a serious challenge to Kant's attempts to separate scientific, ethical, and aesthetic knowledge from each other. Gadamer argues that the problems of understanding and truth are similar in all areas: hermeneutics is a universal problem.

The most serious challenges raised by Gadamer's hermeneutics are directed at ethical theories based on conceptions of absolute truth or universal method. Legalism and utilitarianism both attempt to understand human beings apart from their cultural and historical situatedness and to provide either *universal* norms or a *universally applicable* method. We have considered several criticisms of moral absolutes and of utilitarianism, and have suggested that their main failings seem to lie in a failure to appreciate the complexity, and the significance for moral deliberation, of the context of actions and choices (the twin failings of abstraction and reduction); and in their reliance on scientific truth and Enlightenment reason. Gadamer argues that all human life and all human understanding are inescapably finite and historical. Human relationships and communities involve complex dynamic systems: attempting to describe them on the basis of static models has serious limitations. We will now consider some of the more important implications for ethics of Gadamer's hermeneutics: the critique of abstraction (section 4.1.1), the nature of moral truth and knowledge (section 4.1.2), the nature of reason and its role in moral deliberation (section 4.1.3), the importance of tradition (section 4.1.4), the centrality of language and its metaphorical nature (section 4.1.5), and the elements of application and self-presentation in the virtuous life (section 4.1.6). We will then briefly reconsider our scenario from Chapter One (section 4.1.7).

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[1] *TM*, 491.

4.1.1 Abstracted ethics?

In Part One of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is fiercely critical of the abstraction involved in 'aesthetic consciousness' and I have suggested that this critique might equally apply to those forms of ethical reasoning which we have seen to rely on their own forms of abstraction. Gadamer is clear that moral deliberation is not about applying universal principles in the abstract but is about judging individual concrete cases.[2] He is critical of Kant's conception of the aesthetic experience as isolated and separate from the world and from the cultural and historical situatedness both of the work of art and of the experiencing subject. Gadamer suggests that in performing such abstraction the true nature of the work of art is distorted and so judgements about it do not relate to the 'real' work of art at all. They relate, if at all, to an artificial construct derived from the work of art. In attempting to simplify moral judgements by abstracting only certain features from a complex context (from the situation where action is required), or by attempting to apply universal principles or a universal method, ethicists too unavoidably alter the nature of the ethical case under consideration. The real nature of the case lies in a complex network of agent, motivation, context, relationships, tradition, community, consequences and so on. Ethical judgements based on abstraction relate to an artificial construct consisting only of certain selected features of the case. It may well be impossible fully and accurately to account for all the features of a case but this should not prevent the attempt (and certainly we should not be deliberately excluding some of them). Gadamer is critical of Kant for denying any truth value to aesthetic judgements. He suggests that this is a direct result of the abstraction of aesthetic experience from its context and from the lasting significance for the observer. Kant argued for a rigid separation of aesthetic judgement from other forms of judgement and, in so doing, abstracted the aesthetic 'experience' from the context or tradition of the observer.[3] The aesthetic judgement becomes a judgement simply of form: all elements of context or purpose must be excluded. Against this, Gadamer suggests that aesthetic judgements (and by implication ethical judgements) can communicate truth as part of an 'event of meaning': that is, by virtue of the very situatedness in a context, and the lasting effects on an experiencing subject, that Kant denies. For Gadamer, understanding (including

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[2] *TM*, 39.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 45: §2.

moral understanding) can only exist as part of the 'hermeneutic continuity of human existence'.[4]

However, after Kant and perhaps as a consequence of his rigid isolation of aesthetic judgements, ethical judgements increasingly come to be seen as similar to scientific judgements with science characterised as 'objective' and aesthetics 'merely subjective' (i.e. completely relative). This has required the abstraction of certain features from ethical contexts and from the process of deliberation in order to make them susceptible of a 'scientific' analysis. Theories of aesthetic consciousness abstract the experience of art from its context; while the hegemony of scientific method, together with inappropriate insistence on universality and a limited conception of reason, abstract ethical judgement from its context. Absolutism too is guilty of its own forms of abstraction. Gadamer's hermeneutics, on the other hand, imply that all understanding is inevitably context-bound; that we can only understand anything because we are part of a tradition; and that both aesthetics and ethics are part of the hermeneutical project.

For Kant, the spectrum of judgements could be represented thus:

Objective ... Scientific ... Ethical || Aesthetic ... ***Subjective***

I want to argue, with Gadamer and against Kant, that ethical judgement has a good deal in common with aesthetic judgement. Much traditional ethics, notably utilitarianism, has attempted to provide a rational basis for ethical judgements by the adoption of a scientific method. For Enlightenment science only the rigorous application of method could provide access to truth. Hermeneutics, together with late twentieth-century philosophy of science from Thomas Kuhn[5] onwards, would suggest that science is not as 'objective' as the Enlightenment philosophers thought. The 'objective' approach of science may have brought us significant understanding of ourselves and our world but even here truth is ultimately perspectival. No judgements can properly be described as completely 'objective'. The spectrum should perhaps be represented with no rigid separation:

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[4] *TM*, 96.

[5] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed, 1970).

Objective ...	Scientific		
Concept ...		Ethical	... ***Subjective***
		Aesthetic	... *Judgement*

This opens up the possibility that ethics has as much to learn from aesthetics as it has from science and implies that ethics always involves judgement rather than merely the application of rigid rules. Kantian ethics tends to divorce ethical principles from empirical conditions.[6] This, together with the characterisation of human beings as essentially rational, has led to the exclusion of feelings, passions and, most seriously, imagination from the sphere of ethics.

Dale Jamieson describes the dominant conception of moral theory:

> On the dominant conception, moral theories are *abstract structures* that sort agents, actions, or outcomes into appropriate categories. Proposed categories include virtuous, vicious, right, wrong, permitted, forbidden, good, bad, best, worst, supererogatory, and obligatory ... The job of moral theorists ... is to make particular moral theories explicit, to describe their universality, and to make vivid their coercive power. This is done through examining arguments, assessing evidence, and scrutinizing logical relationships.[7]

Such systems can feel cold and inflexible to those struggling with ethical judgement who may be able to see many specific and particular features of their situation which militate against the conclusions of such abstract models. As Kathleen Higgins notes, Kant's ethics, 'presents invulnerability to situational contingencies as an ethical ideal. This ideal, however, is foreign to our moral experience.'[8] Robert Song traces the genesis of this ideal back before Kant to Plato who, in situating moral truth in a realm of reality removed from time and contingency, created ethics as a form of *techne*. Immunity to change also implied, in the ideal subject, 'an impermeability to the distracting, unpredictable power of the passions'.[9] However, real moral decisions are coloured by the sort of person who is making the decision; the impact of the decision on their networks of relationships; and the temporal location of the situation in relation to

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6 Immanuel Kant, 'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals' [1785], in H. J. Paton (ed.), *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1948), iii-v. Page references are to the second edition of *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, which appear as marginal notes in this edition.

7 Dale Jamieson, 'Method and Moral Theory', in Peter Singer (ed.), *Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 476-87, at 476, emphasis mine.

8 Kathleen Marie Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

9 Robert Song, 'Wisdom as the End of Morality', in Stephen C. Barton (ed.), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 295-306, at 300.

other contexts (both moral and non-moral). In abstracting the process of ethical judgement from the context of specific ethical decisions traditional ethical theories have removed much of the power of ethical thought to guide actual behaviour. Not only do such ethical theories not take proper account of individual circumstances but because of this they now have no real purchase on the actions of the moral agent. So we should not adopt a standpoint in relation to ethical deliberation and the good that pretends to immediacy (this would amount to a criticism of Joseph Fletcher's 'antinomian'). Nor can we attempt to escape our historical situation by appeals to absolutes and universals (Fletcher's 'legalist'). Instead we should adopt a standpoint that corresponds to the historical nature of the human condition (Fletcher's 'situationist'). Ethical deliberation should be characterised by constant vigilance in mediating between the norms of an ethical tradition and the specific features of ethical situations.

A properly hermeneutical ethics would need to be contextual; situated within language and tradition, and related to concrete cases and specific situations. Moral judgements could not be based upon, or justified by, appeals to abstract principles. Abstraction could only be used as a tool of ethical analysis: principles and generalisations would have no weight on their own, they would need to be recontextualized and open to modification by particular cases. Such an ethics could regain its ability to motivate ethical behaviour. The insights of deontological forms of ethics need not be abandoned altogether but the status of moral principles would need to change. Moral principles might be deemed to hold 'in most cases' but they would nonetheless be recognised as partial and provisional, as the distilled wisdom of communal deliberation. There would be no room for moral absolutes: there is no objective standpoint 'outside' ethics from which they could be recognised.

4.1.2 Moral knowledge & moral truth

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer addresses the problem of method in the human sciences. This problem stems from the division between the 'exact' and the 'human' sciences. In the exact sciences all contingency related to the observer must be excluded and their ideal consists of knowledge of 'similarities, regularities and conformities to law'.[10] In the face of the dominance of the exact sciences the human sciences either had to adopt

[10] *TM*, 14.

their method in order to preserve their claims to truth; or they had to develop an autonomous method and so undermine (in the eyes of the exact scientists) their own truth claims. The choice seemed to be between scientifically verifiable truth and no truth at all. However it is this characterisation of the nature of truth, the denial of truth claims made outside the exact sciences, which Gadamer criticises so fiercely. Gadamer does not accept that only truth arrived at by scientific method can be valid:

> Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a process, *a method.*[11]

The assertion that the human sciences cannot make truth claims is dependent upon the widespread understanding of truth as consisting only of 'scientific truth'. On the basis of this assumption, the conclusion about the human sciences is correct but it is this very assumption that Gadamer wishes to challenge.

Gadamer argues that scientific method is simply inappropriate for the human sciences. The emphasis on scientific method has simply blinded us to other kinds of truth proper to the human sciences. The exclusion of all factors relating to the observer and the detachment from tradition may allow the identification of what is 'regular' or 'typical' but that is all that method can properly identify. This leaves out a great deal that is important to our hermeneutic experience. Gadamer also criticises the understanding of 'experience' in the natural sciences, suggesting that it simply ignores the 'inner historicity of experience'[12] by insisting on results that are verifiable and repeatable. I would argue that the search for universal norms and the application of universal method in ethics similarly denies the inner historicity of our moral experience. Also, the scientific method involves breaking down the object of study into smaller and smaller parts so that they can be more easily understood. Increased understanding is usually described using metaphors of depth. For Gadamer, understanding is also about breadth and synthesis as well as depth and analysis; about having more descriptions of an object and about seeing connections. As Richard Rorty observes,

> the more descriptions that are available, and the more integration between these descriptions, the better is our understanding of the object identified by any of those descriptions. [13]

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[11] *TM*, 290.

[12] *TM*, 346.

[13] Richard Rorty, 'Being That Can Be Understood Is Language: Richard Rorty on Hans-Georg Gadamer', *London Review of Books*, 16 March 2000, 23-25, at 23.

I suggest that ethics has followed too closely the pattern of 'scientific method' in its search for universals and its abstraction of ethical judgements from context and motivation. Can moral 'knowledge' be obtained by the methods of deductive logic or is there an irreducible historical and cultural element, in which proper weight must be given to context and motivation, which must operate by inductive methods. Is all ethical knowledge *a priori* and simply waiting to be discovered; is it simply *a posteriori*, needing to be constructed, like scientific knowledge, after the collection of appropriate data; or is it perhaps 'connatural', arising from the reality and experience of individual 'special cases', but related to some primitive apprehension of moral truth in the knower? Connatural knowledge is a kind of knowledge by acquaintance. We know the 'natural law', for example, through our direct acquaintance with it in our human experience. Jacques Maritain was a strong defender of such a conception of ethical norms as rooted in human nature.[14]

Gadamer returns to the understanding of knowledge and truth found in the humanist tradition: moral, historical and political truths cannot be objective because our own being is always already involved.[15] They (and we) are always already situated within a context: a community and a tradition, a culture and a history. Jean Grondin suggests that knowledge here is not an understanding of method, rather it is 'common sense' or 'wisdom for life'; what is formed is a 'capacity for judgement', or more simply 'taste'.[16] B. R. Tilghman suggests that beauty and goodness were closely related in Plato and that this fact has been hidden by the translation of '*to kalon*' as 'beauty'. He suggests that it actually means 'goodness in general or that which is to be desired and sought after ... it is that which attracts the soul to finer things'.[17] By the eighteenth century the idea of beauty had become restricted to the appearance of things. The beautiful became the 'aesthetic' and had lost all connection with practical utility and morality. For Gadamer, taste is neither simply subjective (within the individual) nor strictly objective (imposed from without): it is formed in individuals in their interaction with a community in a process of education and cultural formation (*Bildung*). Taste is not simply about following fashion; rather it implies an ability to stand back and judge fashion according

[14] See e.g. Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Gordian, 1971).

[15] *TM*, 9-42.

[16] Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, trans. Kathryn Plant (Chesham: Acumen Publishing, 2003), 26.

[17] B. R. Tilghman, *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 22.

to its own standards, 'certain of the agreement of an ideal community'.[18] The agreement of an ideal community is what gives taste its normative power.

Gadamer wishes to retrieve this earlier, moral, understanding of the word 'taste' to replace its narrowed and impoverished sense as an exclusively aesthetic term understood individualistically. He uses the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* to explore this further. *Phronesis* (or prudence) is distinct from both *techne* (practical skill) and *episteme* (theoretical knowledge). *Techne* is about the correct application of rules and knowledge, *phronesis* is about the development of judgement and wisdom. *Phronesis* is cultivated rather than taught and is flexible in adapting to particular contexts: it is a matter of 'common sense'.

> There is something immediately evident about grounding philological and historical studies and the ways the human sciences work on this concept of the *sensus communis*. For their object, the moral and historical existence of humanity, as it takes shape in our words and deeds, is itself decisively determined by the *sensus communis*. Thus a conclusion based on universals, a reasoned proof, is not sufficient, because what is decisive is the circumstances.[19]

For Gadamer, aesthetic experience transcends 'method' and resists all attempts to reduce understanding to the subjectivity of either the artist or the viewer. Aesthetic experience is not simply subjective consciousness but is a form of ontological disclosure in which the 'being' of a work of art is communicated within a tradition and culture. The experience thus affects the life of the viewer and can communicate 'truth' without the use of conceptual thought:

> in art and the beautiful we encounter a significance that transcends all conceptual thought.[20]

It is this sort of contextual experience, rather than abstraction, that is the key to art. I suggest that ethics similarly transcends method: contextual experience of ethics and goodness as part of an unfinished process is the key. There are interesting parallels between virtuous lives and works of art: contemplating the life of Saint Francis or Mother Theresa for moral inspiration is surely more about recognising moral beauty than about analysing moral concepts. Like art, a virtuous life is something to 'follow' or 'aspire to' rather than strictly to imitate.

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[18] *TM*, 37.

[19] *TM*, 22-23.

[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival' [1977], in Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3-53, at 16.

Gadamer's hermeneutics is designed to overturn the dominance of technical reason and to regain a social and contextual conception of wisdom and truth:

> For moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge – i.e., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he sees. It is something that he has to do.[21]

Wisdom is grounded in the *sensus communis* and truth emerges from the interactions, the conversations, between individuals. Song suggests that Aristotelian ethics is different from Platonic ethics:

> The good life is one that is good for human beings, not for those who have shed all distinctively human characteristics.[22]
>
> Instead of the locus of moral truth lying beyond the everyday world, wisdom is located in the accumulated experience of the virtuous person.[23]

Gadamer argues that philosophy, art and history are modes of experience in which a truth may be communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science; truth comes into being as the result of an interaction (between subject and text or between subject and interlocutor). Truth emerges as text and contemporary consciousness combine in a 'fusion of horizons'. I suggest that ethics is a similar mode of experience, based on our interactions with other people: right choices depend upon an interaction between the individual, the tradition and the situation. Moral truth emerges as the morality of the 'other' (person, text or tradition) combines with our own moral consciousness: understanding is located in-between familiarity and strangeness (this is the concept of 'moral distance' which is to be overcome by a fusion of horizons). New experiences challenge our previous false generalisations. We must be open to new experiences and willing to learn: conversation, openness and risk are prerequisites for understanding. It is the dialectic of question and answer that gives understanding the character of a conversation or dialogue. Historically effected consciousness renounces any claim to absolute knowledge and seeks understanding through a fusion of horizons, which is an achievement of language (language which is both consequent upon understanding and also a condition of it). The hermeneutic circle is as inevitable in ethics as in all other understanding: We cannot escape from it; instead, we should concentrate our efforts on making a conscious effort to enter the circle aware of our

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[21] *TM*, 314.

[22] Song, 'Wisdom as the End of Morality', 300.

[23] Song, 'Wisdom as the End of Morality', 301.

prejudices and prepared to put them at risk. We must acknowledge that, together with all our knowledge, our moral understanding is partial, historical and finite. The goal of universality is unattainable.

A properly hermeneutical ethics would not be based upon the application of a universal method or on scientific criteria of validation. This would not mean that it could make no truth claims at all; rather, it would mean that moral truth was encountered in the interactions of agents and situations; that it developed connaturally. The insights of natural law ethics would be incorporated but again only with provisional status. Hermeneutical ethics would take proper account of experience and would strive for breadth of understanding as well as depth. It would restore an element of judgement or taste (considered, once again, to include moral sensibility alongside aesthetic sensibility) to moral deliberation. Moral wisdom would be seen as a function not just of the individual but also of the community. The *sensus communis* may have some similarities with Social Contract ethics although the important feature would not be communal *agreement* but communal *judgement*.

Gadamer suggests that:

> Art is only possible because the formative activity of nature leaves an open domain which can be filled by the productions of the human spirit.[24]

I want to suggest that ethics too is only possible because the formative activity of nature leaves an open domain which can be filled by the productions of the human spirit (and/or the Holy Spirit): that ethics is a creative and artistic project rather than simply the keeping of rules or the application of a method. The insights of utilitarianism (together with proportionalism and other forms of consequentialism) would not need to be abandoned: the consideration of consequences would be an important component of moral deliberation, perhaps especially in public and political ethics. However utilitarianism as a complete system could not be accepted. The process of evaluating consequences would not simply constitute an ethical judgement: the results of such a process would be open to challenge and modification by other considerations.

[24] Gadamer, 'Relevance of the Beautiful', 13.

4.1.3 The nature of moral reasoning

There are serious questions to be addressed about the abstracted rationalist basis of much ethical theory and also about the conceptions of reason which moral theories assume.[25] In Chapter Three we saw that Gadamer characterises Kant as asking the question 'what are the conditions of our knowledge by virtue of which modern science is possible, and how far does it extend?'. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explores the conditions of all understanding and concludes that it is our situatedness within a tradition, a culture and a language that, despite constituting limitations to our understanding, are in fact the necessary conditions of its possibility. This must be true of our ethical understanding as much as our aesthetic or historical understanding. Gadamer argues that we are completely and inevitably context-bound, and this includes our reason. There is no such thing as universal reason; rather our reason is constantly dependent upon the context in which it operates; reason is always related to a specific community, tradition and language. Except, perhaps, in the limiting case of formal logic, 'pure reason' is simply impossible to attain. Gadamer emphasises the importance of the linguisticality of our experience together with the metaphorical nature of all language, as demonstrated in the process of concept formation.[26] Reason here works inductively from grasping resemblances rather than deductively from subsuming particulars under universals.

Gadamer is sharply critical of the Enlightenment notions of reason and rationality upon which legalism and utilitarianism both seem to be based. Both seek to exclude feeling and emotion from moral decision-making because of a concern to satisfy the canons of rational validation and 'objectivity'. Mark Johnson considers the ways in which we, as humans, think and the mental schemes we use to organise our thoughts. He mounts a sustained attack on the conception of morality as an abstracted system of universal laws dictated by reason.[27] Johnson is critical too of what he calls utilitarian reductionism: the reduction of reason to 'economic, means-ends, technical rationality as the sole criterion for moral evaluation'.[28] Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner also consider the way we

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[25] For further discussions see Emanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

[26] *TM*, 429.

[27] *MI*.

[28] *MI*, 120.

think. They outline a theory of conceptual blending, similar to Johnson's understanding of metaphorical projection, as central to reason and throw similar doubts on the dominant conceptions.[29] This view of reason as detached, abstracted and objective pervades much of contemporary ethics (although its significance and limitations are rarely recognised). Gadamer's hermeneutical insights preclude the possibility of such a universal reason. Johnson suggests that Kant, in particular, is guilty of a misguided attempt to abstract a universal reason with the result that reason comes to mean little more than the principles of formal logic:[30] when in fact what is needed to resolve specific cases is moral *imagination.*[31]

For Gadamer, moral reasoning is a form of *phronesis. Phronesis* is formed through dialogue, through conversation. It requires openness to others and patient listening. There is no single authority and no monopoly of truth. Ethics is situated (as are agents) within tradition, culture and language. In Gadamer's ethics there could be no hard and fast principles, no moral absolutes. An agent may possess maxims that would militate against certain courses of action but can never be sure in advance of the *right* action. The right action is known by that kind of intuition which *phronesis* provides. *Phronesis* is formed within an agent and is closely connected to their character, their hopes and their priorities. A good person is one who instinctively knows what is right; who acts out of habit.[32] Formation depends on the example of other virtuous people and on dialogue with them (either real, or an internal dialogue about their actions, motivations, character and so on). As Chris Lawn observes, one great advantage of *phronesis* is its flexibility and adaptability:

> Each situation is utterly unique: its strangeness exposes the inadequacy of general rules. Rules by their very nature can never be programmatically applied to specific cases.[33]

This is true not just in the resolution of cases but also in their framing: the way we decide which factors are morally relevant and the descriptive language that we use. *Phronesis* allows a good deal of interpretive flexibility and even redefinition of terms in

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[29] Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[30] *MI*, 110-13.

[31] For further discussion of the 'post-modern questioning of reason' see Paul D. Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 1-21 and 131-60.

[32] Obviously, Gadamer's ethics at this point has strong links to virtue ethics. See e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985).

[33] Chris Lawn, *Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 134.

response to the situation an agent faces: the case 'co-determines, corrects and supplements' the principle.[34] Rules which are intrinsically rigid do not easily admit of exceptions or of a redefinition of terms in this way. Christian ethics should be about judgement (and taste), not about rules and abstraction.

Song suggests that, as Christians, our belief that this finite world is not all there is should prompt an 'openness to the world and a vulnerability to its unpredictability'. In ethics therefore:

> We are free to face particularities in their particularity. We do not have to impose moral rules on circumstances or force them into premeditated moulds. We are freed from the effort of having to elevate ourselves above the level of chance: Kantianism, as Bernard Williams shrewdly recognises, is a form of Pelagianism.[35]

This last point is important for Christian ethics. Openness to contingency is a constituent part of Christian faith. The attempt to rise above chance (with absolute truth or scientific method) may be not only misguided (and, as Gadamer would suggest, ultimately impossible), it may also be heretical.

There are problems not only with our understanding of what reason is, but also with the insistence that it is only reason that counts in relation to moral decision-making. Gadamer suggests that by focussing solely on the truth that admits of scientific verification other truth may be missed. Ethics can be rational without being rationalistic. A morality of constraint, based upon 'reason' alone, ignores the human resources of imagination which could allow more sensitive and humane judgements to be made.[36] Gadamer rejects the oppositions which characterise the Enlightenment: between reason and tradition, reason and prejudice, reason and authority. Reason is inescapably situated in history and culture; it depends for its power upon the very fact that it is part of a tradition. Norm and context are not separate and competing but are connected and inform one another. Reason cannot be separated from other human capabilities as a separate objective faculty. The search for an objective ethics based on absolute norms controlled solely by reason is a wild goose chase. Gadamer's hermeneutics may allow us to move beyond absolute ethical systems *and* the fear of ethical relativism.

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[34] *TM*, 39.

[35] Song, 'Wisdom as the End of Morality', 305. He is referring to Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), 224, n20.

[36] *MI*, 185-216.

A properly hermeneutical ethics would be rational but not rationalistic: emotions, passion, will and imagination would be allowed a role alongside reason in ethical deliberation. Reason would be recognised as contextual rather than universal and the importance of inductive reasoning would be emphasised. Moral wisdom would be recognised as a form of *phronesis*. The conclusions of Kantian rational ethics would be open to challenge.

4.1.4 Tradition and ethics

Gadamer asserts that there is simply no possibility of a universal objective viewpoint outside historical contingency. Prejudice (or prejudgement) is inevitable and is a necessary condition of any genuine encounter of understanding. The Enlightenment believed that prejudice could be overcome by the application of absolute (and universal) reason, but for Gadamer, all human existence, including human reason, is finite and historical. We stand in a particular community, within a particular tradition, and it is from here that we receive our prejudices. Gadamer argues that the Enlightenment's attempt to eliminate the historical contingency of tradition was misguided. History and tradition are the very basis of human existence and understanding. If this is true of understanding generally it must also be true of our ethical understanding. That is why, as Gadamer says, 'the character and virtue of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the moral reality of his being'.[37] Nothing can completely transcend human thought and history. So, ethical knowledge is also incapable of transcending history, there is no objective, eternal and universal standpoint from which to formulate moral absolutes. Ethics exists as part of the wider tradition of human understanding in a hermeneutic community. Just as works of art constitute the 'assembled achievements of the human mind' so do good (virtuous) lives. Our moral understanding comes from our experience of interaction (direct or indirect) with other moral agents. The being of a work of art consists partly in its being experienced by an observer within a community and a tradition of understanding: so too the being of a good person. Ethics is by its very nature interpersonal and communal. Paul Ricoeur defines ethical intentions 'as aiming at the "good life" with and for others in just

[37] *TM*, 277.

institutions'.[38] Just as the abstraction inherent in the 'aesthetic consciousness' destroys the continuity of the work of art, so abstraction in ethics destroys the continuity of the agent with others and with society. As Gadamer observes:

> A person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition.[39]

Gadamer wishes to retrieve the 'special exemplariness of tradition for the hermeneutical task'.[40] Ethics is not a finite and completed text but we are embedded in it as it develops. The whole process is an event within the movement of tradition. Understanding involves the interaction of subject and object, both situated within history and tradition. Understanding itself becomes part of that history and tradition. There is an inescapable temporality here (of subject, object and understanding) that precludes any claim to certainty or to ultimate foundations. It is this temporality which creates for Gadamer the paradigm for the basis of all understanding: distance. Distance can arise within a tradition (temporal distance or 'vertical' distance) and also between traditions ('horizontal distance'). The latter can also occur between different parts of the same tradition (e.g. the range of different moral understandings within the Christian tradition). In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre provides an insightful account of the distance between moral traditions and of the historical distance within moral traditions.[41] His solution to this 'problem' is to opt for one system of ethics: the Aristotelian. Gadamer would not see this distance simply as a problem but also as a condition of the possibility of understanding. In all cases it is openness to the horizon of the 'other' that allows understanding and truth to emerge in dialogue. We must be open to new experiences; we must allow others to address us and to challenge our prejudices. This openness is characteristic of historically effected consciousness. Hermeneutics is not about methodological certainty but about readiness for experience: this is what distinguishes historically effected consciousness. The important thing is not to have the 'right answers' but to keep asking questions. We must also try to understand the

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[38] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

[39] *TM*, 360.

[40] *TM*, 178.

[41] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

questions that others are asking; the questions to which their actions were the answer. Moral understanding requires the same discipline of question and answer.[42]

Understanding, interpretation and application are inseparable and legal hermeneutics is the paradigm case. As we have seen, a law's normative content is in large measure determined by how it is applied. Gadamer's conclusion that philological and legal hermeneutics are essentially the same proposes a unity that does not consist in historical or scientific method but in the fact that they all find 'their true ground in historically effected consciousness'.[43] Moral development includes our worldview; our experience; the acquisition of knowledge, character, and virtue; and our *telos*. All of this is subject to the influences of tradition, culture and language.

> A person who has to make moral decisions has always already learned something. He has been so formed by education and custom that he knows in general what is right. The task of making a moral decision is that of doing the right thing in a particular situation.[44]

The specific features and limitations of a situation constitute its 'horizon'. Individuals understand as part of a community and a tradition. The horizon of the present must continually change as we risk our prejudices in the dialogue that leads to understanding as horizons fuse. Ethical deliberation should be characterised rather by constant mediation between the norms of an ethical tradition and the specific features of ethical situations. As Nicholas Lash observes:

> If it is true for us, as creatures of history, that some understanding of our past is a necessary condition of an accurate grasp of our present predicament and our responsibilities for the future, it is also true that a measure of critical self-understanding of our present predicament is a necessary condition of an accurate 'reading' of our past. We do not *first* understand the past and *then* proceed to understand the present. The relationship between these two dimensions of our quest for meaning and truth is dialectical: they mutually inform, enable, correct, and enlighten each other.[45]

Just as a tradition is 'an argument extended through time' , so is an ethical tradition or system of morality: 'fundamental agreements are defined and redefined'.[46] Our ethical ideas, if they are truly open to the 'other' and to dialogue, are open to criticism and development though always limited by the course of their effects (effective history).

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[42] For a discussion in relation to Scripture and ethics see Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). Chapter 5 – 'Listening to the Voices of Outsiders: Challenges to Our Interpretive Practices'.

[43] *TM*, 340.

[44] *TM*, 316-17.

[45] Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: S.C.M., 1986), 24-25.

[46] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* , 12.

They are grounded in our historical, bodily and linguistic existence. In short, they are hermeneutical.

A properly hermeneutical ethics would recognise the importance of tradition, and the provisionality implied by our temporal historical nature. Tradition would represent an important resource, though not an absolute authority. Such an ethics would be open to the insights and experiences of other traditions. It would have similar properties to legal hermeneutics: ethics would have no meaning without the possibility of its being applied. Ethical understanding would consist in a mediation between moral norms, the history of their application (historical effect), and the case at hand. Application would not be consequent upon a prior understanding; rather it would be an integral part of moral understanding; casuistry would be an important element.

4.1.5 The developmental character of moral language

Gadamer observes that

> objectivizing science regards the linguisticality of the natural experience of the world as a source of prejudices.[47]

For Enlightenment science this implies that linguisticality is the source of illegitimate but avoidable bias. For Gadamer language is indeed a source of prejudices, in the sense of prejudgements, but this is inescapable and indeed constitutes a condition of the possibility of understanding. All thought involves language: as Fred Lawrence puts it: 'human beings live within language as the air they breathe'.[48] Human beings cannot escape their dependence on language and we must be constantly aware of the limitations it brings but just as our historical situatedness is both a source of limitations for our understanding and also a condition of its possibility, the same is true of our linguistic situatedness. Even our understanding of tradition is verbally constituted. Part of the very nature of our existence, the nature of human being, is that we exist in relation to other things through conversation. If this linguistic 'conversation' is the basis of our existence and of our relationships, if as Gadamer suggests 'we are a conversation',[49] then ethics,

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[47] *TM*, 453.

[48] Fred Lawrence, 'Gadamer, the Hermeneutic Revolution, and Theology', in Robert J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 167-200, at 184.

[49] This expression is taken from Hölderlin's poem 'Celebration of Peace'.

which seeks to guide those relationships, must also be based on conversation and mediated through language. Our understanding of ethical texts (and text-analogues such as the lives of others and our networks of relationships) are conditioned by history and language: these are the two conditions that render all our understanding finite though we can never grasp with certainty the extent of their influence. Rorty urges that philosophy should abandon the scientific, problem-solving model of philosophical activity in favour of a conversational model and the fusion of horizons through a discipline of question and answer.[50] Paul Murray characterises Rorty as concerned to

> return us to the constraints and conditions of finite human existence in order to expunge sceptical concerns at root and prevent any group from claiming the exclusive right to declare on matters of truth and goodness.[51]

Gadamer's understanding of language is fundamentally expressivist: words do not 'stand for' objects; rather, they have their meaning because of the conventions of language use. The meanings of words, the way they are used in utterances to communicate and their performative character are 'sanctioned by consensus, agreement and convention'.[52] Language has the power to express what it is to be human. Correspondence theories of language often ignore or denigrate poetry and literature seeing them as inferior to propositional language or as simply rhetorical devices. For Gadamer, metaphor is not simply a figure of speech, but is at the heart of all our language use. It is not the power of thought and representation that allow language its meaning; meaning arises from the interactions of human dialogue in which metaphor, imagination and the *sensus communis* play vital roles. Language is constantly changing as a result of dialogue. This change occurs within a tradition and a community and is limited by the *sensus communis*; it cannot be controlled by individuals. Language is fundamentally social in character. As we have seen, it is language itself that allows humankind to be aware of a 'world' at all.

Gadamer sees language as living and developing. He is clear that concept formation is an inherently metaphorical process.[53] Concept formation often takes place as a result of 'accidents and relations';[54] reflection on perception and experience can extend the

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[50] Rorty, 'Being That Can Be Understood Is Language', 25.

[51] Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, 87.

[52] Lawn, *Gadamer*, 78.

[53] *TM*, 428-38.

[54] *TM*, 428.

semantic range of a word. This is how language, including moral language, develops. Concepts are constantly being revised in the light of experience and dialogue. The great strength of language lies in its ability to express newly identified similarities in the world or in our interaction with it; flexibility, rather than univocity, is the key. Gadamer is critical of the scientific ideal of a logically ordered arrangement of concepts which constitutes an abstraction from their relationships of meaning and from the constant flux of the metaphorical life of language. This may have a place in the exact sciences but not in the human sciences (and not in ethics). Concept formation is a communal enterprise; 'common usage' guides as well as limits the development of language. The *sensus communis* provides the normative framework for the development of language and understanding; it provides conditions and limits. The nature of moral language is crucial to our notions of moral understanding and moral reasoning; Stanley Hauerwas agrees with Fletcher that our moral notions fail to grasp (and indeed can never grasp) the full depth and richness of our moral experience.[55] There is always more in our moral experience than we can adequately describe in our moral language; it is only the metaphorical basis of language which allows us any hope of finding ways to reduce this deficit.

A properly hermeneutical ethics would recognise the importance of our moral language and the metaphorical process by which our moral notions are formed. If our ethical understanding is to be seen in this way, then we will have to acknowledge that our ethical knowledge can only ever be provisional; that our ethical understanding is inescapably limited by history and language; and that our ethical deliberations are unavoidably context-bound. However we would also need to adopt that vigilance of thought that is required in the absence of complete understanding and which constitutes the essence of hermeneutics. We would also have to seek moral truth not in words or in absolute formulations but in dialogue. Truth exists in the interaction which language mediates as the world is brought into being in language: truth is encountered in interaction, in 'dialogue', in the mediation between familiarity and strangeness, and in the 'in-between'. The hermeneutic circle is inescapable: individual words acquire meaning in discourse; knowledge exists within networks of ideas; truth emerges in

[55] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 12.

linguistic interactions. Hermeneutical ethics would be controlled by a discipline of question and answer, and based on the model of conversation.

4.1.6 Application and self-presentation

Gadamer's problem with Kantianism is its intellectualism; making right choices depend upon the proper understanding and *subsequent* application of an abstract norm. For Gadamer right choices depend upon an interaction between the individual, the tradition and the situation. We need to 'see' and frame situations as 'moral' situations that demand action: we need to appreciate the morally relevant factors of a situation. Moral knowledge includes experience and tradition; moral understanding always already involves application. We can never fully elucidate all the reasons for, nor all the influences upon, our actions. Our discernment in the moral situation is not related to theoretical knowledge of an 'object', rather it is the 'vigilance of ethical knowledge'.[56] As we noted above 'hermeneutics is not the title of a philosophical project that aspires to complete understanding, but the name of vigilance in thought which rests on its absence'.[57] Gadamer's conclusion to this section is worth quoting in full:

> To summarize, if we relate Aristotle's description of the ethical phenomenon and especially the virtue of moral knowledge to our own investigation, we find that his analysis in fact offers a kind of *model of the problems of hermeneutics.* We too determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning. Here too application did not consist in relating some pre-given universal to the particular situation. The interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all.[58]

We do not learn moral knowledge as one might learn a skill or craft, but are always already in the situation of having to act. We do not acquire moral knowledge and then apply it: what is right 'cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that requires a right action'.[59]

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[56] Gadamer, quoted in Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 106.

[57] Grondin, *Philosophy of Gadamer*, 75.

[58] *TM*, 324.

[59] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (London: S.C.M., 1966), 27.

> A person who has to make moral decisions has always already learned something. He has been so formed by education and custom that he knows in general what is right. The task of making a moral decision is that of doing the right thing in a particular situation.[60]

Despite some reservations, Gadamer's considerations of play in relation to ontology have useful insights with implications for ethics. Morality could be said to exist within a community or tradition but only find expression through moral agents and observers, through being 'played'. Is the purpose of ethics less about solving problems and more about 'ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself': less about actually *being* a virtuous person and more about ordering the attempt? Taylor agrees that the human sciences should be understood on the 'conversation' model.[61] Rorty hopes that philosophers will abandon the 'scientistic, problem-solving, model of philosophical activity with which Kant burdened [the] discipline' and substitute 'a conversational model, one in which philosophical success is measured by horizons fused rather than problems solved, or even problems dissolved'.[62] Perhaps we might hope that ethicists will achieve something similar.

The idea of the virtuous life as a form of self-presentation has interesting parallels with the Eastern Orthodox notion of 'personhood',[63] and with the Catholic personalist tradition.[64] Human persons are to some extent constituted by their network of relationships: 'a self can never be described without reference to those who surround it'.[65] Human beings may be said to exist as isolated individuals but only become real persons as they interact with others and achieve 'self-presentation'.[66] It is ethical action, or the observance of such action, which brings about change in moral agents.

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[60] *TM*, 316-17.

[61] Charles Taylor, 'Gadamer on the Human Sciences', in Dostal (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 126-42, at 127, emphasis mine.

[62] Richard Rorty, 'Being That Can Be Understood Is Language: Richard Rorty on Hans-Georg Gadamer', *London Review of Books,* 16 March 2000, 23-25, at 25.

[63] See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985).

[64] See e.g. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966); Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1952).

[65] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 35.

[66] Such self-presentation, though, is historically situated. Compare MacIntyre's criticisms of Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959).in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985), 35, 115-17.

A properly hermeneutical ethics would recognise the complex, dynamic character of our moral lives. We find our true selves in the artistic project that is living the virtuous life: The observed virtuous life of another is something to follow and to interpret in one's own artistic project. At this point questions of motivation, character and virtue are clearly important and the insights of virtue ethics will be essential. Casuistry, as a form of artistic composition will be central to moral deliberation. Considerations based on feelings, emotions, taste, imagination and inspiration may not be measurable, nor easily incorporated into a decision-making process (artistic composition is neither easy nor reducible to simple propositions), but the diversity of goods requires that the effort should be made.[67]

Hermeneutical ethics would be open to learning from the self-presentation of others, eager to engage in conversation and prepared to put its prejudices at risk. It would be happy to learn from the experiences of others and would strive to incorporate the practical wisdom of other traditions, including that of oppressed minorities. There are no easy answers here, but if Gadamer is right the challenge must be taken up.

4.1.7 Our example reconsidered in the light of a hermeneutical ethics

In Chapter One we considered the scenario of a drowning child and one person's response: that they would jump in 'so that their child did not have to die alone'. We observed that this might be considered a praiseworthy and fitting response, but that traditional ethical theories would not be expected to reach this conclusion, nor would they readily provide a justification for it. Perhaps we can now offer a justification, and answer the questions which we raised.[68] Can this decision be justified on the basis of aesthetic criteria? In other words, was the decision justifiable because there was something 'beautiful' about it? (Though, of course, at the time the father would have had no opportunity to test this perception against the *sensus communis*.) Motivation is important; love for another can (and possibly should) be an overriding consideration. Given more time (or the luxury to consider the scenario in the abstract) rules, duties, consequences and virtues might all have a place in our deliberations but ultimately we

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[67] See Charles Taylor, 'The Diversity of Goods', in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 230-47.

[68] Chapter One, 13.

might still wish to find a solution that is elegant, beautiful or fitting. We might also wish that we were formed in such a way that an appropriate response was an instinctive judgement of taste.

4.2 Criticisms of Gadamer's hermeneutics

Gadamer stands as a key figure in the area of hermeneutics and his work is arguably the most important contribution to the field in the late twentieth century. His work has been developed and amended in a number of different directions. Inevitably it has also been criticised. If we are to appropriate Gadamer's hermeneutics in our approach to ethics then we will render ethics susceptible to the same criticisms that have been directed at Gadamer. It will be important to see whether any of these criticisms are fatal for Gadamer's theories (or for ethics as a hermeneutical endeavour) or whether they can be answered by adaptations and modifications. We will consider criticisms relating to the ambiguity of Gadamer's hermeneutics (section 4.2.1), the possibility of a critique of a tradition from within (section 4.2.2), and the recognition of prejudices (section 4.2.3).

4.2.1 Anthony Thiselton and ambiguity

Anthony Thiselton suggests that Gadamer is located precisely on the boundary between modern and post-modern thought. Prescribing a criterion in advance for a 'right judgement' constitutes a return to objectivity (and modernity) whilst removing all the 'rules from the game' is no more than (post-modern) relativism.[69] I suspect that Gadamer is really neither modern nor post-modern (nor even on the boundary) since both positions accept and maintain the same criteria for the establishment of objective truth (science and reason), modernism claiming that the criteria are adequate and objective truth a possibility, postmodernism denying the claims with the consequence that all truth must be relative. The notion of relativity is parasitic upon the notion of objectivity. Post-modernism is effectively a denial of the possibility of Cartesian truth: Gadamer does not adopt this model of truth in the first place; rather, he questions the criteria on which the debate about truth is based and argues that the debate is misguided. Gadamer, then, is neither modern nor post-modern but perhaps 'extra-modern'. He

[69] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 328.

attempts to move beyond both objectivism and relativism by asserting the value of truth claims that are independent of method. However, both Gadamer and post-modernism represent scepticism about the legacy of Enlightenment thought.[70] It is therefore not surprising that Gadamer is recruited by post-modernist authors although this is not an accurate characterisation of his position. The two forms of scepticism have much in common but originate from different directions. Both are sceptical of Cartesian dualism and the autonomous thinking subject. Both are sceptical of science as the dominant discourse. The anti-foundationalist tendencies of both Gadamer and post-modernism result in a deep mistrust of 'objective truth' and its replacement with contextual and intersubjective truth: for postmodernism this implies an inevitable relativism, but not for Gadamer.

Thiselton suggests that there is a 'deep ambiguity' in Gadamer which

> allows the interpreter of his system to stress either of two aspects. He or she may stress, on one side, the universality of language and of effective-histories which transmit community-judgements of practical wisdom as tradition. Alternatively, the emphasis may be seen to lie on the variable and unpredictable nature of the historically finite actualisations of texts and traditions in context-relative events. If interpreters emphasise only variable finite *effects*, this suggests some support for a *socio-pragmatic* hermeneutic. If, however, they emphasise that these effects *presuppose* universals of language and continuities of tradition, this suggests that Gadamer is laying the foundations of a *metacritical* hermeneutic. I criticise those pragmatists who attend to only one side of Gadamer's system, but I recognise the difficulty of reconciling the two sides, and acknowledge the ambiguity of Gadamer's own work.[71]

It seems to me that to describe these features of Gadamer's work as an 'ambiguity' rather misses one of Gadamer's most important points: the embedded nature of 'context-relative' events. For Gadamer there is an inevitable connection and tension between discrete 'events' and the broader 'tradition'. The mistake would be to think we could isolate either pole of this relationship. Context-relative events can never be independent of their situation in history, tradition, culture and language. To describe this as an ambiguity is to preserve the false dichotomy between norm and context. 'Context-relative' should perhaps be rendered as 'context-dependent' to avoid introducing notions of relativity. Context-relative events may be 'variable and unpredictable' but they are not simply free-floating with no connection whatsoever to tradition. This relationship between events and tradition is crucial for Gadamer: problems arise when

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[70] Lawn, *Gadamer*, 122.

[71] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 25.

one aspect is emphasised at the expense of the other. The difficulty does not so much lie with Gadamer as with the interpreters who 'stress either of two aspects' and 'emphasise only' one half of the story. The fact that Gadamer's hermeneutics *can* be interpreted in two ways is hardly Gadamer' fault when he is at pains to stress this necessary relationship. Thiselton acknowledges as much in his criticism of pragmatists; and Georgia Warnke, for example, argues that Rorty is too one-sided in his approach to Gadamer and that he ignores Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue.[72] Context-relative events are still part of a tradition: pragmatists need to remember this. All traditions encompass context-relative events and interpretation always already involves application: metacritical theorists cannot completely ignore practical situations. It may be 'difficult' to reconcile the two sides of Gadamer's hermeneutics (perhaps especially so if one is caught up in Enlightenment rationalism), however it may be worth the effort if we can develop a metacritical hermeneutic which properly incorporates socio-pragmatic elements. This discussion is very similar to that of Fletcher in *Situation Ethics*. As we have seen, for Fletcher the approach of the situationist is preferable to that of the legalist or the antinomian. The relationship between tradition and situation is to be preserved. Emphasising only one aspect would be a mistake. Interpreters of Gadamer and interpreters of Fletcher have both made this mistake and then sought to blame the original author for ambiguity or inconsistency. In both cases a careful reading shows that the authors went to great lengths to advocate the difficult path of retaining both aspects in tension.

In part, then, the strength of Gadamer's hermeneutics comes from the very fact that he holds these two aspects in dialectic tension; the universality of language does not efface the specificity of particular situations but it does offer the hope of mediating between tradition and situation. So the ambiguity noted by Thiselton may be a strength rather than a weakness and his criticisms should more properly be directed at those interpreters of Gadamer who fail to keep the two aspects of his hermeneutics in dialectic tension.

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[72] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 159-61.

4.2.2 Jürgen Habermas and ideology critique

Jürgen Habermas suggested that the gravest error in Gadamer's system was the assumption that consensus (or tradition) can develop without the malign influence of distorting forces (ideology). He suggested that in this Gadamer was naïve, and pointed out that institutional authority can legitimate violence; that rhetoric can obfuscate as well as enlighten;[73] and that in the light of Marx we need a self-critical 'depth-hermeneutic'. The Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton mounts a similar criticism, effectively arguing that Gadamer's hermeneutics serve only to support the *status quo* and so are politically deeply conservative.[74]

Habermas is committed to the values of truth, critique and rational consensus, and his aim is to reformulate the project of modernity, moving it away from its heavy reliance on the knowing subject and to locate normative control in an 'ideal speech-situation', a sphere of public debate. In so doing he hopes to rescue the Enlightenment project from the criticisms of post-modernism.[75] Habermas is broadly positive about much of Gadamer's hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*[76] but is critical of hermeneutics' claim to universality.[77] He engages positively with Gadamer's emphases on language, tradition and translation:

> Tradition [*Überlieferung*], as the medium in which languages propagate themselves, takes place as translation, namely as the bridging of distances between generations.[78]

He agrees with Gadamer's critique of scientific method and the impossibility of a truly detached and objective standpoint. Habermas sees the primary task of hermeneutics as the prevention of miscommunication, of misunderstanding. He approves of Gadamer's critique of 'the objectivistic self-understanding of the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)'[79] and agrees that it is never possible to completely describe an action or, as he puts it, to locate it in all its stories:

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[73] Jürgen Habermas, 'On Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality' [1970], in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 294-319, at 297.

[74] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory : An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 73.

[75] See Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23-48.

[76] Jürgen Habermas, 'A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method', in F. R. Dallmayr (ed.), *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 335-63.

[77] Habermas, 'Universality'.

[78] Habermas, 'Review', 339.

[79] Habermas, 'Review', 344.

> The ideal of complete description cannot be consistently formulated; it ascribes to history a claim to contemplation that it not only cannot redeem but that is illegitimate as a claim.[80]

In other (more Gadamerian) words, there is no objective standpoint outside history. Habermas also agrees with Gadamer's emphasis on the involvement of application in understanding:

> I find Gadamer's real achievement in the demonstration that hermeneutic understanding is linked with transcendental necessity to the articulation of an action-orienting self-understanding.

He also accepts the role of prejudices in understanding, especially in relation to practical philosophy and ethics. Even in his criticism of Gadamer, Habermas still seeks to specify in what sense and to what extent the fundamental theses of hermeneutics can be defended.[81]

Habermas argues that Gadamer goes too far in opposing hermeneutic experience to methodic knowledge. The critique of the absolutism of method derived from the natural sciences does not, for Habermas, imply an exemption from all considerations of method. He suggests that tradition may be profoundly altered by scientific reflection; though I suspect that Gadamer would not disagree. More tellingly, he criticises Gadamer for failing 'to appreciate the power of reflection that is developed in understanding'.[82] Habermas argues that when tradition is passed on through learning there is always the danger that the educator's illegitimate prejudices will be passed on to the learner because of the educator's perceived authority. What is needed is reflection:

> knowledge is raised to reflection when it makes the normative framework itself transparent while moving around in it.[83]

He suggests that Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice is in danger of denying the power of reflection, rendering a tradition unable to critique itself and to recognise the 'repressive character of social power relations':[84] Gadamer's reliance on tradition leaves him unable to criticise tradition, and he is naively optimistic about the capacity of language, tradition and temporal distance to filter out false prejudices. Habermas feels that Gadamer is uncritically dependent on tradition. Gadamer sees understanding as

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[80] Habermas, 'Review', 350.

[81] Habermas, 'Universality', 302.

[82] Habermas, 'Review', 357.

[83] Habermas, 'Review', 357.

[84] Habermas, 'Review', 361.

placing oneself in a process of tradition[85] but Habermas argues that this does not allow for proper reflective engagement with tradition:

> Gadamer sees living traditions and hermeneutic research fused in a single point. Against this stands the insight that reflective appropriation of tradition breaks the quasi-natural substance of tradition and alters the positions of subjects within it.[86]

Nicholas Adams suggests that both Gadamer and Habermas acknowledge the authority of tradition and also acknowledge that reflection on that tradition creates a distance between the tradition and the individuals who participate in it. He argues that Gadamer tries to close this gap by urging faithfulness to the tradition whilst Habermas tries 'to construct a procedural ethics in the gap that opens up'.[87] Adams is critical of Gadamer at this point but he misrepresents him: Gadamer is no advocate of blind faith in tradition. Rather, Gadamer seeks to close the gap, to fuse the horizons by means of imaginative engagement. Recognising tradition as 'tradition' and placing it within a narrative context, and recognising tradition as something that requires interpretation (and is susceptible of critique), are hermeneutical insights. The possibility of self-criticism that Adams advocates arises from within the tradition not from any gap between tradition and reflective individuals.

This question about the influence of distorting ideologies can of course be addressed to Enlightenment rationalism as much as to any other tradition. Arguably it is only openness to other traditions and the voice of outsiders that has enabled Habermas to see the distorting effects of ideology and power in Western European society, standing as it does within the Enlightenment tradition. It required the voices of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche fully to uncover the distorting influences of money, sex and power within our own tradition and, indeed, in the Western church.[88] Habermas' critique could only carry real force if there were an objective viewpoint from which to judge traditions, from where the distortions were completely visible. As it is, however, Habermas' own tradition stands in need of the same depth-hermeneutic: there are no privileged traditions.

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[85] *TM*, 290.

[86] Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* [1967], trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 168.

[87] Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 205.

[88] See e.g. Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

Habermas suggests that hermeneutics' claim to universality is invalid; that there are limits to hermeneutics' field of application. However, he focuses on the limit encountered in cases of systematically distorted communication in psychoanalysis, and in the critique of ideologies. In such cases, he suggests, unintelligible speech cannot be overcome by hermeneutic analysis. When confronting unintelligibility arising from historical or cultural distance we can in principle identify what extra information might be required to make understanding possible; we can know 'what we do not yet know'; this is not the case with cases of distorted communication. Such distortion can occur in everyday speech when the parties fail to recognise the distortion. Habermas argues that tradition can be the locus of falsehood and coercion as well as truth and accord. Following a lengthy discussion of Freud, Habermas suggests that what is required is a depth-hermeneutic which can eliminate obscurities arising with language itself rather than from within language where hermeneutical understanding is located. Gadamer would no doubt reply that there is no objective vantage point outside language from which such a depth-hermeneutic could survey language. For Habermas:

> A critically self-aware hermeneutics ... one which differentiates between insight and delusion, assimilates the *metahermeneutical* knowledge concerning the conditions which make systematically distorted communication possible. It links understanding to the principle of rational discourse.[89]

For Gadamer, such knowledge would have to be attained within hermeneutics and not beyond it. Matthew Foster suggests that this leads to two arguments: (1) every authentic critique of ideology demonstrates the hermeneutic character of language and (2) any critique which does not recognise its own hermeneutic character (e.g. Habermas') is ultimately only promoting a new ideology.[90]

Habermas' criticism of hermeneutics is significant but I am not sure that it is fully justified. I suspect that Habermas' optimism about our ability to 'know what we do not yet know' is unfounded; even in cases of temporal and cultural distance there may be fundamental differences of which, from our own historical and cultural viewpoint, we cannot hope to be aware. Distorted communication is not a special case. Habermas observes that only a newcomer to a situation of distorted communication can recognise the miscommunication.[91] This is precisely Gadamer's point when he stresses the

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[89] Habermas, 'Universality', 314, emphasis mine.

[90] Matthew R. Foster, *Gadamer and Practical Philosophy: The Hermeneutics of Moral Confidence* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1991), 154.

[91] Habermas, 'Universality', 302.

importance of openness to others, and of dialogue. For Gadamer aesthetic consciousness consists in a 'trained receptivity to 'otherness'' and 'keeping oneself open ... to other more universal points of view'.[92] He requires the same of hermeneutics, as Warnke has noted.[93] It may be that *within* a tradition or group hermeneutics has no way to recognise the distorting influences of ideology, but openness *between* traditions allows for the miscommunication to be recognised.

For understanding to be achieved Gadamer suggests that two things are required. First, an awareness of our prejudices; second a willingness to correct and revise prejudices in the light of experience. In a theological context, Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones observe that

> failures of interpretation and corrupt character are mutually reinforcing. In such situations, communities lose the ability to read scripture over-against themselves in ways that challenge current ways of thinking and acting.[94]

This implies that while communities may have this ability it can be suppressed by ideology and corruption. They cite the Dutch Reformed Church's attitude to apartheid in South Africa as an example. However, they go on to say that

> such a community needs to hear the voice of a prophet ... cultivating the skills of talking to outsiders can help to avoid this situation.[95]

It is this sort of encounter between cultures that can open a community to interpretive innovation. This seems to be entirely in line with Gadamer's insistence on openness to others and I am not convinced that Gadamer was as naïve about ideology as Habermas suggests, or that Gadamer's system is unable to allow for a critique of tradition. Communities are able to read texts over-against themselves especially when they can hear the voice of an outsider or a prophet. Indeed it is the connection between tradition and situation which we identified in our consideration of Thiselton's charge of ambiguity that allows Gadamer to mount a successful defence against the critique of Habermas. Blind allegiance to tradition would clearly be susceptible to the distorting influences of ideology but for Gadamer tradition that is open to dialogue is subject to critique and development arising from context-dependent events and situations. Constant vigilance and openness to others are the conditions of a critique of tradition from within hermeneutics. Habermas' criticism of Gadamer has some force and serves

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92 *TM*, 17.

93 Warnke, *Gadamer*.

94 Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 103.

95 Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 104.

as a warning against complacency but I suspect that Gadamer simply failed to emphasise the self-critical aspects of his system rather than that they are absent.

4.2.3 Anthony Thiselton, Richard Bernstein and critical judgement

In the light of Habermas' critique there are questions which need to be addressed about the issue of 'control' or regulation of interpretations. Thiselton observes that Gadamer does not actually explain how we are to take our pre-judgements and apply them to particular cases, or how we are actually to recognise false prejudices. For Thiselton, this leaves the question 'what is the basis for our critical judgements?'.[96] How, that is, are we to recognise true prejudgements? Richard Bernstein asks a similar question of Gadamer: 'what is and what ought to be the basis for the critical evaluation of the problems of modernity?'. He argues that Gadamer's own arguments require rational justification.[97] It seems to me that Thiselton is looking for a 'method' by which we can apply our prejudices to cases, and discriminate between true and false prejudices. This is precisely what Gadamer is least likely to offer. Gadamer would no doubt argue that the application of prejudices requires the exercise of *phronesis* rather than the application of a method. For Gadamer the basis for critical judgements lies in the normativity of the *sensus communis*; the necessary discrimination has more in common with aesthetic judgement. Bernstein is seeking justification in terms of Enlightenment reason but the rational justification for Gadamer's arguments involves an appeal to a different conception of rationality than that of universal reason; forms of reason and argument may still be valid but the ultimate justification does not rest exclusively upon the canons of rationality. Bernstein also asks: 'what material, social and political conditions need to be concretely realised in order to encourage the flourishing of *phronesis* in all citizens?'. Bernstein suggests that Gadamer's emphasis on practical philosophy and the role of *phronesis* is not complemented by any consideration of the social conditions necessary for their functioning in society.[98] However, Gadamer does set out to illuminate the essential character of the *Geisteswissenschaften*.[99] As well as

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[96] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 315.

[97] Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 155.

[98] Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 158.

[99] Roger A. Badham, 'The Implications of Gadamer's Hermeneutics for Contemporary Christian Ethics' (Ph.D. thesis, Drew University, 1997), 159.

developing his own hermeneutical theory in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues, at length, against nineteenth-century hermeneutics concluding that the humanist tradition is to be preferred. There are elements of *Truth and* Method that directly concern what *ought* to happen in society. Although Gadamer does not address Bernstein's concern directly, the social conditions necessary for the flourishing of *phronesis* would include the centrality of *Bildung* and the *sensus communis*. As we have seen, Gadamer sees *Bildung* as 'the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities',[100] and the *sensus communis* as the sense that founds community:

> what gives the human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race ... this communal sense for what is true and right ... is not based on argumentation but enables one to discover what is evident.[101]

4.3 Developments of Gadamer's hermeneutics

Thiselton suggests that Gadamer's work can be seen as a 'crossroads' for contemporary hermeneutics from which theories can develop in at least four directions.[102] First, Gadamer's work in its rejection of 'method' represents a turn from the critical to the metacritical and focuses on how we make ethical decisions rather than on what decisions we actually make. Hence Gadamer's work has inspired others to take up and modify this metacritical approach. This route is followed by, for example, Pannenberg, Habermas, Apel and Ricoeur. Much of this work has emphasised the role of practical wisdom rather than theoretical reason. It has also recognised the role of tradition and community, tradition being seen to represent the practical judgements of communities developed over time. Second, Gadamer's hermeneutics has inspired socially relevant critical theory. Habermas' critique of Gadamer is influential here. Habermas, and Ricoeur are perhaps the most significant authors to develop Gadamer's hermeneutics in this critical direction. (We will consider the work of Ricoeur in more detail in section 4.3.1.) Third, Gadamer's hermeneutics has inspired a pragmatic approach, looking at the effects of texts within given communities (effective history). This emphasises the variable nature of the application of texts to specific historical events, and the context-relative nature of understanding. This socio-pragmatic hermeneutics is developed by,

[100] *TM*, 10.

[101] *TM*, 21.

[102] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 11.

for example, Rorty. Lawn notes that Rorty explicitly turns to Gadamer's hermeneutics (in particular to the notions of dialogue and conversation) in his critique of orthodox views of language and truth.[103] Fourth, some have responded to Gadamer's hermeneutics by turning back to more traditional approaches, focussing more on the critical than the metacritical.

4.3.1 Paul Ricoeur: retrieval and suspicion

Perhaps the most direct and significant development of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. In his work we begin to see more developed answers to some of the criticisms outlined above. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur characterise understanding as a historically and culturally situated dialectic of question and answer in which prejudices play a crucial role. Ricoeur emphasises the concept of narrative as the means by which we understand and locate ourselves and our actions. Both see application as an integral part of understanding.[104] He describes a three stage approach to hermeneutics: describing, narrating, and prescribing.[105] Ricoeur insists on a properly critical (and self-critical) approach as an integral part of hermeneutics. With Gadamer, he emphasises the role of tradition but he shares Habermas' suspicion that an overemphasis on belonging to a tradition can make a critique of that tradition virtually impossible. Ricoeur accepts and incorporates Habermas' critique into his own hermeneutics. Ricoeur's 'critical hermeneutics' is often characterised as 'retrieval *and* suspicion'[106] and represents an attempt to incorporate critical concerns into interpretation theory. The retrieval of textual perspectives is an act of interpretation and must be subject to critical checks. Any single text can give rise to a number of different interpretations because of the subjective influence of prejudices. Ricoeur emphasises the need for suspicion and self-criticism:

> Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigour, vow of obedience.[107]

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[103] Lawn, *Gadamer*, 126.

[104] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 62.

[105] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 20.

[106] See e.g. Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: S.C.M., 1991), 70.

[107] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

Ricoeur insists on retaining 'explanation' (Gadamer's 'method') alongside 'understanding'. He argues that explanation alone is reductive whilst understanding alone is vulnerable to self-deception and that what is needed is a dialectical relationship between the two. He welcomes methodological proposals as potentially helpful suggestions in the process of coming to an understanding though they must always be subject to validation or correction. Ricoeur explains the relationship between explanation and understanding:

> On the epistemological level, I say that there are not two methods, the explanatory method and the method of understanding. Strictly speaking only explanation is methodic. Understanding is rather the nonmethodic moment which, in the sciences of interpretation, comes together with the methodic moment of explanation. Understanding precedes, accompanies, closes and thus *envelops* explanation. In return, explanation develops understanding analytically.[108]

This emphasis on method is often characterised as a significant difference between Ricoeur and Gadamer but I am not sure that this is really the case. Whilst Gadamer is highly critical of *scientific* method in the human sciences and certainly argues that method alone is insufficient to guarantee truth, he does stress the importance of openness to others and of conversation. I think Ricoeur's acceptance of all interpretative strategies actually represents a development of Gadamer's commitment to openness. Gadamer has more recently conceded that there are hermeneutical dimensions even in the natural sciences:

> Doubtless the image of the natural sciences that I had in mind when I conceived my hermeneutical ideas for *Truth and Method* was quite one-sided. It is now clear to me in this respect that a whole broad field of hermeneutical problems has been left out.[109]

Perhaps Gadamer could now even find a role for scientific method within a broader conception of hermeneutics; though never as the sole (or even a sufficient) guarantor of truth.

For Gadamer and Ricoeur, the existence of multiple ethical theories and methods does not imply ethical relativism. If scientific method were the only guarantor of truth and scientific method could be shown not to apply in ethics, then all ethics would be

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[108] Paul Ricoeur, 'Explanation and Understanding', in Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (eds.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, trans. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 149-66, at 165, emphasis original.

[109] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Reflections on My Philosophical Journey', in Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 3-63, at 40.

relative. For Gadamer and Ricoeur, ethical pluralism is inevitable and, if competing ideas are open to dialogue with others, positive. Like Gadamer, Ricoeur emphasises the creative possibilities of distanciation. He denies the possibility of a totally objective standpoint as sought by science and rejects an uncritical acceptance of tradition:

> a certain dialectic between the experience of belonging and alienating distanciation becomes the mainspring, the key to the inner life, of hermeneutics.[110]

Listening in openness to symbol and narrative allows creative events of meaning to occur. Despite their differences Gadamer and Ricoeur are agreed in privileging the 'horizon' of the text rather than the author and in viewing the text as a 'well' of possible meanings. For Ricoeur, the autonomy of the text is a condition for this 'surplus of meaning'. They agree that as texts shape interpretations, so also interpretations shape texts. Meaning is the result of a two-way encounter between text and reader. Ricoeur develops this particularly in relation to metaphor. For Ricoeur, the act of understanding is directed towards future creative possibilities. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, we do not meet a mind *behind* the text; rather we encounter a possible way of looking at things, a possible world *in front of* the text.[111] Understanding a text is not about understanding the 'sense' of the text in terms of its original context; rather it is about grasping the possible worldviews opened up by its 'reference':

> To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says to what it talks about.[112]

Thus understanding is always about application in new communicative contexts.

Ricoeur's moral philosophy is to be found throughout his work on critical hermeneutics but finds its clearest expression in *Oneself as Another*. Here he defines the ethical goal as 'aiming at the "good life" with and for others, in just institutions'.[113] Thus, for Ricoeur, moral reflection is ultimately teleological. The good life is composed of various discrete goods which we discover through our inherited social practices. Practices, in Ricoeur's conception, are multi-layered or 'thick', consisting of many different dimensions: most importantly the integrating narratives that contextualise all

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[110] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 90.; see also the conclusion in Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

[111] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 107.

[112] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 88.

[113] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

the other dimensions. In this emphasis on 'institutions' and practices Ricoeur demonstrates that he shares the social concerns of Bernstein and Gadamer.

Like Gadamer, Ricoeur emphasises the importance of *phronesis*: he describes it in terms of three 'moments', corresponding to his three stage hermeneutics: description, narration and prescription.[114] Description involves the recognition of goods, and also the framing of situations, within the full thickness of our inherited social practices. It is the dominant narratives surrounding our goods and practices that allow us to make sense of our experience. Narrative also allows us imaginatively to explore possible responses to moral situations; to rehearse the meaning and consequences of various possible choices. Ricoeur divides the third moment of *phronesis*, prescription, into two stages: the 'deontological test'[115] and the 'test of practical wisdom'.[116] Here, as Martha Nussbaum observes, Ricoeur attempts to 'forge a complex relationship between deontology and teleology at the level of Aristotelian *phronesis*'[117]; to combine Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* with Kant's *Moralität*.[118] He mediates between an Aristotelian theory of the good and a Kantian theory of the right: the good and the right stand in dialectic tension with one another.

Ricoeur distinguishes between 'ethics' and morality':

> I reserve the term 'ethics' for the *aim* of an accomplished life and the term 'morality' for the articulation of this aim in *norms*.[119]

The main aim of Ricoeur's moral philosophy in *Oneself as Another* is:

> to establish: (1) the primacy of ethics over morality, (2) the necessity for the ethical aim to pass through the sieve of the norm, and (3) the legitimacy of recourse by the norm to the aim whenever the norm leads to impasse in practice.[120]

Norms are important but provisional conventions; the deontology of morality is ultimately subject to the teleology of ethics. In tragic situations, arising from the conflict of norms, *phronesis* 'has no recourse other than to return to the initial intuition of

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[114] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 140-68.

[115] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 203-39.

[116] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 240-96.

[117] Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Ricoeur on Tragedy: Teleology, Deontology, and *Phronesis*', in John Wall, William Schweiker and W. David Hall (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 264-76, at 265.

[118] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 290.

[119] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.

[120] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.

ethics.'[121] (This, of course, is comparable to the approach of Fletcher's situationist.) Such conflicts are central to the development of practical wisdom.

John Wall considers the greatest strength of Ricoeur's concept of the good to be

> that it views the good dynamically, interpretively, dialectically. The good is not just given to the self by external forces (like history, power, tradition, social relations, biology, and so forth). It is also, by definition, actively and voluntarily *interpreted* by the self into its own sense of narrative identity.[122]

The self must create a coherent structure out of all the teleological ends by which it is constituted in multiple contexts. This narrative identity or structure

> like a text, can be read and critiqued by others in the public domain.[123]

Ricoeur's third thesis above, the legitimacy of recourse by the norm to the aim whenever the norm leads to impasse in practice, is really a recognition of the possibility of tragic conflicts between norms and a suggestion as to how we might proceed in the face of them:

> in the conflicts to which morality gives rise, only a recourse to the ethical ground against which morality stands out can give rise to the wisdom of judgement in situation. From tragic *phronein* to practical *phronesis*: this will be the maxim that can shelter moral conviction from the ruinous alternatives of univocity or arbitrariness.[124]

Tragic conflicts reveal the shortcomings or 'one-sidedness' of the competing principles. Nussbaum suggests that for Ricoeur:

> To this one-sidedness, the solution is a *phronesis* that is contextual, situational, sensitive to the conflicting demands of reality, willing to choose in the full knowledge of reality's conflictual character.[125]

Nussbaum argues that Ricoeur's approach to tragedy goes well beyond the two dominant approaches to tragic predicaments characteristic of modernity - the Kantian and utilitarian responses. Kant simply denies that such conflicts ever genuinely arise; one or other of the apparently conflicting duties will turn out not to be genuine. The utilitarian approach never even recognises the tragic conflict; it simply perseveres in the calculation of consequences. Given the failings that we have already identified in moral

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[121] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 240.

[122] John Wall, 'Moral Meaning: Beyond the Good and the Right', in Wall, Schweiker and Hall (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur*, 47-63, at 52.

[123] Wall, 'Moral Meaning', 52.

[124] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 249.

[125] Nussbaum, 'Ricoeur on Tragedy', 272.

absolutism and utilitarianism, together with the alternative approaches adopted by Gadamer and developed by Ricoeur, we would surely expect a more flexible and more adequate response.

Song is critical of some features of Ricoeur's approach, in *Oneself as Another*, to the ethical question of the status of the human embryo.[126] However, I think Song is insufficiently alert to the methodological dimensions of the debate. He commends Ricoeur for refusing to 'cast the question in terms of the Kantian divide of person and thing'[127] and agrees that 'wisdom in such matters is a matter of communal *phronesis*'.[128] Ricoeur is consciously open to all sides in the debate:

> It is necessary to listen to the spokespersons of opposing theses in order best to determine the point of insertion of practical wisdom.[129]

He goes on to reject the all-or-nothing outlook that characterises the embryo as either a person or a thing; instead he proposes that a narrative account of personal identity should ground a different understanding of the embryo which could allow 'qualitatively different rights to be assigned at different stages of development'.[130] Song does not disagree with this. However, he criticises Ricoeur for insufficient attention to the role of the dominant technological culture and concludes that his arguments are not finally decisive. Ricoeur, though, is clear that

> moral judgement in situation is all the less arbitrary as the decision maker ... has taken the counsel of men and women reputed to be the most competent and the wisest.[131]

Also, he is not attempting to be 'finally decisive'; rather, he is trying to characterise the nature of the situation and apply the Aristotelian 'just mean'. Practical wisdom takes the form of 'critical solicitude': a concern for other persons, even 'potential persons', that has wrestled with the principles at stake in the situation and has listened to the views of others.[132] In short, Ricoeur's horizon is properly hermeneutical and could not be 'finally decisive'. It does however represent a valuable contribution to the debate.

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[126] Robert Song, 'Whose Sanctity of Life? Ricoeur, Dworkin and the Human Embryo', in Stephen Barton (ed.), *Holiness Past and Present* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 460-76.

[127] Song, 'Whose Sanctity of Life?' 462.

[128] Song, 'Whose Sanctity of Life?' 465.

[129] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 270.

[130] Song, 'Whose Sanctity of Life?' 462.

[131] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 273.

[132] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 273.

Another important area of Ricoeur's research is that of linguistics and he could well be said to be continuing Gadamer's (and Heidegger's) turn to language. In particular, Ricoeur has explored the metaphorical nature of language which, as we have seen, is an important Gadamerian theme. In *Creativity in Language* Ricoeur argues that metaphor

> is not merely an ornament of language or a stylistic decoration, but a semantic innovation, an emergence of meaning.[133]

He argues that words only really have meanings within sentences used in particular contexts; on their own or in a dictionary they have only *potential* meanings. It is the use of words within sentences that is the focus of creativity in language. A problem arises because of a phenomenon of natural languages: polysemy. By polysemy, Ricoeur means the ability of words to mean more than one thing. This gives rise to the potential for misunderstanding and confusion. He outlines three possible strategies for meeting this challenge of misunderstanding: ordinary language, scientific language, and poetic language.[134]

For ordinary language the main aim is to convey information from speaker to hearer about the concrete situations of everyday life; its main tactic is to reduce the effects of polysemy. Ordinary language relies heavily on the effects of context to limit the semantic fields of words that we use. The structure of the sentence and the context together reduce the number of possible meanings of words. In this way, ordinary language is able to make relatively univocal statements even while utilising polysemic words although the possibility of misunderstanding is never completely eradicated. Ordinary language also has creative potential, not just misunderstandings but *new* understandings can emerge. The variability of meaning of words and language's sensibility to the context confer the powers of creation and invention.

Scientific language aims at eradicating polysemy, rather than reducing it, in an attempt to eliminate all ambiguity. Scientific language uses precise definitions of words and adopts technical terms which denote 'only quantitative entities to the exclusion of the qualitative aspect of our experience'.[135] This process of abstraction leads ultimately to the replacement of words by mathematical symbols. Science creates formal systems and

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[133] Paul Ricoeur, 'Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor', in Reagan and Stewart (eds.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 120-33, at 120.

[134] Ricoeur, 'Creativity in Language', 127.

[135] Ricoeur, 'Creativity in Language', 128.

rules for interpreting them. Ricoeur argues that the aim of scientific language is not strictly communication; rather it is 'to insure the identity of meaning from the beginning to the end of an argument'.[136] These features of scientific language may represent part of the reason that Gadamer considers scientific method inappropriate in the human sciences. Utilitarianism, for example, represents an attempt to describe ethics in purely quantitative terms to the exclusion of qualitative aspects of our experience.

Poetic language, and especially metaphor, actually strives to preserve polysemy and to make use of it. Polysemy is deliberately preserved and several possible interpretations are held in creative tension. Metaphor

> is the general process by which we grasp kinship, break the distance between remote ideas, build similarities on dissimilarities ... metaphor has the extraordinary power of redescribing reality. [137]

Ricoeur concludes

> that the strategy of discourse implied in metaphorical language is neither to improve communication nor to insure univocity in argumentation, but to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language. The strategy of metaphor is heuristic fiction for the sake of redescribing reality. With metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality.[138]

Ricoeur suggests that the power of imagination to allow new worlds to build our self-understanding is conveyed by emerging meanings in our language. For Ricoeur, imagination is a dimension of language and there is an inescapable link between imagination and metaphor.[139] In the next chapter, the power of metaphor (section 5.2) and its connection to imagination (section 5.3) will be explored further as we consider the work of Mark Johnson.

4.4 Conclusions

Gadamer's hermeneutics appears to have the potential to address the concerns about recent ethical theory with which we began, especially when taken together with recent work in cognitive science and on the overlaps between ethics and aesthetics. In

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[136] Ricoeur, 'Creativity in Language', 129.

[137] Ricoeur, 'Creativity in Language', 132.

[138] Ricoeur, 'Creativity in Language', 133.

[139] Paul Ricoeur, 'Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics', in Reagan and Stewart (eds.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 134-48, at 148.

particular Gadamer addresses the weaknesses of legalism and utilitarianism which we identified at the end of Chapter Two. It would seem that none of the criticisms of Gadamer's hermeneutics are fatal either for his undertaking or for our project of incorporating ethics within hermeneutics; though they may point to important modifications or developments. The ambiguity noted by Thiselton turns out to be a strength rather than a weakness. Habermas' critique carries some weight against hermeneutics and therefore against ethics as a hermeneutical endeavour: there is the same danger of ideological influence in ethical traditions, and there is the same need for self-criticism and criticism of one's tradition. However, Gadamer's hermeneutics can deflect the criticisms by retaining the link between tradition and situation and by emphasising the importance of openness and conversation: ethics will need to do the same. Also Ricoeur's work shows how a properly critical approach may be incorporated into hermeneutics (and ethics). We must be open to others and prepared to modify our pre-understandings: vow of rigour, vow of obedience.

What might it mean for ethics to become part of a universal hermeneutical project? Like all understanding our ethical knowledge will be seen to depend upon and be conditioned by our historical and cultural situatedness. The abstraction of ethical deliberation from real-life situations will prove to be impossible as well as misguided and misleading. Ethics will be part of the essence of becoming a true 'person'. The virtuous life will be best understood as an artistic project. Ethical understanding will be part of an 'event of meaning' and will be interpersonal, contextual and not completely reducible to propositions. Truth and meaning will be located within the experience of the event itself. Our moral sense, or conscience, will have much in common with taste. Ethics will be based on experience and practical knowledge, and practical application will be an integral part of the process of moral understanding. It will no longer be possible to practice or understand 'ethics in itself' only 'ethics as the assembled achievements of the human mind as it has realised itself historically in reflective human societies'. Whilst not offering specific content to the virtues a hermeneutical conception of ethics could provide concepts (aesthetics, taste) for evaluating them; and a mechanism for their control (the *sensus communis*). The goal of the good life would be located as much in the process, as in the outcome. Christian ethics based on Gadamer's hermeneutics could have in common with other forms of ethics an appreciation of ethical understanding as partial and revisable, an emphasis on learning from others, especially

those outside one's own tradition, and a creative element. The distinctiveness of such a Christian ethics would be the place of inspiration and the work of the Holy Spirit within a Christian tradition and context.

Chapter Five

Metaphor, Imagination and Conscience

In Chapter Two we identified a number of failings in the ethical approaches of utilitarianism and legalism: especially their abstraction; their reductionism; their conceptions of reason, knowledge and truth; and their failure to allow for the significance of history and tradition. In Gadamer's hermeneutics we discovered a philosophical critique of these tendencies together with intimations of how we might better proceed by drawing ethics into the universal project of hermeneutics. In particular, Gadamer emphasised the need for a proper account of the historical, cultural and linguistic situatedness of ethics. The danger is that as human sciences become more scientific they become less human. The scientific method of utilitarianism strives to exclude all human contingency and so ethics has no room for morally relevant but agent-relative motivations, feelings, emotions, passions or virtue. The absolute truths of legalism are totally inflexible and unable to respond to morally significant features of differing situations. For Gadamer, language is the universal medium in which all understanding occurs and our ethical understanding, like all other understanding, must be seen on the model of a conversation. Gadamer noted the importance of metaphor and concept-formation, insights which have been developed further by Paul Ricoeur. Proper attention to our moral language may provide the beginnings of a coordinated response to the failings of legalism and utilitarianism within the context of Gadamer's hermeneutics. In this chapter I will briefly address the importance of moral notions and moral language (section 5.1). I will consider further the important role of metaphor in our language and understanding (section 5.2). In particular, I will make connections with the work of Mark Johnson in cognitive science: especially in relation to metaphor, concept-formation and imagination. Johnson is significant because his work on language and embodiment suggests a new and contextual conception of reason which may offer significant advantages over the abstract universal reason of the Enlightenment (section 5.3). I will explore the role of imagination in ethical deliberation, the imaginative character of conscience, and some parallels between taste and conscience (section 5.4). I will also suggest a model for the work of moral theorists (section 5.5).

5.1 Moral notions and moral language

As we have seen, Gadamer makes the claim that 'Being that can be understood is language'.[1] Language is the way we make sense of our experiences; of the world; of *being* itself. Language is the only way that we can understand being: anything that we understand about being comes to us through language. However, this does not mean that language must necessarily be able to provide access to all of being; there will always be truths that are beyond our ability to express, always more to understand. There is however no other access than through language. This is another example of Gadamer's critical realism. Being is real but our understanding of it is both enabled and limited by our language. In his assertion that language goes all the way down, Gadamer is challenging the Cartesian view that thought gives rise to understanding that must then be expressed through language. It is not the Cartesian thinking subject that alone guarantees linguistic meaning: rather, meaning and understanding are products of human dialogical interaction. Understanding develops in linguistic communities. We must pay more attention to the ways that language enables and limits our moral understanding. Our moral notions and the way we use them in ethical deliberation will be particularly significant.

Stanley Hauerwas considers the importance of moral notions in the context of a discussion of Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*. He argues that there was 'something essentially right about the main thrust of [Fletcher's] view' but that he was mistaken to characterise the debate solely in terms of a conflict between rules and situations (though this is arguably a caricature of Fletcher's intentions) when 'what he was really concerned with was the applicability of our moral notions to various kinds of situations.'[2] He suggests that our moral notions are simply not rich enough or flexible enough to account for the richness and variety of our moral experience. He criticises Fletcher for focussing on decision as the central ethical concept and ignoring the prior issue of our moral notions. The way we frame a situation or decision depends on our historical, cultural and linguistic situatedness: our tradition and language are always already in play. Hauerwas criticises those ethical approaches that attempt to establish

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1 *TM*, 474.

2 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics, Moral Notions, and Moral Theology', in *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 11-29, at 11.

objective moral judgements from the point of view of a spectator. He suggests that all our notions arise from historical contexts: even a supposedly concrete notion such as 'table' arises from our social conventions and practical needs. We group empirically dissimilar objects (consider the great variety of tables) together on the basis of experience. The basic difference between moral and non-moral notions lies in the reason for grouping them together: moral notions are not simply means to identify and categorise but also to 'avoid or promote, to excuse, blame, praise, or to judge and command'.[3]

> We do not come to know the world by perceiving it, but we come to know the world as we learn to use our language.[4]

Our moral notions are the way we group together some of the most significant and recurring features of our experience. Hauerwas criticises Fletcher for his narrow overly simple understanding of rules. He observes that

> rules are not dictated from on high, but rather are embodied in the very notions we use ... therefore just as in using descriptive terms we have to follow interpersonal rules in a public language to talk about aspects or relationships in the world, so in using moral terms we have to follow interpersonal rules in a public language to talk about some aspects or relationships of those beings who are regulated by interpersonal rules.[5]

Our notions only acquire meaning as we use them in real-life situations. The rules (or perhaps better, conventions) for the use of our moral notions have the additional characteristic that they are also rules for human behaviour. Our moral rules are embedded in our moral notions and our moral behaviour: they are understood and clarified as they are used. Or, in Gadamer's words, specific cases co-determine, correct and supplement the principles.[6] Moral notions can be transformed by developing social or historical contexts:[7] we are constantly in the process of testing our moral notions against experience and adapting them as necessary. The application of moral notions to new and difficult situations

> is often done by men who might be called moral virtuosos or geniuses ... more by intuitive insight than logical rigor.[8]

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3 Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 16.

4 Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 17.

5 Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 18.

6 *TM*, 39.

7 Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 25.

8 Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 26.

Hauerwas argues that there is still a role for the moral theologian in backing up such genius with 'good reasons' and so preventing it from being lost or perverted. He notes that a few of our moral notions are 'relatively complete' (his example is murder) whilst the majority are open and can be used in many different ways (it is this openness that, for Hauerwas, constitutes the rightness of Fletcher's position). Some complex situations can only be understood by using several moral notions together. Importantly, Hauerwas suggests that as a result of this openness our moral reasoning is not deductive but analogical:[9]

> we do not find what we ought to do by having an abstract principle from which can be deduced the 'right act'. Rather ... by comparing cases, [we] try to find out what is common to the situations ... In this sense, moral reason is more dependent on *imagination* than strict logical entailment.[10]

The metaphorical nature of language, the way our moral notions function, and the analogical nature of moral reasoning all imply a significant role in ethics for imagination. Hauerwas expounds (though not explicitly) a hermeneutical approach to ethics:

> the moral philosopher and the theologian cannot and do not start their thinking in an ethical vacuum. Rather they begin with the richness of human experience that is embodied in our everyday moral notions.[11]

This constitutes an ethical version of the hermeneutic circle and emphasises the linguisticality of our ethical understanding. Our received moral notions are inherited as 'scattered and limited pieces of our experience':[12] the problem is that they are inherited together with a pretentious claim to the sort of coherent hierarchy that would make them sufficient to describe and control all of our moral deliberation. Problems arise when the radical specificity of our situations exposes the inadequacies of our ethical systems. Hauerwas and Gadamer would urge us to recognise this pretension for what it is and to recognise the partial and embedded nature of our moral understanding.

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[9] Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 22.

[10] Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 22, emphasis mine.

[11] Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 24.

[12] Hauerwas, 'Situation Ethics', 27.

5.2 The nature and function of metaphor

The nature of moral notions is further radicalised by Johnson who argues that all our moral language is metaphorical. Before turning to Johnson's work we need to sketch in some background considerations regarding the nature and function of metaphor.[13] Three principal types of theory of metaphor have been elaborated.

First, the substitution theory of metaphor. This theory which sees metaphor as chief amongst the tropes was probably developed by students of rhetoric in the Aristotelian tradition.[14] According to this theory, metaphor is simply an ornamental way of saying something that could have been said in more literal language. In other words, the metaphor is dispensable (the similarity could be recognised without it) and a literal meaning can be substituted. Metaphor is a decorative feature of rhetoric designed to produce aesthetic speech but is ultimately unnecessary.

> In brief, a grace or ornament or added power of language, not its constitutive form.[15]

Second, the emotive theory of metaphor. This theory suggests that the impact of metaphor is purely affective. Like the substitution theory it tends to assume that metaphors are dispensable. Metaphor adds nothing to the cognitive content of the utterance; rather, it is suggested that the metaphor adds only emotional content (largely unspecified). If pushed to its limit, the emotive theory denies that metaphors have any cognitive content at all. This view of metaphor is often associated with logical positivism: the words in a metaphorical utterance may have meaning but the utterance itself cannot be meaningful as its applicability cannot be tested. The effect of the metaphor is related solely to its emotive import.[16]

Third, incremental theories of metaphor. The basic position of these theories is that the cognitive content expressed in a metaphor cannot be expressed adequately in any other way. The metaphor cannot be substituted because part of the cognitive import of the

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[13] See Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 93-102; David E. Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).

[14] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 10.

[15] I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90.

[16] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 26-31.

utterance is provided by the form of the metaphor. Where do these extra meanings come from? One possible answer is provided in the work of Richards who proposes an 'interaction theory' of metaphor.[17] On this view, metaphor is not a matter of substitution but of the interaction between words in a sentence. Speaking of one thing (the tenor of the metaphor) in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another (the vehicle of the metaphor) results in a tension in the sentence. This tension arises because of an apparent error in predication which does not make literal sense and requires resolution by the hearer.

> The vehicle is not normally a mere embellishment of a tenor which is otherwise unchanged by it, but ... the vehicle and tenor in cooperation give a meaning of more varied powers than can be ascribed to either.[18]

Francis Bacon commented similarly on the ability of aphorisms to generate new ideas in contrast to the limiting influence of 'method':

> [Aphorisms] representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to enquire farther, whereas Methods, carrying the shew of a total, do secure men as if they were at furthest.[19]

Metaphors offer the same invitation, and the same superiority over method.

In *Interpretation Theory* Ricoeur addresses the question of signification in works of literature.[20] In scientific works, the (linguistic) significations are to be taken literally. However literature, especially poetry, contains more than simply a literal sense. He suggests that this 'surplus of meaning' is an integral part of their signification. Ricoeur argues that the tension produced by the interaction of tenor and vehicle is not strictly a tension between the parts of the utterance but between two possible, and opposed, interpretations of the utterance. In other words metaphors can only function in a context. They are a phenomenon not of semantics but of discourse.[21] A metaphor cannot exist without an interpreter who recognises the utterance as metaphorical when the literal meaning 'self-destructs' in contradiction.[22] It is the interaction between these possible interpretations of the metaphor (as utterance) which gives rise to the creation of meaning typical of good metaphors. For example, McFague observes that

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[17] Richards, *Rhetoric*, 93.

[18] Richards, *Rhetoric*, 100.

[19] Quoted in Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 92.

[20] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

[21] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 1-24.

[22] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50.

> metaphor always has the character of 'is' and 'is not' ... a metaphor does not assert identity between the (tenor and vehicle) ... but suggests we consider what we do not know how to talk about ... through the metaphor.[23]

In other words, not all facets of a metaphor will be true. As Ricoeur puts it:

> redescription is guided by the interplay between differences and resemblances that gives rise to the tension at the level of the utterance.[24]

Thus, metaphors can offer us new insight and information; they re-describe reality.[25]

Theories of metaphor locate the essence of metaphor at different levels of an utterance. In substitution theories, metaphor exists at the level of the individual word. Interactive theories locate metaphor within sentences and Ricoeur locates it within discourse. These explanations seem to come progressively closer to understanding how metaphor works. All three of these levels are required: metaphor is the result of using a particular word (or words) within an apparently incongruous sentence structure, as part of a discourse. Metaphorical meaning does not exist simply at the level of the word but neither does it exist at the level of the sentence. Metaphors only work in a particular context: utterances may be literal in one context and metaphorical in another. These observations place metaphor firmly in the domain of language known as *parole* (as opposed to *langue*), and within the scope of pragmatics (rather than semantics). Pragmatics seeks to specify the extra-linguistic common ground that speakers and hearers share and that enables them to understand each other.[26] Semantically, metaphoric utterances are false, but hearers will attempt to re-assess the utterance in a way that is relevant, to find an interpretation of the metaphor which will make the utterance true, rather than assume that the utterance is nonsense. For metaphor to function as communication, the speaker and the hearer must share common perceptions of that to which the metaphor is alluding. Evans suggests that:

> In order for a sharing of mutual understanding between speaker and hearer to occur, there must be a common speech community, a common universe of discourse, and the recognition of a common meaning function.[27]

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[23] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 34.

[24] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 68.

[25] See also Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: S.C.M., 2000), 161-66.

[26] For a full discussion see S. Davis (ed.), *Pragmatics: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[27] R. A. Evans, *Intelligible and Responsible Talk About God: A Theory of the Dimensional Structure of Language and Its Bearing Upon Theological Symbolism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 217.

Metaphors are characteristically open to a variety of interpretations though the number of possible interpretations is not unlimited. Rather; they are restricted by the traditional and linguistic situatedness of the speech community: by the *sensus communis*. The value of metaphor can only be assessed within a community in terms of how well it fits into the language and world-view of the community, and in terms of the actions which may be prompted in the hearers. For Ricoeur, 'interpretation (of texts) is... a critical reflective self-reconstruction of the interpreter in the act of reading'.[28] Given that Ricoeur sees both texts and metaphor as discourse this definition will apply in some degree to the interpretation of metaphors too. So, the value of metaphor may lie in its ability to prompt such a reflective self-reconstruction within a community.

Metaphors may prompt a whole series of related propositions. They can be extended to provide a system, or model, for considering a particular subject. Consideration of such models can allow the development of understanding and can prompt further metaphors and hypotheses. This use of models is basic to scientific enquiry where they give rise to new ways of thinking and speaking about the world. However, models are imperfect and may break down in the face of new discoveries. At this point models can sometimes be adapted to accommodate the new data. Alternatively, more than one model may be adopted together to provide a more complete description.[29] Some models simply have to be discarded. Theology also depends on models to give form to its reflections. Here too models fail: such failure is usually related to the communal dimension of metaphor and often occurs when attempts are made to apply models to new situations or in new communities. So for example, the use by feminist theologians of the metaphor 'God is our Mother' instead of, or alongside, 'God is our Father' constitutes such a paradigm shift.

McFague suggests that there may be *no* known fact or truth or feeling without metaphor: 'metaphor is as ultimate as speech itself'.[30] Recent studies in cognitive science also suggest that metaphor is absolutely fundamental to the way we think: in

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[28] Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: S.C.M., 1991), 61.

[29] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 70-71.

[30] Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 47.

Moral Imagination, Mark Johnson considers the implications for ethics of such studies.[31]

5.3 Moral Imagination: Mark Johnson and cognitive science

Johnson considers the ways in which we, as humans, think and the mental schemes we use to organise our thoughts.[32] He mounts a sustained attack on the conception of morality as a system of universal laws dictated by reason. He also argues that we do not, in practice, make ethical decisions by bringing specific, concrete situations, under universal laws (his prime target, therefore, is Kantian ethics). Johnson argues instead that our ethical thought is thoroughly metaphorical and that imagination has an essential role in our ethical deliberations (and indeed many other kinds of deliberation). He argues that our traditional conceptions of morality and of moral deliberation (especially in their Kantian forms) are mistaken and that both moral absolutism and moral relativism are misguided because they assume false views of human reason and moral understanding. Johnson argues convincingly that

> any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp our world.[33]

In a sense, Johnson extends Gadamer's notions of our situatedness in tradition and culture to include our situatedness in a physical body (embodiment): both have implications for our understanding of language including moral language.

5.3.1 The impact of cognitive science on our conception of reason

Johnson considers five ways in which studies in cognitive science have a direct bearing on our conception of reason, including moral reasoning.

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[31] *MI.*

[32] This section draws primarily on *MI.* It is in this book that Johnson's work is most clearly focussed on ethics. However, see also Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind : The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh.* Also relevant is Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[33] Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, xiii.

First, the theory of prototypes: the classical theory of categories and concepts involves the description of necessary and sufficient features that something must possess to fall under a certain concept or be included in a particular category. However, most categories actually used by people are not consciously defined in this way. Rather, we usually define categories (e.g. bird) by means of a typical example or prototype (e.g. robin), while still able to recognise other members of the category that differ, often in significant ways, from the prototype (e.g. ostrich, penguin).[34] Categories thus have a radial structure with a prototype case at the centre and less typical cases further out. So, our concepts are not uniformly structured and our categories have 'fuzzy edges'. Johnson suggests that our basic moral categories – e.g. person, duty, right, law, will – also exhibit this prototype structure. Moral principles only clearly apply to prototypical (clear-cut) cases whilst our moral lives require us to address unique and individual (precisely not prototypical) cases.[35] Johnson accepts that there is a relatively stable 'core' to most of our moral concepts, however he suggests that this is not due to the abstraction of objective 'rules', rather it is the result of the stability of the shared metaphorical systems within a given culture.[36] It is the prototype structure of moral concepts which can account for both their stable core and their relative indeterminacy.[37] Johnson also argues that something important is missing from morality when it is seen as based on absolute laws:

> What is left out is any sense of the development, growth, and historical transformation of our experience and our moral knowledge.[38]

In fact, moral rules are considered objective precisely because they are unaffected by historical contingencies.

Second, Johnson discusses frame semantics: semantic frames are the idealised frameworks that we, communally, develop to understand the different kinds of situation that we encounter.[39] Our terms and concepts only have meaning in relation to these broad schemes or frames which are not an objective part of the situation but are imposed by us in the light of prior understanding and experience. There can be several ways of framing any moral situation that we encounter (Johnson's example is

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[34] The examples are Johnson's.

[35] *MI*, 9.

[36] *MI*, 91.

[37] *MI*, 100.

[38] *MI*, 79.

[39] *MI*, 9. See also Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 18-40.

understanding a foetus as either 'a person' or as 'a biological organism with no personality'.) Semantic frames are not static; rather, they are dynamic patterns with both spatial and temporal dimensions. However the number of possible ways for an individual to frame a situation is once more restricted by the traditional and linguistic conventions within which they operate though new combinations or extensions of frames are always a possibility.

Third, metaphorical understanding: our understanding is largely composed of 'metaphorical mappings'.[40] Complex systems of metaphor connect our different experiential domains. Trevor Hart's summary of Johnson's position is helpful:

> In short, we make sense of the world by mapping meaningful order from one domain (generally some physical reality) onto another (generally some extra-physical reality) in order to grant it a clearer structure.[41]

Language does not provide a system of fixed concepts that can be mapped directly onto the reality of our experience. Rather; complex systems of overlapping metaphors connect different areas of our experience.[42] Johnson argues that this interconnection of domains implies that there is no purely 'ethical' domain: rather, our moral systems have a vast reach into other domains of our experience.[43] Brown notes the phenomenon of synaesthesia: 'the habit of our minds regularly to connect the same phenomena across different kinds of discourse' and suggests that this phenomenon may help to explain the effectiveness of metaphor.[44] Moltmann observes that 'it is a fundamental characteristic of *religious* speech to try to make the unexperienceable divine reality comprehensible with the help of metaphors taken from the world which human beings experience'.[45]

Fourth, basic-level experience: concepts derived from certain categories of experience are more important in determining how we function than others. This is dictated by features we have in common:

> the kinds of bodies we have, the way our brains work, the nature of our purposes and how we interact socially.[46]

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[40] *MI*, 10.

[41] Trevor Hart, 'Creative Imagination and Moral Identity', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16, no. 1 (2003), 1-13, at 5.

[42] See also Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 65-100.

[43] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 333.

[44] David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 377.

[45] Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 161.

[46] *MI*, 11.

Basic level experiences of pleasure and pain, as Bentham and Mill realised, will be important in moral deliberation and, because shared, may provide arguments against the extreme forms of moral relativism. They will not, however, be the only experiences or notions on which to base our moral judgements.

Fifth, narrative: narrative is a fundamental mode of human understanding which plays a role in how we 'understand actions, evaluate moral character, and project possible solutions to morally problematic situations.'[47] As we will see (section 5.3.6), it is the narratives surrounding our goods and practices that allow us to make sense of our experience and to explore imaginatively the possible responses to moral situations. Narrative is constitutive of our experience; any moral theory must take account of this narrative character of our lives.

As we have seen, Gadamer set out to describe what happens in the *process* of understanding:

> Fundamentally I am *not proposing a method*; I am describing what *is the case*.[48]

Cognitive science has the same aim. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that there is so much overlap between Johnson's account of the implications of cognitive studies for moral reasoning and our own survey of the implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics.[49] Gadamer provides a strikingly similar account of the metaphorical nature of language and of the process of concept formation.[50] He is also aware of the influence of our language on our reasoning:

> The conceptual world in which philosophising develops has already influenced us in the same way that the language in which we live conditions us ... we must become aware of these influences.[51]

Gadamer and Johnson are both critical of the claim of abstracted reason to universality and its pretension to univocity. Many ethical theories require literal concepts and objective situations, while metaphor is seen as non-rational, subjective and unconstrained. Semantic frames have interesting parallels with Gadamer's *horizons* and

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[47] *MI*, 11.

[48] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Supplement I: Hermeneutics and Historicism' [1965], in *TM*, 542-49, at 512.

[49] What is surprising, given the extent of the parallels between Johnson and Gadamer is that Johnson refers to Gadamer so little: there are only a handful of references in all of Johnson's published works. Perhaps this is a consequence of the lack of dialogue between continental and American philosophy.

[50] Chapter Three, 112.

[51] *TM*, xxv.

Taylor's *conceptual schemes*.[52] For all three, our reasoning and understanding depend upon our cultural and historical situatedness. In fact, the metaphorical nature of language requires a communal understanding. Reason is always linguistically situated but this is also the condition of possibility of metaphoric extension and the development of new concepts by a community.

5.3.2 Johnson's criticism of abstraction

Johnson is particularly critical of the conception of moral *laws* stemming from the essence of reason upon which morality is said to be based. He is especially critical of attempts to abstract moral laws from the context of our experience, arguing that such systems are simply too narrow and too unimaginative to capture most of what goes on in our moral experience.[53] Johnson argues that moral norms can only have any relevance within the evolving moral tradition of a specific community. He summarises Hegel:

> ethics ought not to consist merely in [an abstracted] theory of morality ... but rather in a theory of the historically and culturally embedded and embodied morality of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*).[54]

In fact, Johnson's criticism goes even deeper than this. He suggests that Moral Law theories work with a conception of reason which is itself a dangerous abstraction:

> Reason is defined as an abstract structure that stands above and transcends any particular instance of reasoning in actual historical contexts ... a fixed, transtemporal structure that in no way depends on the nature of our bodily experience nor on the social contexts, historical events, or cultural practices in which it is manifested.[55]

As we have seen, Gadamer's hermeneutical insights preclude the possibility of such a universal reason. Johnson suggests that Kant, in particular, is guilty of a misguided attempt to abstract a universal reason with the result that reason comes to mean little more than the principles of formal logic.[56]

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[52] Charles Taylor, 'Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes', in Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald and Jens Kertscher (eds.), *Gadamer's Century* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2002).

[53] *MI*, 104.

[54] *MI*, 28.

[55] *MI*, 108.

[56] *MI*, 110-13.

5.3.3 Reduction and the diversity of goods

As we have seen, Johnson is also critical of 'utilitarian reductionism' through which 'technical rationality [becomes] the sole criterion for moral evaluation'.[57] Similarly, in *The Diversity of Goods* Charles Taylor argues convincingly against the reductionism of both utilitarianism and formalism. He suggests that both are concerned with the epistemological question of validation – as understood by the natural sciences, after the Enlightenment. A principal concern of utilitarianism was the concern to satisfy these canons of rational validation. All considerations of feelings, emotion, virtue or obligation, were excluded: utilitarians

> could abandon all the metaphysical or theological factors ... which made ethical questions undecidable. Bluntly, [they] could calculate.[58]

Formalism again offers the prospect of making moral decisions without the unvalidated consideration of feelings or emotion and without addressing issues of virtue or obligation by sidestepping them altogether. You can finesse all this by recourse to universalisable maxims and moral absolutes.

Taylor argues that to approach ethical theory with these notions of validation and formal principles leads to a serious distortion of our moral thinking. An already formulated theory of validation distorts our observations and framing of reality: any reason at work in a situation that does not fit the model is either discarded or simply goes unnoticed. Both systems narrow our horizons:

> One of the big illusions which grows from either of these reductions is the belief that there is a single consistent domain of the 'moral', that there is one set of considerations, or mode of calculation, which determines what we ought 'morally' to do. The unity of the moral is a question which is conceptually decided from the first on the grounds that moral reasoning just is equivalent to calculating consequences for human happiness, or determining the universal applicability of maxims, or something of the sort.[59]

For Taylor the boundaries of the 'moral' are an open question. Also different moral ideals may appear to contradict one another – for example, the universal attribution of moral personality and considerations of less than universal solidarity or personal excellence.[60]

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[57] *MI*, 120.

[58] Charles Taylor, 'The Diversity of Goods', in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 230-47, at 230.

[59] Taylor, 'Diversity', 233.

[60] Taylor, 'Diversity', 233.

Against the *quantitative* deliberations of utilitarianism and the avoidance of the issue by formalism, Taylor argues for a consideration in moral reasoning of the *qualitative* distinctions we make between different actions, or feelings, or modes of life as being in some way morally admirable or contemptible. This is, in essence, Mill's point about higher and lower pleasures, but Taylor argues that it cannot be accommodated within the quantitative framework of utilitarianism. Commonly adopted moral goals illustrate these quantitative distinctions: for example, the goals of personal integrity, Christian agape, and liberation, already involve judgements about what is most important in life. Taylor notes that the higher goals he cites involve motivation as part of their very definition. To aspire to one of these goals is to aspire to be a particular kind of person, to be motivated in a certain way, to exhibit a particular virtue. The goals are significantly qualitatively different and not easily susceptible of a quantitative analysis or comparison. Qualitative considerations 'get short shrift in the utilitarian and formalist reductions'.[61] Some forms of ethical thinking are unfairly privileged over others. Taylor suggests that the grounds for such dismissal are usually expressed in terms of self-evidence, validation or a desire to exclude 'subject-related properties'.[62] These last are to be excluded in the search for a 'naturalist account of man': a description like that of any other object in nature. Such a programme requires that human goals and activities are characterised in purely physical (or even chemical) terms. Such requirements for absolute and objective explanations of human behaviour must exclude considerations of qualitative contrast. Taylor suggests that the assumption that our accounts of human behaviour must be naturalistic is misguided, rather we should expect to have to take account of 'the significances of things for agents' and that this will 'require some use of languages of qualitative contrast'.[63] He suggests that both utilitarianism and formalism are, in fact, arbitrary restrictions of moral reasoning and that they have little foundation in our normal ethical sensibility and practice.

Taylor concludes that 'the ethical is not a homogeneous domain' and that the moral goods which we do in fact recognise are diverse. Virtue, character, feelings, emotions, motivations and goals all play a part in everyday moral thinking. No single-factor theory is likely to do justice to our full range of moral considerations. Their claims of objective calculation and precision are illusory:

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[61] Taylor, 'Diversity', 240.

[62] Taylor, 'Diversity', 241-42.

[63] Taylor, 'Diversity', 243.

> In fact, they only have a semblance of validity through leaving out all that they cannot calculate.[64]

Our various goals are ultimately incommensurable. Their combination must rest on considerations other than direct comparison and calculation.

5.3.4 The centrality of metaphor

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that our metaphorical talk is extraordinarily coordinated. A metaphor is not simply an utterance; rather it is embedded in our language in a way which shapes both our language and our actions.[65] *Moral Imagination* is an extended exploration of the consequences of this recognition. Johnson points out that we rarely stop to reflect on the nature of our moral language: the metaphors are now dead, and we behave as if the language we use were literal, univocal and unchangeable. He suggests that our moral reasoning depends on metaphor at two basic levels:

> (1) Our most fundamental moral concepts (e.g. will, freedom, law, right, duty, well-being, action) are defined metaphorically, typically by multiple metaphoric mappings for a single concept. (2) The way we conceptualise a particular situation will depend on our use of systematic conceptual metaphors that make up the common understanding of members of our culture. In other words, the way we frame and categorise a given situation will determine how we reason about it, and how we frame it will depend on which metaphorical concepts we are using.[66]

Johnson points out that because of the flexibility of metaphorical concepts, which can be developed and extended (or supplemented) by further metaphors, it becomes impossible to have determinate, univocal applications of moral rules that contain such concepts. However, he suggests that this is a strength and not a weakness. Metaphor constitutes a basis for imaginatively moving beyond 'clear' and prototypical cases. It allows us to explore possibilities in a flexible, though constrained, way and to develop our moral concepts in the light of experience.[67]

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[64] Taylor, 'Diversity', 245.

[65] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.

[66] *MI*, 2.

[67] *MI*, 10. For a detailed discussion of 'conceptual blending' see Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*.

In *Moral Imagination*, Johnson describes in considerable detail the metaphoric character of much of our moral deliberation.[68] He outlines event structure metaphors (the journeys of our lives), metaphors of social and moral 'accounting' ('can someone *lend* me a hand?', 'I *owe* you my life') and metaphors for moral character (uprightness and strength). He also considers some examples of semantic framing (for example, marriage is a journey, marriage is a resource, marriage is an organic unity). His conclusion is that metaphor has a central role in our moral deliberation:

> My claim ... is that because so much of our common moral understanding is structured by systems of metaphor, no account of morality can be adequate that fails to examine the extent to which our conceptualisation, reasoning and language about morality involve metaphor (and other imaginative devices).[69]

This dependence on the metaphorical nature of our understanding is not, for Johnson, to be lamented: it is what makes abstract thought possible and allows us to make sense of our experience. This closely parallels Gadamer's accounts of traditional and linguistic situatedness as the conditions of the possibility of understanding.

5.3.5 Reason and faculty psychology: the 'Moral Law Folk Theories'

Johnson is highly critical of what he calls the 'Moral Law Folk Theory'. It is worth quoting his summary in full:

> Human beings have a dual nature, part bodily and part mental. It is our capacity to reason and act upon rational principles that distinguishes us from brute animals. The free will, which humans possess but animals do not, is precisely this capacity to act on principles we give to ourselves to guide our actions. Therefore our freedom is preserved only in acting on principles our reason gives to us. There is a deep tension between our bodily and mental aspects, because our bodily passions and desires are not rational. That is why we need reason to tell us how we ought to act in situations where our actions may affect the well-being of ourselves and other people. Reason guides the will by giving it moral laws – laws that specify which acts are morally prohibited, which are required, and which are permissible. Universal reason not only is the source of all moral laws but also tells us how to apply those principles to concrete situations. Moral reasoning is thus principally a matter of getting the correct description of a situation, determining which moral law pertains to it, and figuring out what action that moral law requires for the given situation.[70]

Johnson argues that this theory is so pervasive in our culture that it is the shared basis of both religious and rationalist (Kantian) ethics. Most of us, he suggests, are not even

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[68] See also Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 290-334.

[69] *MI*, 61-62.

[70] *MI*, 7.

aware of this basis to our morality and simply accept it, without reflection or criticism, as literal fact. Because the theory is so pervasive, it becomes difficult to conceive of alternative ways of doing ethics. Rationalist ethical systems share certain common features: they purport to give *guidance* about right and wrong; they specify moral laws; they treat reason as a force; and they treat morality as a system of restrictions.[71] Johnson criticises the dualism of such systems together with their conceptions of reason and freedom, and their implied disregard for the imaginative and subjective aspects of moral deliberation. In fact, Johnson suggests that it is *morally irresponsible* to 'think and act as though we possess a universal disembodied reason that generates absolute rules ... and universal laws ... by which we can tell right from wrong in any situation we encounter'.[72] Moral absolutism and moral relativism are both mistaken in accepting this erroneous view of reason: we are expected to choose between the absolute nature of moral laws based on reason or accept that they are utterly relative to a specific cultural context. As we have seen, Gadamer argues that the absolutist/relativist split is a false dichotomy. Johnson adduces evidence from 'recent empirical studies in the cognitive sciences concerning conceptual structure, meaning and reason'[73] which suggest that we do not, in practice, reason or understand in the ways that the Moral Law Folk Theory suggests. Rather:

> A new view is emerging of concepts as grounded in structures of our bodily interactions and as irreducibly imaginative in character.[74]

In fact, what we are learning about the ways in which humans reason and conceptualise is radically at odds with our traditional theories. Johnson points out that for the Moral Law Folk Theory to be plausible, a number of assumptions about concepts and reasoning must be accepted:

> (1) There must be one and only one correct conceptualisation for any situation. Otherwise we could never figure out which moral rule is supposed to apply to the situation. (2) There must exist literal concepts with univocal meanings, in terms of which the moral laws are stated and which also apply to the situation being considered. (3) Situations must be conceptualisable by a list of features that uniquely describe them (which is to say that concepts must be defined by sets of necessary and sufficient conditions for their application).[75]

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[71] *MI*, 27.

[72] *MI*, 5.

[73] *MI*, 5.

[74] *MI*, 6.

[75] *MI*, 8.

However, moral decisions are complex, they are made by people who are involved in intricate networks of relationships with others; people who are influenced by their culture both in terms of *how to make* moral decisions and also in terms of what sorts of decision actually *matter*. Situations can often be framed and rules interpreted in several ways.

A rationalistic ethics is, I suggest, simply unattainable as it is based on the illusion of pure reason, totally independent of experience, and it characterises reason simply as logical inference (with no role for metaphor, feelings or imagination). Johnson, on the other hand, suggests that our actual human understanding is thoroughly metaphorical and is based on bodily experience:

> In short, 'pure' reason has almost nothing to do with human reason ... Views of reason as pure, transcendent and nonimaginative ignore the fact that moral theories are expressions of the moral traditions they emerge from and reconstruct.

He argues that all moral theories have a metaphorical basis: even Kant's moral theory stemming, supposedly, from pure practical reason depends on metaphor. Johnson suggests, with Putnam, that Kant is not simply providing arguments for his approach; he is also providing an image to explain how our ideals are co-ordinated:

> Putnam is right in claiming that Kant's theory elaborates a moral image and is an imaginative articulation of a particular moral tradition.[76]

Kant is not working completely *ex nihilo*: he too is limited by his prejudices. By attempting to ground ethics in 'pure reason' and the 'pure will' Kant creates a huge problem for himself: how can moral principles based purely on *a priori* concepts and stripped of all connection to experience or feeling ever apply to real situations? Kant's solution is to suggest that we treat moral laws as if they were laws of nature:

> In short, the underlying metaphor that lets us apply the categorical imperative to concrete cases is 'moral laws are natural laws'.[77]

Thus, says Johnson, even Kant's supposedly pure rational ethics is based on metaphorical mappings and requires the use of imagination in its application to specific cases.

Johnson criticises a second folk theory: the theory of 'Faculty Psychology'. According to this the mental realm is comprised of at least four parts (the faculties): reason,

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[76] *MI*, 66.

[77] *MI*, 72.

perception, passion and will. These faculties are distinct and often in conflict. Perception receives sense impressions and passes them on to reason and/or passion. Will is capable of freely making decisions to act (and is therefore thought of, metaphorically, as a person). Reason is calculating and makes decisions while passions often oppose reason, and can be unpredictable and difficult to control. Will causes the body to act and can be guided by reason (though it can also resist the force of reason). Will is prone to following passion although sometimes it can resist passion, especially if it is a 'strong' will. Commonly, passion and reason are in a 'struggle' for control of the will.[78] The Moral Law Folk Theory (and its more philosophical counterparts) assumes this theory of Faculty Psychology and so morality is seen as a constant battle between the forces of reason and of passion. We are required to keep our reasoning 'pure' and cultivate a 'strong' will. Our moral lives are struggles to preserve these in the face of pressures and temptations that arise from our passions, from our bodily lives and involvement in the physical world. Johnson perhaps overstates his case here: Faculty Psychology may be defensible but only if one is clear that it is a device of philosophical analysis. Problems arise when it assumes the status of a description of psychological realities.

5.3.6 The narrative self

Johnson argues that moral absolutism not only distorts our understanding of human reason but that it also distorts our conception of the self. He criticises the objectivist view of the self that is presupposed by the Moral Law folk theory and suggests that it:

> cannot give an adequate account of moral personality, because it cannot account for the way in which the moral identity of a person is an ongoing, culturally and historically situated, imaginative process of thought and action ... the historical narrative process by which moral agents formulate and continually revise their moral identity is incompatible with [the objectivist self].[79]

He describes six characteristics of this view of the self (a view which is fundamentally Cartesian). First, the 'essential rational' self: the moral agent has a fixed determinate rational nature. Second, the 'ahistorical' self: our essence as moral agents is not changed by our historical circumstances. Third, the 'universal' self: every moral agent possesses the same essential nature. Fourth, the 'bifurcated' self split into reason and desire:

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[78] *MI*, 14.

[79] *MI*, 126.

reason is unable to move us to action; desire is not intrinsically rational. Fifth, the 'atomic', individual self: people are the source of their own ends and of the rationality and freedom to realise those ends. Sixth, the self as 'separate from its acts': the essential self is entirely independent of the actions it performs. Johnson denies the validity of all of these characteristics.. In particular, he denies the split between reason and desire, and asserts the unity of the self and its actions. Taylor provides an extended treatment of this in *Sources of the Self.*[80] There is an essential unity between the self and its acts: the self is a work-in-progress. We do not have pre-established fixed identities: rather our identity evolves and emerges from a network of ends, relationships, and the critique of others:

> Human beings are not fixed quasi-objects that have an independent prior identity and *then* go about making choices from which they are distanced. We are, rather, beings in process whose identity emerges and is continually transformed in an ongoing process of reflection and action. Our actions express who we are, and they may also transform who we are at the same time.[81]

This concept of the historically situated self finding and forming itself as part of an ongoing process is reminiscent of Gadamer's language of 'play' as the clue to ontological explanation. Both seem to accord with the language of 'being' and 'becoming': art and the historical self only come to their true potential in the interaction with a viewer or with other selves. For Gadamer, play is about interaction with others, about self-presentation, but 'all presentation is potentially a representation *for someone*': meaning exists in the event or interaction between the work and the audience.[82] So the moral life is about the artistic and creative project of self-presentation whose meaning can exist only within a community. The objective/ subjective split in ethics (and aesthetics) is now seen as a false dichotomy, there is simply no possibility of pure objectivism or pure subjectivism for historically situated selves. For morality, one of the key points here is that the self is *at stake* in moments of choice and deliberation. Our actions are constitutive of and constituted by our selves. For a self-in-process

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[80] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-107.

[81] *MI*, 148.

[82] *TM*, 106.

> moral deliberation is primarily a matter of the way in which our imaginative ideals inform our exploration of possibilities for acting within a morally problematic situation.[83]

Johnson emphasises the narrative context of self and action, arguing that narrative is a fundamental way in which humans seek to make sense of experience, to describe their own lives, and to explore possibilities for the future. In this he agrees with MacIntyre:

> It is now becoming clear that we render the actions of others intelligible in this [narrative] way because action itself has a basically historical character. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction.[84]

In our moral lives we attempt to weave together our experiences and our goals into a narrative, a framework that helps us imaginatively to engage with problematic situations, and that continues our tradition while also giving us the means for criticising and transforming it.[85] Johnson may accept the need for moral theories and generalisations but he insists that we should not see them as absolute or objective but remember that they are formed from the bottom up, from the developing life of a moral tradition. We must remember that they are, in fact, potentially distorting abstractions:

> Humans are temporal, and ultimately narrative, creatures. It is this dimension that must be infused into moral theory. We must make use of all sorts of idealizations and imaginative models, though we want to keep them as fine-textured, flexible and open to novelty as possible ... idealizations, if they are to be useful, must take account of the central role of narrative in the structure of human experience.[86]

The traditional conceptions of the moral self fail for three main reasons: first, we are socially constituted; second, we are historically situated; and, third, we are subject to change and development. What underlies all of these is a shared and developing language. Traditional moral theories attempt to escape the thoroughgoing contextual and indeterminate nature of our moral lives by adopting processes of abstraction or reduction. Hermeneutics shows us that such attempts are futile: ethics must be properly situated and demonstrates an ineliminable indeterminacy. The self, the moral agent, is constituted not simply by its biological nature but also, and in large measure, by its own imaginative ideals; the networks of relationships of which it is part; the traditions and

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[83] *MI*, 149.

[84] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985), 212.

[85] *MI*, 184.

[86] *MI*, 184.

institutions of its culture; and its historical and linguistic situatedness as Taylor observes:

> What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. And as has been widely discussed, these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer.[87]

Taylor and Johnson argue persuasively that moral identity is subject to change and development. Traditional moral theories tend to assume a self that is fixed and unchanging, detached and rational, immune to situational contingencies. Ricoeur identifies the temporal dimension of the self as the significant lacuna in traditional descriptions and suggests that narrative provides the means for making sense of this temporal dimension of our selves and our actions.[88] Our experience is not just ordered by imagination but it is ordered *into* narrative. We construct the narrative of our lives; and our deliberations (including our moral deliberations) are, in turn shaped by those same narratives. There simply is no narrative-free way to see the world: once more we have encountered a hermeneutic circle.

5.3.7 The importance of moral imagination

Johnson makes strong claims for imagination: that without imagination nothing could be meaningful, and that we could never make sense of our experience. Hart maintains that imagination

> is capable of breaking reality open for our consideration and transforming it and ... manifests elements of creativity in doing each of these things ... the poetic and the heuristic belong together.[89]

He notes, following Warnock,[90] that imagination allows us to structure our experience in a chaotic world; that it operates in a subconscious way; and that it is capable of transforming our apprehension of reality. Hart is critical of modern objectivist science in its attempts to 'eliminate the "distortions" of human perspective from its accounts of

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[87] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 34.

[88] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52. Also: Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 113-68.

[89] Hart, 'Imagination', 2.

[90] Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber, 1977).

the material cosmos' and observes that 'emotional, moral, aesthetic and spiritual realities and values fall even further beyond the boundary of "reality"'.[91] Yet these are the things that we cherish most and which allow us to construe our lives as coherent and worthwhile. Hart concedes the basic, Gadamerian, point

> that our experience and knowledge is mediated by both sense and sensibility, our embodiedness and our embeddedness in historically located symbolic worlds.[92]

The only reality with which we can engage is the world mediated through our perception and experience, which will necessarily include the realities excluded by objectivist science. The view of imagination as 'unconstrained, subjective play of images or representations' fundamentally misunderstands the nature of human cognition. Instead, imagination should be placed at the core of moral judgement.[93] Johnson argues that moral imagination does not necessarily entail moral relativism because our imaginative forays are constrained by our shared language and communal systematic metaphors. Also, basic-level experiences are the common ground for our moral reasoning. Hart agrees:

> creative imagination, far from being the unruly and gratuitously disruptive force of popular report, is a responsible (and according to Johnson's account rule-governed) extension of our selves into the world, which intuits its contours and generates meaningful patterns which provide the best 'fit' available, and thereby enables us to indwell the world in ways befitting our nature as human beings.[94]

There are interesting resonances here with the notions of natural law, connaturality, moral sense, and conscience: something inherent in our human nature allows us to recognise the good and to act upon it.

I suggest that there is an unavoidable 'moral distance' between cultures and, to a lesser extent, between individuals within a culture. Overcoming this distance by a fusion of horizons can be productive if we are open to a conversation with the other and prepared to put our prejudices at risk. 'Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the nature of unshared experience.'[95] For Taylor, it is our indwelling of a set of overlapping imaginative frameworks that structures our moral

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[91] Hart, 'Imagination', 3.

[92] Hart, 'Imagination', 4.

[93] *MI*, 208.

[94] Hart, 'Imagination', 7.

[95] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 231. For an example in relation to missionary work among the Masai see Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* [1978] (London: S.C.M., 2001).

experience and grants us our sense of the good.[96] We learn by example rather than by learning rules:

> We are inspired by the lives of people ... who seem to us to be caring, sensitive, intelligent, courageous and wise. We get a sense of what we might become and how we might live by observing how they live and by trying to act as they would.[97]

A mature moral imagination depends upon

> experience that is broad enough, rich enough and subtle enough to allow [human beings] to understand who they are, to imagine who they might become, to explore the possibilities for meaningful action, and to harmonise their lives with those of others.[98]

Such moral imagination is formed in a community by *Bildung* and limited by the *sensus communis*. Artistic taste requires the exercise of imagination. I want to suggest that conscience too is fundamentally imaginative. We are the artists of our lives.[99]

5.4 Moral imagination, conscience and taste

The classical definition of conscience was given by Thomas Aquinas: the mind of man making moral judgements. Human beings have an innate awareness of basic moral principles (which he called *synderesis*), and conscience (*conscientia*) is the judgement of the practical reason as it brings these to bear on particular questions of right and wrong.[100] Moral judgements are thus often seen as the application of universals (rules, principles) to particulars (cases, situations). As we have seen, this characterisation can be called into question and in this section I want to explore the consequences for our notion of conscience. The word 'conscience' has been used inconsistently to describe various different components of the human ability to make moral judgements and we need to be careful about definitions when referring to it. However, there seems to be almost universal agreement that human beings have some sort of faculty or ability for recognising good and evil and for making distinctions between right and wrong. I intend

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[96] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 78.

[97] *MI*, 258.

[98] *MI*, 183.

[99] *MI*, 183.

[100] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 2nd revised ed, 1920-25), I.79.12.

to adopt a broad definition of conscience as the human ability to make moral judgements ('the seat of moral agency in the soul'[101] as Oliver O'Donovan describes it).

Whilst the content of moral judgements and the definitions of good and evil may vary from time to time, place to place, or culture to culture, the ability to make moral decisions seems to be constant. Many of the differences can be explained by different understandings of the facts relevant to the case (rather than faulty logic or judgements). Perhaps surprisingly, people often agree on moral principles even when they do not share much in the way of ethical theory. Eric D'Arcy quotes Jacques Maritain regarding the UN declaration of human rights:

> it is an example of the fact that men can come to agree to a number of practical truths regarding their lives in common which are derived from extremely different, or even basically opposed, theoretical conceptions. He tells of a meeting of the French National Committee of UNESCO which was discussing the Rights of Man, at which someone expressed surprise that people of mutually antagonistic ideologies could yet agree on a proposed statement of the rights: 'Yes,' they replied, 'we agree on these rights, providing we are not asked why.'[102]

Beauchamp and Childress make the same point in relation to medical ethics[103] as do Jonsen and Toulmin in their history of casuistry.[104]

Confusion arises when one considers what conscience actually does and how it operates: different understandings of the nature of conscience inevitably lead to different understandings of its function and operation. Conscience has variously been seen as a witness regarding past actions; as a lawgiver; as prompting human beings to obey laws; as calling us to a virtuous life; and as forming character. Many authors see conscience as an element of reason; making judgements in a rational and strictly logical way or acting as 'a superior principle'. This is perhaps supremely the case for Kant with his strict emphasis on duty and the categorical imperative. C. A. Pierce suggests that this complete range of meaning of 'conscience' is present in the New Testament and that no single word is applicable to translate *syneidesis* on all occasions. However, it is always retrospective, passing moral judgement *after* an action is performed. The

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[101] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 115.

[102] Eric D'Arcy, *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 232.

[103] Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5th ed, 2001).

[104] Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

prospective conscience seems to be a Christian innovation emerging in the Patristic period.[105] D'Arcy observes that both understandings of conscience are subsequently used together:[106] conscience is henceforth a faculty of moral direction as well as moral judgement. It seems that the key concept which could enable us to unify our understandings of conscience is imagination. One needs imagination to identify the relevant features of a moral dilemma and to consider the consequences of any proposed action. Empathy is a fundamentally imaginative capacity: it is our imagination that allows us to make sense of the motives, feelings and choices of other people. We need to build up a 'mental picture' of the situation, of what has happened and of what might happen if a particular course of action is followed. It is imagination which allows the retrospective function of conscience to be transformed into its prospective function by imagining the judgement that conscience *would pass* if an action were performed, by imagining how one might feel *after* any proposed action, and by imagining what the new situation would actually be: in other words, by considering possible *narratives*. Narrative is not something that we impose on a completed experience, rather it is inherent in the imaginative synthesis that constitutes and is constituted by our experience itself. Narrative allows us to make sense of the historical dimension of our existence: we are able to orientate ourselves in moral space.[107] Also it allows us to make sense of the imaginative projections by which we explore the plans and goals that motivate our lives. Johnson observes:

> There is no other cognitive-experiential structure that blends these two basic dimensions of human existence.[108]

It is rare that real-life moral decisions can be reduced to single simple questions of right and wrong action. More often, the situation will involve a number of people who will be affected by any decision, a number of possible courses of action and a number of morally 'grey areas'. Imagination seems a better tool for dealing with such complexity than logic or the application of rational syllogisms.

D'Arcy suggests that it was St Jerome's comments on *synderesis*, picked up by Peter Lombard which set the tone for much of the scholastic debate on conscience. For the

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[105] C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament: A Study of Syneidesis in the New Testament; in the Light of Its Sources, and with Particular Reference to St. Paul: With Some Observations Regarding Its Pastoral Relevance Today* (London: S.C.M., 1955), 104-10, and 14.

[106] D'Arcy, *Conscience*, 13.

[107] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 25-52.

[108] *MI*, 171.

Scholastics, *synderesis* was primarily seen as a cognitive faculty which applied only to general principles: some authors equated this with conscience, others like Aquinas maintained a distinction. Not all of the Scholastics saw *synderesis* as purely cognitive: a notable exception was the voluntarism of the Franciscans. Bonaventure concluded that for a human being to be moral both reason and will need to be directed and that conscience directs reason and *synderesis* directs the will. There are serious questions to be asked about whether it is legitimate to attempt to separate reason and will in this way and whether moral judgements can always be reduced to bringing particulars under universals. Johnson argues that such a separation is illegitimate and that we very rarely think and reason in terms of universals and particulars. As we have seen, he suggests that reason, desire and imagination are inextricably connected and that we usually think in terms of prototypical definitions and radial categories. Such ideas are not completely new. Joseph Butler (in 1726) speaks of

> conscience, moral reason, moral sense, or Divine reason; whether considered as *a sentiment of the understanding* or as a *perception of the heart*; or, which seems the truth, as including both.[109]

The phrases 'sentiment of the understanding' and 'perception of the heart' are particularly fascinating and are echoed by T S Eliot who described conscience as 'the power to feel our thoughts and think our feelings'.[110] Arguably it is the Scholastic debates about conscience, framed as they are in terms of philosophical analysis, which colour subsequent treatment of the concept and have a negative impact on the ability of moral theology to guide decision-making: there is a gap between moral philosophy and phenomenology, between theory and practice.

Is conscience a universal human capacity? Generally, the answer to this question has been in the affirmative and certainly was for both Aquinas and Kant. However, there is an extreme Protestant position which claims that conscience is only present in human beings by the grace of God. In a similar vein, Thielicke suggests that there is no real continuity between the conscience in an unbeliever, where it functions as a defence against the claims of God, and the conscience in a believer, where it functions as the voice of God.[111] Conscience, he argues, is totally transformed at conversion. Ramsey

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[109] Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and a Dissertation of the Nature of Virtue* [1726] (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 148, emphasis mine.

[110] Quoted in: Ronald Preston, 'Conscience', in John Macquarrie and James Childress (eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (London: S.C.M., 1986), 116-18.

[111] Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* [1958], 3 vols., vol. 1: Foundations (translated from 2nd German edition) (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 318.

admits that conscience is universal, 'a natural ground for morality in all men', but urges that it is 'transcended' by Christ: the promptings of conscience can act only as boundaries and are unable themselves to motivate action. Whether conscience is indeed universal depends again on how one defines it. If taken as the whole ability to make moral decisions then it seems to be a universal feature of human nature. Our moral deliberation, our ability to recognise the good, seems to be similar to our ability to recognise beauty; an ability with many facets, some cognitive some affective, which requires a 'fit' between the characteristics of an object and our perceptive abilities. Judgements in both will have a subjective (though not arbitrary) element. Even if conscience is a universal human ability, it is generally held to require education and practice for it to develop fully. In this, of course, it would be no different to other innate abilities such as language. Indeed, as we have seen our moral judgement develops as we learn to use our moral language. It seems reasonable then to suggest that there is an essential communal element to conscience. Again, dangers arise if one attempts to abstract the individual moral agent from their context, community, tradition and history: it is the *sensus communis* which provides much of the content and control of conscience. There are of course parts of conscience, parts of our ability to make moral judgements, that are essentially individual and interior. However, they are not the whole story: there are other elements that are communal and exterior which have an inevitable effect on the individual and interior components.

Ethics, though, is not just about principles; it must also be about application to individual cases. Principles are no more than markers for the outer limits of communal self-understanding. Conscience could perhaps be defined as our ability to 'do' casuistry. Indeed casuistry is not just an essential complement to moral theory; rather it is itself the very essence of communal moral deliberation from which moral theory develops. As we have seen, Gadamer argues that situations in which we are required to act are, by definition, special cases and

> from this it ultimately follows that *all moral decisions require taste* – which does not mean that this most individual balancing of decision is the only thing that governs them, but it is an indispensable element.[112]

It would seem that casuistry is an essential part of a properly hermeneutical ethics. Reliance on abstraction and rational analysis (in a narrowly defined formal sense of 'rational') ignores too much that is significant in particular cases when real people have

[112] *TM*, 39, emphasis mine.

to make moral choices. Moral knowledge is a matter not of theoretical knowledge, or *episteme*, but of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*.

There are, of course, a number of problems with the notion of conscience, some of them notorious. However, many of them look rather different if conscience is redefined as the whole ability to make moral decisions and if the agent is properly situated. Preston observes that:

> Conscience can err because our judgements can be corrupted by personal, social and economic interests; it can err because it makes errors of factual judgement, and because of ignorance; it can err by not being sensitive enough to the personal and social factors involved in the issue at stake; and it can err by wrongly estimating the consequences of possible actions.[113]

These errors can be reduced (though probably never avoided completely) by paying proper attention to the *sensus communis*, and by employing an adequately trained moral imagination. Conscience can indeed be corrupted by personal, social and economic interests, but these should not be simply ignored in making moral judgements; rather, we need to educate our conscience to take proper account of them. Ignorance can be addressed by education. The moral community and Scripture provide ways of educating our conscience:

> As Christians we are to allow the mind of Christ to be formed in us (1 Cor 2.16) so that we grow in sensitivity, in the *art* of moral discernment.[114]

Sensitivity and accurate estimation of consequences require the use of imagination. The erring conscience cannot be identified 'objectively' but can be identified communally. The traditional problems with the notion of conscience (the erring conscience, the doubting conscience, the merely probable conscience, the over-scrupulous conscience and the sleeping conscience) apply particularly to conceptions of conscience as isolated and individual. Deficiencies in one's individual knowledge, ability, sensitivity or imagination may be addressed by recourse to the communal education of conscience.

Can conscience be 'lost' or, abnormally, absent in some individuals? St Jerome describes *synderesis* as:

> That spark of conscience which was not quenched even in the heart of Cain, when he was driven out or paradise ... And yet in some men we see this

[113] Preston, 'Conscience'.

[114] Preston, 'Conscience', 117, emphasis mine.

> conscience overthrown and displaced; they have no sense of shame for their sins.[115]

The absence of conscience is usually included as part of the definition of a psychopath. (There is a parallel situation concerning the absence of taste as part of the definition of a philistine.) This may presumably be an absence of Aquinas' *synderesis* or a failure at any level of the ability to make moral judgements (in our terms, conscience). This seems to be sufficiently rare to warrant description as a pathology and presumably cannot be addressed simply by education. Whether psychopaths are born with no conscience or whether they lose their conscience or whether their conscience is absent only in certain isolated areas of their lives is unclear. Whether conscience is overthrown and displaced or simply ignored raises the question of conscience's ability to motivate moral action. Absence of shame may be due to lack of conscience, but it would also seem that repeated sinful activity can dull one's response to the promptings of conscience: shame is still present but one's sensitivity to it is reduced.

The question of motivation is an important one. Kant would argue that love of duty, as seen in a 'good will' is the *only* thing that can motivate good actions. Even if we have an effective and educated conscience, capable of making sound moral judgements, we still have to obey its dictates. This, of course, implies a different understanding of conscience from those who would argue that conscience *itself* enforces rules[116] but is consistent with our definition of conscience as the ability to make moral judgements. Whether we obey the dictates of conscience must depend either upon the degree of authority that we attribute to conscience and hence its ability to *compel* us; or upon the ability of conscience or of 'right' moral choices to *attract* us (rather like the ability of some objects to produce 'sensations', or subjective judgements, of beauty).

There are a number of striking parallels between conscience and taste: the ability to make ethical judgements and the ability to make aesthetic judgements both seem to be innate and universal (or to constitute an abnormality if absent); both require education; both have an inescapably communal dimension; both have an inescapably subjective dimension; both involve both judgements and feelings; both involve judgements of past actions and creative possibilities for the future; both can err; both can paralyse

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[115] Quoted in: D'Arcy, *Conscience*, 16-17.

[116] R. A. Shiner, 'Butler's Theory of Moral Judgement', in S. C. Brown (ed.), *Philosophers of the Enlightenment* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979), 199-225.

(scrupulosity or perfectionism); individuals can settle for second-best (conformity or kitsch); both need to distance themselves from self-interest.[117]

Can we now construct a model of conscience that is consistent with both Gadamer's hermeneutics and Johnson's accounts of the findings of modern cognitive science? Is such a model consistent with the observed phenomenology of ethical decision-making and is it helpful in considering ethical theory? I suggest we can. We will need to overcome the 'Great Divide between Reason and Sentiment' to produce a notion of conscience that involves both rational elements and subjective feelings and experience (we will need to adopt a new notion of reason). Indeed, we will need to overcome a number of dualisms in the characterisation of conscience which we can now see as false distinctions: conscience concerns both past *and* future actions (i.e. both retrospective and prospective functions); it is both individual *and* communal; both a voice (accusing) *and* a 'call' (to virtue)[118]; it is both about guilt *and* about moral ideals; it is about feeling *and* judgement, imagination *and* reason. As the ability to make moral judgements conscience is crucial for the art of casuistry in the light of Gadamer's hermeneutics. The communal aspect of conscience is crucially important in the education of individual consciences; in legislation and prohibition of certain behaviours; and in the avoidance of moral relativism. However, the *sensus communis* is not incontrovertible. Individuals may challenge the public conscience on the grounds of new facts, or of new experiences. Such challenges may result in significant shifts in the *sensus communis*. The situation is very similar to Kuhn's notions of 'normal science' and 'paradigm shifts'.[119] The *sensus communis* will continue unchanged for long periods, accepted by all the members of the community until there is sufficient pressure to produce a significant change. Changes in the secular communal understandings of sexual morality seem to have undergone a paradigm shift during the latter half of the twentieth century, for example.

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[117] For a discussion of beauty, bad taste and sin, see John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74-81.

[118] John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach* (London: S.C.M., 1982), 130.

[119] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed, 1970).

Moral judgements are more similar to aesthetic judgements than has generally been allowed and we may have much to learn from considerations of aesthetics. One function of conscience is to assemble and attempt to resolve a number of different views and opinions: a form of composition or bricolage. The moral life should be seen as an artistic project which requires all the gifts and skills (inspiration, imagination, creativity, composition, bricolage, proportion ... etc.) of a trained artist. Moral judgement will render conclusions that are relative and contextual (though not arbitrary) and we should not require the sort of precision and certainty that we require of science (though, as paradigm shifts demonstrate, the conclusions of science are more context-bound than is generally acknowledged). Apparently similar situations may have different 'right answers' for different people. Rather than 'scientific precision', what we should require of moral judgements is 'artistic merit' and above all a proper exercise of moral imagination.

5.5 The moral theorist as art-critic

We have seen that our moral language is thoroughly metaphorical and that our moral reasoning is irreducibly imaginative. Also, we have seen that metaphors, especially as they become objectified and die, can dominate the way we think. How should we respond? What kind of moral theories do we require? What is the best way for a community to retain some sort of control in the face of the unpredictable creativity of metaphors?[120] McFague observes that theological reflection relies on metaphorical language in the Bible and in the Christian literary tradition. This language is not a secondary embellishment to doctrine and systematic theology; rather it is its foundation:

> If one accepts that metaphor is basic... to all human thought... then there is no way for theological reflection to avoid a return to its metaphorical base in parable, story, poem and confession.[121]

By extension, the same will be true of theological ethics. We need to remember that our understanding can only ever be partial and that we cannot even be sure which elements of our understanding are correct: moral norms must be constantly recontextualisable. McFague observes that

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[120] Rachel Reesor, 'Atonement: Mystery and Metaphorical Language', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68, no. 2 (1994), 209-18, at 212.

[121] McFague, *Parables*, 64.

> metaphorical 'knowledge' is a highly risky, uncertain and open-ended enterprise... The risk and open-endedness means that many metaphors are necessary, metaphors which will support, balance, and illuminate each other.[122]

Rather than progressively refining our norms to a core of absolutes we should attempt to hold multiple metaphors in creative tension. The metaphors will be able to correct and limit each other and can be re-orientated, or supplemented, when required. A collection of live metaphors, although 'fuzzy', may contain more of the truth and be more flexible than abstract systems. As we have seen the traditional Enlightenment emphases have been called into question: even the claims of scientific inquiry to detachment and objectivity have been shown to be false. Ricoeur suggests that the scientific search for univocity is an unrealistic demand of the Enlightenment dependence on reason. Even science proceeds by means of metaphor (scientific models) and the use of heuristic fictions. Ethical and scientific language are both aiming to describe something (the good or the true) which is (currently) beyond a complete literal understanding. Ricoeur is concerned that theological language (and, we might add, ethical language) should open up possibilities rather than close them down. Vanhoozer characterises his position:

> scientific and literal language fail to serve humanity because they are unable to express the possible.[123]

Cooper observes that metaphor may have the ability to convey extra cognitive content above and beyond the propositions to which the metaphor may lead us. He suggests that this extra truth and understanding are in a certain sense *ineffable*: that is they cannot be reduced to propositions and are subject to a different grammar.[124] Thus metaphor may be particularly appropriate for expressing religious truth: it may also be particularly appropriate for expressing Christian truth. To adapt an argument from John of Damascus and the eighth-century iconodules, the fact that Christ was incarnate as a human being, using ineradicably metaphorical human language and preaching in parables, may mean that metaphors (like icons) should be venerated as providing a specialised epistemic access to spiritual truths.[125]

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[122] McFague, *Parables*, 44.

[123] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61.

[124] Cooper, *Metaphor*.

[125] McFague, *Parables*, 62.

Johnson briefly discusses the model of morality as art. He suggests

> that we are likely to learn a great deal more about morality by examining how far it is like aesthetic discrimination and artistic creation than by studying traditional Moral Law accounts.[126]

Johnson argues that we must rely, not on Moral Law but on moral imagination. Moral theory is not abstract and universal but must be grounded in the metaphorical and narrative understanding of our situations:

> [Moral] theory would not be based primarily on discovering and applying moral laws, but rather on developing knowledge of the imaginative constitution of our moral understanding and what this means for moral reasoning.[127]

De Gruchy (following Kierkegaard) suggests that 'our capacity for aesthetic experience [is] an essential part of what it means to be human'.[128] I suggest that our capacity for moral judgement and moral outrage (our conscience) is similarly an essential part of what it means to be human and that both aesthetics and ethics depend upon the basic human capacity for imagination. Plato, in *Protagoras*, identifies the 'divine spark' kindled in humanity by Prometheus as 'skill in the arts' which Hart renders as 'capacity for culture':[129] could this just be our 'imagination'?

The criteria for judging 'good' metaphors, and hence 'good' moral theories, are similar to those for judging good art and good exhibitions. Expounding moral theory should be like staging an exhibition rather than focussing on one aspect of one painting. The moral theorist could now be described as an art-critic rather than the policeman of an ideology. The art-critic (who will also be an artist in their own right), is responsible for commenting on each of the works of art, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, and for producing a reliable exhibition guide which includes reference to context and history, and the history of interpretation and that will enable the viewer to relate to the exhibition. This, though, is very definitely guidance not prescription: a good deal of control must be relinquished so that ethics can develop and be recontextualised through dialogue.

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[126] *MI*, 210.

[127] *MI*, 77.

[128] de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 81.

[129] Trevor Hart, 'Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth', in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 1-26, at 4.

In all of this, we must remember that language and art are both only partially successful attempts to express the ineffable. As James Dunn observes:

> At [Christianity's] heart is the conviction that God revealed himself most fully not just in human word but in human person, not just in rational or even inspired propositions but in the human relationships which can never be confined within words and formulae alone.[130]

5.6 Conclusions

It seems that Gadamer's hermeneutics, together with Johnson's moral imagination, and an emphasis on the normative control of a community may be able to provide a coherent ethical framework or horizon. This framework offers a co-ordinated response to our concerns about abstraction, reduction, absolute truth, universal reason, history, tradition, language and metaphor. Moral theories arise from developing moral traditions and are grounded in their historical and cultural context which allows real people to reach meaningful conclusions about concrete situations. This framework reflects what cognitive science has shown us about how we actually think. It is humane and creative rather than callous and proscriptive; and yet avoids the dangers of moral relativism.

[130] James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: S.C.M., 1991), 259.

Chapter Six

Truth and Imagination in Christian Ethics

In the last chapter we noted, with Mark Johnson, that the descriptions of our reasoning (including our ethical reasoning) provided by cognitive science do not accord with the traditional Enlightenment view. I suggested that Johnson's description of moral imagination drew together many of these observations and could provide a coherent approach to ethical reflection. The importance of the imagination is a theme which has recently begun to be developed in relation both to theology and to ethics.[1]

In this chapter I want to explore further the implications of imagination for ethics and, specifically, its possible place in *Christian* ethics.[2] I will briefly outline Gadamer's critical realism (section 6.1); some of the relationships between ethics and aesthetics (section 6.2); and the imaginative structure of revelation (section 6.3). I will then consider creativity and will attempt to draw out links with the Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation (section 6.4). I will explore the role of improvisation in Christian ethics and endorse it as a way of doing justice to Gadamer's insights (section 6.5). I will then address the question of the normative 'control' of ethical deliberation and the importance of the community in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity and the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiration (section 6.6). The chapter concludes with a consideration of two practical consequences: the recovery of rhetoric; and the adoption of casuistry (section 6.7). These themes are complex and, as I hope to show, the possible connections are abundant: we can barely begin to do them justice. In several

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1 In relation to theology see David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

In relation to ethics see *MI*; Kathleen Marie Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

2 As a priest in the Church of England I am part of the Christian tradition and much of the following discussion concerns the nature of ethics for the Christian community. I have not made any attempt to reflect on the implications for other traditions.

places this chapter draws on the 'ecclesial ethics' and 'ethics of character' developed by Stanley Hauerwas.[3]

6.1 'Invention' in both senses: critical realism

Trevor Hart considers the claim that our 'knowing' of the world is imaginatively constructed from the outset and concludes that it is indeed imagination which allows us to structure our experience of the world. It is simply not possible to attain a truly objective standpoint; we are always limited by our perceptions of the world:

> Reality is always mediated to us through some perspective or other, and the scientific attempt to escape this fact is itself, ironically, a highly imaginative achievement in so far as it succeeds ... It is the world as we perceive and experience it that concerns us, and *should* concern us, in any study of the nature and meaning of human existence.[4]

This experience is structured by imagination, it is 'moral, emotional, spiritual and aesthetic' as well as physical, and it allows us to find meaning and value in our existence.[5]

Hart refers to Johnson's study *The Body in the Mind* and suggests that imagination 'is at root a matter of meaningful pattern, and our capacity to recognise and construct and reconstruct it'.[6] He notes the two important functions ascribed to imagination by Johnson in relation to our tacit knowledge and experience. First: the structuring of experience by image schemata or semantic frames. (Johnson's 'semantic frames' are similar to Charles Taylor's 'inescapable frameworks'[7] or 'conceptual schemes',[8] and to Gadamer's 'horizons'.) Second: metaphoric projection, making sense of the world by

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[3] See e.g. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: S.C.M., 1983); Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

[4] Trevor Hart, 'Creative Imagination and Moral Identity', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16, no. 1 (2003), 1-13, at 3-4

[5] Hart, 'Imagination', 4

[6] Hart, 'Imagination', 5

[7] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3-24.

[8] Charles Taylor, 'Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes', in Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald and Jens Kertscher (eds.), *Gadamer's Century* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2002).

extending meanings from one domain of our experience to another.[9] Hart makes the important observation that such projection is essential in our language about abstract concepts whose reality is 'discarnate and elusive'. If we are to converse about mental, spiritual, emotional, or moral realities then we have to use language from the domain of another more basic (generally physical) reality. In short, we must use metaphor:

> There is, we might say, a poetic aspect to our most basic perceptual engagements with the world, and to the language in which we articulate them ... creative imagination is constantly at work rendering experience into symbolic form.[10]

There is a hermeneutic circle at work here: our metaphors are constituted by our experience while our experience is constituted by metaphors: experience and imagination are inextricably linked.

Imagination is not only important in our ability to *create* meaningful order but also in our capacity to *reorder* our experience. We have already seen that metaphor can allow us to extend our language, especially to non-prototypical cases, and to develop our concepts imaginatively. Sometimes we deliberately 'play' with the symbols and schemes that interpret our experience. As Mary Warnock puts it:

> If, below the level of consciousness, our imagination is at work tidying up the chaos of sense experience, at a different level it may, as it were, untidy it again. It may suggest that there are vast unexplored areas ... questions raised by experience about whose answers we can only with hesitation speculate.[11]

In this way poets and artists (and Stanley Hauerwas' moral virtuosos) can reorganise our perceptions of the world, and challenge our understanding of reality, through their imaginative re-descriptions. Paul Ricoeur observes that language 'invents' in both senses of the word (to encounter and to create): 'reality brought to language unites manifestation and creation'.[12] Sallie McFague argues that 'discovery' and 'creation' are involved in scientific and theological models and that all knowledge depends on models (i.e. extended metaphors) to some extent. She suggests that there is always a tension between the 'is' and 'is not' of the correspondence of models to reality and that this 'metaphorical thinking' should be at the heart of both science and theology.[13]

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[9] See Chapter Five, 169.

[10] Taylor, 'Understanding the Other', 6.

[11] Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber, 1977), 208.

[12] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 239.

[13] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 101.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of incarnate subjectivity.[14] The world is real, not simply a Cartesian extension of our own minds. However, consciousness, the world, and the perceptions of the human body are intricately intertwined. The things we experience are not the unchanging 'objects' of the natural sciences; rather, they are interactions between the object and the human body, with its sensory functions. As our perspective changes, incarnate subjectivity reconstructs 'things' through use of its prior understanding of the world's make-up. The ability to reconstruct in this way is a function of our connaturality with the world's things.[15] We do not comprehend only by means of concepts. Our intellect can reflect on our memories, emotions, instincts and volitions. It can illuminate our inner inclinations and orientations of spirit; not to articulate them in concepts, but nonetheless to attain invaluable knowledge. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Husserl that 'transcendental subjectivity is intersubjectivity and argues that there is 'no coherent conception of the self which is not regulated by the consciousness that others have of us'.[16] Understanding arises in interactions and identity inheres in relationships.

Hart observes that our attempts to describe the world are '"heuristic fictions" which in an important sense create what they discover and invent what they find'. Heuristic fictions are not simply a necessary evil in our processes of understanding, something to which we have only occasional recourse when other methods fail: rather, they are simply all we have. We have to create meaning imaginatively if we are to understand or explain anything. There is a reality 'out there' to be discovered or found; but, if we are to make any sense of it we cannot avoid the need to 'create' and 'invent' for ourselves meaningful coherent unities. There is a constant dialectic between discovery and creation. This brings us to the important question of reference in Christian ethics.

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[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

[15] See also R.J. Snell, 'Connaturality in Aquinas: The Ground of Wisdom', *Quodlibet* 5, no. 4 (2003) (http://www.Quodlibet.net).

[16] Thomas Baldwin, 'Introduction', in Maurice Merleau-Ponty (ed.), *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London: Routledge, 2004), 1-36.

6.1.1 Critical realism in Christian ethics?

Janet Soskice discusses reference and realism in relation to scientific models and religious metaphor.[17] She argues for a critical realism which regards scientific models and religious metaphors (and, I suggest, ethical theories) as genuinely referring to real 'things' or relations and their properties rather than, as the positivists would assert, being 'convenient fictions for the ordering of observables'.[18] This conviction becomes the foundation for a critical realist philosophy which regards science and religion (and ethics) as genuinely, though only inaccurately and provisionally, depicting a reality whilst conceding that this reality may never be directly observed or fully understood by human beings.

For the idealists, the structure of human knowledge is entirely dependent upon human thought. 'Reality', such as it is, is no more than a construction of the human consciousness and intellect. The question of reference is irrelevant as no external reference is claimed or sought. Theories and language possess truth and are consistent within their own human-constructed realm. Here again, theoretical models (and ethical theory systems) are no more than ideas. Soskice argues convincingly that positivist and idealist accounts of scientific practice fail to account for the explanatory and predictive knowledge of the world which science provides.[19] Instead she proposes a critical realism:

> The [critical realist] is committed not to any one particular account of the world or even to the possibility that a perfect account could be provided, but to the intelligibility of what is essentially an ontological question, 'What must the world be like for science to be possible?' ... The scientific realist's argument is that the success of science means that its practitioners must assume not only that the world, its structures, and relations exist independently of our theorising but also that our theorizing provides us with access to these structures, limited and revisable as that access may be at any given time.[20]

For us, the relevant questions become, 'What must the world be like for ethics to be possible?' and, 'Can we claim a similar 'success' for ethics which would enable us to assume that 'the good' exists independently from our theorising and that we can have genuine access to such a reality?'

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[17] Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 118-41.

[18] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 120.

[19] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 120-22.

[20] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 122.

Soskice's realism has a strong 'social and context-relative nature'.[21] Scientific theories are relative to the context of the enquiry. Knowledge is structured according to humankind's thought and concepts; however the way we classify the world (or the good) may not be the *only* appropriate way of doing so. The realist is not committed to the identification of only one way of approaching the subject matter, but rather to the possibility that all such schemes allow access to the transcendent reality 'behind' them. Hence, Soskice's critical realism is not vulnerable to objections along idealist lines that all knowledge is humanly constructed. The truth of that charge would be allowed but not as the final word. Soskice advocates a cautious realism, which nonetheless meets the conditions that Mary Hesse says

> ought to be satisfied by an account of science that claims to be realistic in anything like the traditional sense. These are: (1) Theoretical statements have truth value. (2) It is presupposed that the natural world does not change at the behest of our theories. (3) The realistic character of scientific knowledge consists in some sense in the permanent and cumulative capture of true propositions corresponding to the world.[22]

We can construct similar conditions for 'realist' accounts of ethics. These would be: (1) Statements in ethical theory have truth value. (2) The nature of 'the good' does not change at the behest of our theories. (3) The realistic character of moral knowledge consists in some sense in the permanent and cumulative capture of true propositions concerning 'the good'. The last condition is perhaps the most distinctive of the realist approach and requires us to claim a form of 'success' for ethics as envisaged above. Ethical theories, developed in relation to particular sets of circumstances, can also be applied in new and radically different circumstances to provide answers to problems that are generally regarded as 'good': as conducive to human flourishing. Part of the problem here is that it is difficult to 'test' the 'explanatory and predictive powers' or outcomes of ethical theories although the ability to 'confront successive challenges' adduced by MacIntyre in support of Aristotelian ethics is pertinent. Soskice emphasises the importance of membership of a linguistic community in her theories of reference. She quotes Hilary Putnam:

> The realist explanation, in a nutshell, is not that language mirrors the world but that *speakers* mirror the world; i.e. their environment – in the sense of constructing a symbolic representation of that environment.[23]

Then later observes:

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[21] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 131.

[22] Mary Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 290.

[23] Hilary Putnam, 'Realism and Reason', in Hilary Putnam (ed.), *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 123-38, at 123.

> The descriptive vocabulary which any individual uses is, in turn, dependent on the community of interest and investigation in which he finds himself, and the descriptive vocabulary which a community has at its disposal is embedded in particular traditions of investigation and conviction.[24]

Sallie McFague suggests that science also proceeds on the basis of critical realism. Scientists imaginatively construct models to explain the way the world works in the light of observed data. The evidence for the models 'need not be conclusive and is never absolute'. The models do not function as literal descriptions with epistemic certainty: they are retained because they have explanatory power, because they generate new discoveries and because they link to other theories and models:

> Such an epistemological position on models may be called critical or modified realism and it owes its success, as Mary Hesse says, 'both to fidelity to nature as revealed in experiments, and to the fertile imagination which selects appropriate analogies from familiar experiences and from familiar types of language, and thus exhibits relations between one aspect of experience and another' Both experimentation and imagination are ingredients of this perspective.[25]

If such critical realism can be applied to ethics and can incorporate fidelity to human nature and to our imagination thereby exhibiting relations between one aspect of experience and another, there may yet be room for 'scientific method' in ethics.

The form of critical realism put forward by Soskice and McFague, then, may be able to accommodate the suggestions that ethical theories are necessarily the product of human thought without descending into the nihilism and moral relativism to which these suggestions alone inevitably lead. This then allows that questions such as 'What must the world be like for ethics to be possible?' and 'What must humankind be like for ethics to be possible?' are intelligible; and are susceptible of partial answers even by context-bound human beings. Paul Avis urges the acceptance of a 'qualified realism'[26] but argues that 'the term symbolic realism brings out the vital imaginative and creative factor in our significant knowledge, both of the world and of God ...' better than 'critical realism'.[27] Imagination and self-criticism are both important components of qualified realism. The acceptance of critical realism by Soskice in relation to metaphor and science is not, alone, a sufficient reason for adopting critical realism in ethics but

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[24] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 149.

[25] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 101. She is quoting: Mary Hesse, *Science and the Human Imagination: Aspects of the History and Logic of Physical Science* (London: S.C.M., 1954), 13.

[26] Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 137-51.

[27] Avis, *Creative Imagination*, 152.

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> Such an epistemological position on models may be called critical or modified realism and it owes its success, as Mary Hesse says, 'both to fidelity to nature as revealed in experiments, and to the fertile imagination which selects appropriate analogies from familiar experiences and from familiar types of language, and thus exhibits relations between one aspect of experience and another' Both experimentation and imagination are ingredients of this perspective.[25]

If such critical realism can be applied to ethics and can incorporate fidelity to human nature and to our imagination thereby exhibiting relations between one aspect of experience and another, there may yet be room for 'scientific method' in ethics.

The form of critical realism put forward by Soskice and McFague, then, may be able to accommodate the suggestions that ethical theories are necessarily the product of human thought without descending into the nihilism and moral relativism to which these suggestions alone inevitably lead. This then allows that questions such as 'What must the world be like for ethics to be possible?' and 'What must humankind be like for ethics to be possible?' are intelligible; and are susceptible of partial answers even by context-bound human beings. Paul Avis urges the acceptance of a 'qualified realism'[26] but argues that 'the term symbolic realism brings out the vital imaginative and creative factor in our significant knowledge, both of the world and of God ...' better than 'critical realism'.[27] Imagination and self-criticism are both important components of qualified realism. The acceptance of critical realism by Soskice in relation to metaphor and science is not, alone, a sufficient reason for adopting critical realism in ethics but

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[24] Soskice, *Metaphor*, 149.

[25] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 101. She is quoting: Mary Hesse, *Science and the Human Imagination: Aspects of the History and Logic of Physical Science* (London: S.C.M., 1954), 13.

[26] Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 137-51.

[27] Avis, *Creative Imagination*, 152.

her demonstration that language can depict reality even in the absence of certain knowledge may be helpful in the search for an account of ethical theory. It allows the possibilities, for instance, that we can give real content to virtue theory; that the individual moral experience (conscience) is important but not ultimate; and that the communal dimension of ethics is essential. The concerns here are not about proof but rather about conceptual possibility.

6.1.2 Gadamer and critical realism

This critical realism seems to be close to Gadamer's position concerning truth in *Truth and Method.* Brice Wachterhauser considers at some length Gadamer's approach to realism and truth.[28] He characterises hermeneutical philosophers as falling into two broad camps: those who believe that the hermeneutic circle is vicious and those who do not. In other words, those who, in a postmodernist frame of mind, believe that the finite nature of human knowledge renders useless such normative terms as truth, reason, reality, fact, value and good and that all that remains is thoroughgoing relativism; and those who see hermeneutics as a necessary corrective in philosophy but who are still, in some sense, realists. For Gadamer, the fact that we can never attain certain knowledge does not entail that we can attain no knowledge at all: certainty is only applicable to certain domains such as logic or mathematics. [29] Non-cognitivist theories of ethics deny ethics any claim to 'real knowledge' as this would require the same kind of subject/object dichotomy that pertains in the traditional view of scientific knowledge: without this, moral knowledge is simply devoid of truth value.[30] For Gadamer, all real knowledge involves the abolition of this false dichotomy: we cannot escape the hermeneutic circle. For Gadamer, history and language are the conditions of possibility of knowledge but also its limitations. We can know that our knowledge is so conditioned but can never fully assess the impact of our prejudices. As Wachterhauser points out, this finitude in our knowledge and understanding means that scepticism can never be completely silenced:

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[28] Brice Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth', in Robert J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52-78.

[29] So also: Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59-62.

[30] For a discussion see Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 1-5.

> Neither the knower, as such, nor the conditions of her knowledge can be completely known.[31]

All inquiry presupposes a tradition but we can never completely elucidate the nature or history of that tradition. There is no absolute knowledge that can successfully refute scepticism: scepticism and suspicion must remain permanent features of our understanding. It is just not possible, following Gadamer, to 'carry through any version of foundationalism and thereby defeat the sceptic by the rules of her own game'.[32] In Gadamer's hermeneutics tradition functions by setting the normative context of inquiry: it determines the important questions and also determines what constitutes a good answer. Reflection takes place in a community (through language) and across time (in history). We are formed by traditions but we can also contribute to their development.

Gadamer is opposed to the Cartesian view of freedom that requires us to be able to judge the full nature and extent of any norms that govern our knowledge. This model of rational autonomy is clear in Descartes' insistence on his intellect as the only justification for knowledge and in Kant's categorical imperative as the only justification for moral norms. All contingent factors are irrelevant: 'History is suddenly transcended in reason'.[33] Wachterhauser suggests that Gadamer's view of freedom is freedom *within* a tradition: freedom and tradition co-exist in another unavoidable hermeneutic circle.

> Gadamer's account of 'finitude' insists that there will always be a certain level of contingent opacity and inescapable inarticulacy in our reliance on tradition. Nevertheless, such factors do not preclude freedom, but instead situate it within an ongoing dialogue, which is the driving force of any historical tradition.[34]

Attempts to escape the *limitations* of our knowledge, to attain some universal objective viewpoint, also constitute escapes from the *possibility* of knowledge. Gadamer's antifoundationalism suggests that knowledge need not be grounded in epistemological certainty. Truly universal knowledge would also be truly irrelevant. Our finitude is linguistic as well as historical. Our language itself has a history: it develops through the use of metaphor and imagination: whilst we must acknowledge the 'authority' of a linguistic tradition we also have the freedom to extend that tradition through our imagination and linguistic creativity. Language is both a condition and a limitation of our knowledge.

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[31] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 58.

[32] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 69.

[33] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 62.

[34] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 63.

> We are always already biased in our thinking and our knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world. To grow into this linguistic interpretation means to grow up in the world. To this extent, language is the real mark of our finitude. It is always out beyond us.[35]

Nonetheless, Gadamer is an uncompromising realist. Wachterhauser points out that it is not the case, for Gadamer, that our words create our reality in an idealist sense: rather there is a real world to be known (in an inescapably finite way); it is *the* world in which we grow up.[36]

All our knowledge must be ultimately provisional and we must be constantly vigilant in our thought: the denial of foundationalism and the implicit acceptance of fallibilism mean that we must always be prepared to abandon a belief (or set of beliefs) if a weight of evidence to the contrary arises within the dialogue that constitutes our tradition. This is not relativism as it is usually understood: our judgements, though fallible, are not arbitrary. Our knowledge still describes something real even though it must change and develop. Relativism, on the other hand, is the flip-side of absolutism: both require the same criteria of knowledge. Once absolute certainty is abandoned as the standard for knowledge then the simple fact that all knowledge is relative to historical and linguistic context (i.e. all knowledge is situated and all understanding is hermeneutical) ceases to undermine the value of such knowledge. Indeed, such situatedness becomes an essential condition of knowledge. For Gadamer, our language can genuinely reflect reality. Our language and the world are both intelligible:

> 'Being that can be understood is language.' This is not the vision of a skeptical relativist who sees us as trapped inside language, but it is the vision of a metaphysical realist, who has incorporated Hegel's insight into the historically mediated nature of human knowing with Hegel's (and Plato's) conviction that the world is inherently intelligible.[37]

Our interpretations correspond, more or less, to the way things are in the world and are 'true' to the extent that they correspond. However our judgements about such correspondence, our evaluation of interpretations, occur *within* the 'common intelligible space that penetrates the world, our experience, and our languages'.[38] I suggest that such judgements and such evaluations are fundamentally imaginative endeavours and that the imagination can be reliable as an organ of truth.

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[35] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Man and Language' [1966], in David E. Linge (ed.), *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 59-68, at 64.

[36] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 66.

[37] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 77.

[38] Wachterhauser, 'Getting It Right', 77.

6.2 Goodness, Truth and Beauty: the transcendentals reunited?

Hans Urs von Balthasar addresses the relationship between goodness, truth and beauty and attempts to put aesthetics (back) at the centre of theology:

> We here attempt to develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful (*pulchrum*). The introduction will show how impoverished Christian thinking has been by the growing loss of this perspective which once so strongly informed theology ... the transcendentals are inseparable and ... neglecting one can only have a devastating effect on the others.[39]

I suggest that in the light of Gadamer's hermeneutics and the centrality of imagination to ethical thought we might conclude that Christian ethics has been similarly impoverished by the neglect of the third transcendental and that there is a link between the Enlightenment project to locate all authority in reason and the failure of ethics observed by Alasdair MacIntyre (the result of attempts to provide objective ethical theories which abstracted actions from their contexts and excluded desire from the moral calculus). It seems that theology and ethics may both have been led down blind alleys by Enlightenment insistence on the rational and objective, to the exclusion of subjectivity, emotion, and aesthetics. Perhaps von Balthasar's restoration of the aesthetic perspective in Christian theology can offer some hope of providing a way forward for theological ethics, out of the impasse that MacIntyre describes. Jerrold Levinson notes that in recent Anglo-American philosophy, aesthetics and ethics have been pursued in relative isolation but suggests that there is growing interest in the intersection or overlap of aesthetics and ethics and that this may offer some hope of ending 'this rather artificial isolation'. [40] For example, Marcia Muelder Eaton argues against Kant's rigid separation of ethics and aesthetics.[41] For her, the separation of moral and aesthetic value is a mistake because our experiences do not come 'in separate packets': considerations of one sort can, and do, affect considerations of the other. Aesthetic and moral sensitivity are often *both* called for in decisions/judgements about both art and morality. She suggests that in order to understand morality and thus become a mature moral person, one's action must have both appropriate style and

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[39] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* [1961], 7 vols., vol. 1, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), Foreword. See also John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-20.

[40] Jerrold Levinson, 'Introduction: Aesthetics and Ethics', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-25, at 1.

[41] Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral', *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992), 219-40; Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997), 355-64

content, and this requires aesthetic skills:[42] art can be an important source in the moral formation for an individual or community. She concludes that ethics ultimately rests on aesthetics because acceptance of a *telos* is based on aesthetic judgement.[43] She observes that moral considerations usually look to extrinsic features (consequences, principles etc.) whilst aesthetic considerations tend to consider intrinsic features (form, colour etc.) but neither can or should be exclusive. Intrinsic features such as creativity and autonomy can be sources of value in moral judgement and questions of purpose and context should not be excluded from aesthetic judgements. In this she agrees with Gadamer's criticisms of 'aesthetic experience'.[44] She suggests that our aesthetic responses are the results of aggregate rather than separate perceptions.[45] The assessment of a 'meaningful' or 'virtuous' life demands an understanding of the holistic nature of human experience and no single source of value can be allowed to override others.

> Lives are only admirable if *all* relevant considerations are given due attention, and decisions about particular actions to be performed reflect this.[46]

Colin McGinn suggests that virtue can be characterised as 'beauty of the soul'. Just as beauty is the property that delights our aesthetic faculties so the virtuous person is an occasion of aesthetic pleasure.[47] He notes that our language of moral evaluation is 'thoroughly saturated with aesthetic notions (fine, pure, flawless, lovely, delightful, rotten, bestial, stinking, vile, grotesque etc.).[48] In Johnson's terms, there is considerable metaphoric projection from the domain of the aesthetic to the domain of the moral. McGinn suggests that the moral life is an artistic life because it requires skill and has aesthetic qualities: he urges that artistic techniques (composition, detail, form, construction, inner integrity) should be employed in moral formation.[49] He is convinced that aesthetic notions have wide application:

> the aesthetic permeates almost every experience a human being has, and at many levels. We are aesthetic beings though and through; we apprehend the world through aesthetic eyes ... I have argued that the domain of the aesthetic includes

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[42] Eaton, 'Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?' 361

[43] Eaton, 'Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?' 357

[44] So also: Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 379.

[45] Eaton, 'Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral', 231

[46] Eaton, 'Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral', 237

[47] Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 93.

[48] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 98.

[49] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 118.

> people's inner lives – that characters can be beautiful or ugly. Perhaps this idea will seem all but inevitable once the full extent of the aesthetic is recognized.[50]

He suggests that virtually everything we ever understand we evaluate in aesthetic terms: once we recognise this 'panaestheticism' the connection with ethics is a natural step.

I suggested earlier that beauty might be a feature or property of the *interaction* between subject and object.[51] (This would be in accord with Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology.) Because of the type of beings that humans are, there are certain properties of objects that are more likely to evoke a positive aesthetic response. Paul Tillich suggests that

> [a] work of art is authentic if it expresses the encounter of mind and world in which an otherwise hidden quality of a piece of the universe (and implicitly of the universe itself) is united with an otherwise hidden receptive power of the mind (and implicitly of the person as a whole).[52]

If ethics and aesthetics are indeed closely related, we can now perhaps suggest that goodness, like beauty, is intersubjective: goodness is a feature of the interaction between human beings (or between human beings and the world, human beings and God etc.) and this interaction can be judged in a similar way using aesthetic criteria. The way our nature is constituted means that we will be attracted to certain things as beautiful or good. This may be analogous to the way in which 'metaphorical truth' emerges in the interaction between speaker and hearer that we noted earlier. This may offer the possibility of a version of natural law based not on reason as the defining human characteristic but on imagination, and on the hermeneutic and aesthetic nature of human experience and the connaturality of moral knowledge. Along these lines, Kevin Vanhoozer offers a characterisation of wisdom which seems to agree with the understanding of *phronesis* that we have developed:

> Wisdom – the virtue that orders all other virtues – is intrinsically linked to the imagination, and to beauty, via the theme of fittingness. The wise person perceives and participates fittingly in the ordered beauty of creation. Wisdom thus integrates the true, the good and the beautiful.[53]

Beauty, Goodness and Truth subsist not in subject or object but come to being in the interaction of subject and object in a particular context within a tradition. So, beauty is

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[50] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 121.

[51] Chapter Four, 125.

[52] Quoted in Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 212.

[53] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song: Beauty and the Arts', in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 110-22, at 115.

not a property of an object nor simply a subjective 'feeling', rather it comes into being in the interaction between subjects (with particular characteristics) and objects (certain features of objects may make this kind of interaction more likely for subjects of a particular constitution). So, for example, a human judgement of beauty in relation to colour depends on the human ability to register certain wavelengths of light. Also, Goodness is not simply a property of an action or an agent, again goodness comes into being in the interaction of action and agent in a particular context within a tradition: it is a secondary quality.[54] Truth is not simply 'out there' independently of human beings (naïve realism) nor simply a human construct (idealism) but rather it comes into being in the interaction of human beings with the world, with themselves and with others in particular contexts within a tradition. The motivation for us to be moral now becomes the attraction of the good and the desire to see more beauty in the world. Richard Viladesau observes that:

> The good, in order to be morally effective, must also appear good; that is, its connection with our final end, with our deepest desire, must be perceivable. The good must be seen as joyful and fulfilling.[55]

It is our imagination, not our will, that can motivate us to change.[56] As Vanhoozer comments:

> Human beings are created for fellowship with God, the one in whom the true, the good, and the beautiful are ultimately grounded and find their unity. To discern the fittingness of the new order of things 'in Christ' requires a robust imagination, nurtured on compelling and intelligible forms.[57]

He considers the ethical life as a work of beautiful art: not the self made beauty of Nietzsche's creative genius, but 'the Spirit-made beauty of the faithful disciple'.[58]

6.3 Revelation, Christian truth and imagination

In the first volume of his magisterial two-volume work on theology and imagination David Brown considers the changes in Christian doctrine and self-understanding that are brought about by his reappraisal of tradition as 'the motor that sustains revelation

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[54] See John McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

[55] Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 212.

[56] Interestingly this is also the conclusion of much popular psychology and many self-help books. Note the importance of 'visualisation' and see e.g. Paul McKenna, *Change Your Life in Seven Days* (London: Bantam, 2004).

[57] Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song', 117.

[58] Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song', 120.

both within Scripture and beyond'.[59] Biblical revelation and later tradition are encompassed by a single process: we need to pay as much attention to developments in tradition as to the original revelation. Brown's thought here seems to owe a good deal to Gadamer's hermeneutical insight that tradition is the condition of all understanding and to the concept of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). He also sees imagination as central to his argument: it is 'stories and images that give religious belief its shape and vitality'.[60] In the second volume he considers the implications of his arguments for discipleship: the difference that being 'an involved reader' makes, and the impact of the fact that 'such discipleship is necessarily constituted by membership of a particular community'.[61] He suggests that truth can attach to the non-historical or fictional; that they 'can sometimes embody the greater and more profound truth':

> It is thus the imagination that best preserves the continuing tradition's grasp on divine reality and our subjective appropriation of it in our own discipleship.[62]

Brown concludes his second volume with a consideration of the nature of truth.[63] He notes the continuing suspicion of the imagination and its association with images and appearance rather than reality.[64] He notes that postmodernists, whose rejection of any dominant form of truth might have been expected to make them sympathetic to the imagination, actually rebel against the dominance of images as much as the dominance of narratives. In this, they acknowledge the power of images; though, as Vanhoozer notes, it is ironic that ideology critique ultimately undermines the imagination on which it may well be founded.[65] Brown traces a different, more positive, assessment of the role of the imagination back to Kant. Kant argues that imagination is central to the possibility of understanding our world. Brown sees this as mediating between the rationalist and the empiricist:

> both mental concepts and perceptual data are needed, but they are brought into intelligible relation with one another only through the work of the imagination

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[59] Brown, *Tradition & Imagination*, 1.

[60] Brown, *Tradition & Imagination*, 2.

[61] Brown, *Tradition & Imagination*, 2.

[62] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 3.

[63] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 343-406.

[64] See also Avis, *Creative Imagination*, 18f; Trevor Hart, 'Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth', in Begbie (ed.), *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 1-26, at 2.

[65] Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song', 113.

> ... and it is the imagination that unifies such activity into the sense of a united consciousness.[66]

Johnson also examines Kant's view of imagination[67] and summarises:

> Imagination generates much of the connecting structure by which we have coherent, significant experience, cognition and language.[68]

Imagination, rather than being a mere flight of fancy, becomes the basis for all our understanding of the world. Brown traces a complex picture in relation to the understanding of imagination in Kant and Plato concluding that 'there can therefore be no insuperable objection to thinking of the imagination as itself one form of access to the truth'.[69] Imagination has the advantage of being able to 'see' new combinations and to 'think laterally'. Brown suggests that once imagination is seen as central to the process of revelation 'it becomes possible to think of growth in knowledge through a deepening understanding within tradition of the possible range of reference of images and stories'.[70] This is precisely the process we have identified as metaphoric projection and reordering of conceptual fields; and the narrative ordering of experience.

Brown argues that the narrative of Jesus rarely works alone and works best when supplemented by other stories which test its appropriate application to the context of the believer: narrative and imagination sustain the life of the tradition. He also argues that truth can arise from conflict, indeed he argues that conflict is integral to the proper development of a community's self-understanding: 'Heresy is ... indispensable to the growth of orthodoxy'.[71] He cautions that while the ultimate aim should be a common mind, all religious truth is provisional and that we should never see any issue as definitively resolved. He notes that the provisional nature of religious truth is mirrored in the nature of scientific and historical truth. Brown suggests that the pattern of truth arising from conflict should come as no surprise 'since disagreement is one of the most powerful pressures towards more careful formulation of one's own ideas'.[72] We need to be constantly open to other traditions and prepared to reformulate our own beliefs,

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[66] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 350. Brown cites Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, A138, B177, A123-124

[67] Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind : The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 147-66.

[68] Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 165.

[69] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 352.

[70] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 353.

[71] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 3.

[72] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 317.

indeed such encounters may force upon us dramatic paradigm shifts.[73] We must take proper account of our tradition and hear the voices from the past, but we must also be open to 'the further transformations in Christian understanding that are undoubtedly yet to come'.[74]

McGinn notes that there are two traditional paradigms of moral texts exemplified in the Bible. First: the list of moral directives as typified by the Ten Commandments. Second: the parable. He suggests that 'philosophers have been too influenced by the commandment paradigm and not enough by the parable paradigm.'[75] The parable is a narrative with characters to whom we can relate, with believable motivations and personalities,

> the parable is a small work of art that invites aesthetic as well as moral attention. It exploits the power of the story form in order to teach a moral lesson. Accordingly, it needs to be *interpreted* ...[76]

Metaphor is widely employed, indeed parables can be characterised as extended metaphors,[77] and the narrative often involves the hearers by ending with a question. Brown notes that

> existential truths cannot of themselves adequately engage the heart and the imagination. The point has been well taken by ... narrative theology.[78]

The story form includes not just the parable but also the play, the short story, the novel, the film and the television soap. Ethical themes are dramatically enacted and characters are developed: 'art is used to serve morality in many different ways.'[79] Brown agrees that truth can be conveyed imaginatively through fictional narrative, poetry, and the visual arts.[80]

> A novel can instil an entirely new ethical perspective in the reader. It is as if we ourselves live through the events of the story and are thereby influenced to come to a new moral vision. (The mysteriousness of this process is part of its power.)[81]

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[73] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 330.

[74] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 342.

[75] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 172.

[76] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 172, emphasis original. See also John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

[77] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 15.

[78] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 290.

[79] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 173.

[80] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 344.

[81] McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 177.

Hauerwas structures the moral life around the categories of character, vision and narrative. Emanuel Katongole summarises Hauerwas' central contention

> that given the very nature of a contingent and historical existence, all modes of human existence and activity are historical and thereby marked with an irredeemable particularity.[82]

In fact we are so thoroughly historical that no human project, and especially not the quest for moral truth, stands outside the realm of narrative: everything is contingent. Hauerwas argues that such a narrative conception of moral reason is, effectively, Aristotelian *phronesis*.[83] Reason is related to *praxis* and the whole endeavour has the nature of a craft or an art.[84] Correct descriptions of actions and correct framing of situations involve narrative contexts; virtue and character can only be assessed relative to narrative context; and moral deliberation involves the imaginative exploration, guided by our imaginative ideals, of different ways in which the web of narratives that constitutes a moral 'situation' might be continued.

6.4 Christian imagination: creativity and incarnation

The Christian doctrine of God as creator has its foundation in the book of Genesis.[85] The first account of creation in Genesis states that human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Gen.1:27). This was interpreted by the Fathers and by Augustine in particular as being the human rational faculty mirroring the wisdom of God. We have been concerned in this study to reappraise our traditional notion of reason and to replace it with a notion of reason as fundamentally imaginative. Coleridge describes the imagination as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.[86] The *imago Dei* then might perhaps not be reason in its traditional sense but, rather, imagination: if we are fundamentally imaginative beings it is because God is so too. Garrett Green suggests that the traditional interpretation of the *imago Dei* can indeed be reformulated as relating to human imagination:

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[82] Emanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 136-37.

[83] Stanley Hauerwas, Richard Bondi and David Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 27 and 35.

[84] Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason*, 124-31.

[85] There is however, some debate about the origin of the doctrine of creation presented in Genesis.

[86] Quoted in Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 122.

> The point of contact for divine revelation is, materially, the paradigmatic image of God embodied in Jesus Christ; formally, it is the human imagination ...[87]

The *imago Dei* is seen most fully in, the fully human, Jesus Christ and in his imaginative and creative engagement with the cultural, historical and linguistic situatedness of the incarnation. It is our creative imagination that allows us 'to perceive and commend what is good and true in Christ'.[88] Imagination is a communal enterprise; the *imago Dei* does not reside in individuals but in human beings collectively. God has created us as social beings, designed for relationship with him and with one another. It is our moral imagination that allows us to negotiate these networks of relationships, to evaluate our experience and contribute to the developing creation. As George Eliot put it:

> powerful imagination is not false outward vision, but intense inward representation, and a *creative* energy constantly fed by susceptibility to the veriest minutiae of experience, which it reproduces and constructs in fresh and full wholes.[89]

If we are to avoid complacency, we must be prepared constantly to reorder our basic symbols and metaphors. All of this is achieved through the creative, and communal, use of language and imagination:

> the work of imagination is social work, and for Christians that means ecclesial work. The formation, discovery, and interpretation of normative patterns requires a communal context, even when it appears to be the fruit of one individual's insight. As Wittgenstein reminded us that the very idea of a private language is incoherent, so the notion of individual imagination is unthinkable. We are formed by the ongoing interaction of character and circumstance ... in the matrix of our mutual relations ... with others.[90]

Brian Horne suggests that if creativity is part of the very nature of God then it cannot be optional for creatures made in God's image: 'We may not choose not to create if we are to be human.'[91] However, Hart draws attention to an apparent theological cost of ascribing a creative role to human imagination. He notes Johnson's strong claim for imagination:

> If imagination were not always at work we could never have any coherent and unified experience or understanding.[92]

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87 Green, *Imagining God*, 104.

88 Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song', 111.

89 George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* [1879] (London: Pickering, 1994), Ch 13.

90 Green, *Imagining God*, x.

91 Brian L. Horne, 'Art: A Trinitarian Imperative', in Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 80-91, at 91.

92 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 162.

Hart agrees that imagination *creates* the world we inhabit. The problem arises when we attempt to reconcile this insight with our understanding of God's creation: that God created a good world out of chaos. What creative role remains for human imagination when God has already declared his creation to be good? Hart outlines one possible direction of an answer to this objection:

> God created 'the world' with a view to its being a suitable habitation for his human creatures (among others), and in due course for his own indwelling of it as Jesus Christ. God also created us with capacities, organs of response (physical, imaginative, spiritual, moral, aesthetic) such that we would perceive this world in certain ways. He created us not to be purely passive in this relationship, but actually to 'make sense' of the world, to respond to it in appropriate and responsible ways through intellection, interpretation, artistry and the like.[93]

In other words, God only declares creation to be good because it already contains the potential for creative human imagination to continue the creation begun and sustained by God.[94] Part of the problem seems to be that, in discussing the relationship between God as creator and humankind as fundamentally imaginative beings, we have redefined our notion of one pole (the human) of the relationship, but we retain (unconsciously perhaps) at the other a static model of God as creator: God as a 'master builder' whose project is complete. If, as the *imago Dei* might suggest, the human creative imagination reflects the divine creative imagination then perhaps alternative models are more appropriate. An alternative Christian understanding of God as creator speaks of creation as an artistic expression, beautiful in itself and expressive of God's character. John McIntyre sees the glories of creation as manifestations of God's creative imagination.[95] Our creation of the world by our creative imagination is a natural response to God's imaginative artistic project in creation, and indeed an integral part of that project. Creation continues or, at least, it *appears* to historically situated creatures to 'continue'. Of course, from God's eternal vantage point it may be complete, containing 'already' all the imaginative responses we have ever made or ever will make.

Johnson's account of human beings as fundamentally imaginative creatures is compelling and there seems to be no reason to believe that creative imagination could not occupy a central role in relation to theology and morality. As well as tracing the full implications of such an emphasis on imagination there is much work remaining to be

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[93] Hart, 'Imagination', 8 See also Hart, 'Through the Arts'.

[94] See also Hart, 'Through the Arts', 16-18.

[95] John McIntyre, *Faith, Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1987), 51.

done in characterising the nature of imagination and its operation. It does not seem to be simply a faculty of the human mind; or at least it seems to involve the use of all the other faculties: we can see and hear in the imagination (even taste and smell in the imagination), feel in the imagination, and make judgements about imaginary states of affairs. We have already had cause to question the notion of faculty psychology and its separation of reason from the rest of the human mind: the same arguments would hold true in relation to imagination. Imagination is perhaps best thought of as a disposition, or mode of operation, of the mind which allows the creative ordering of experience and the exploration of possible futures. In relation to moral issues this mode of operation may perhaps constitute 'conscience'.[96]

Gadamer describes the process of coming to an understanding as a fusion of horizons (*Horizonverschmelzung*) which is a work of language. This bridging of distance between horizons in language may be another role of imagination; indeed we have seen that it performs a similar function in relation to empathy. Brown outlines the historical and metaphysical distance between the modern believer and Christ: the particularity of the incarnation can render the universal significance of Christ difficult to appreciate. He argues that it is not a simple retelling of the story of Christ that is required; rather, the story must be retold to describe what a 'Christ-like life might be like in flawed situations.'[97] He concludes that this retelling is an imaginative enterprise that may be best addressed by novelists[98] and which he calls 'bridging distance'. [99]

> Visual and literary imagination [is] an indispensable constituent of the living and developing dynamic of religious belief.[100]

Kant defined imagination as 'the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present'.[101] To say that something is not present is effectively to say that there is a distance to be bridged. Green categorises the main types of distance as temporal and spatial.[102] Temporal distance includes our relation to past reality: personal memory and the recollection of communal history both involve the use of the imagination. There is

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[96] See discussion of conscience, and its relation to imagination, Chapter Five, 183-91.

[97] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 97.

[98] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 99-100.

[99] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 79.

[100] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 3.

[101] *Quoted* in Green, *Imagining God*, 62.

[102] Green, *Imagining God*, 62-66.

also a creative or anticipatory role for imagination in relation to future reality. The second type of distance is spatial: this relates to geographical separation (imagining real objects in a different location) but also to cases where the scale of objects (e.g. subatomic particles or the whole cosmos) means that they cannot be directly observed because of our physiological limitations. The final type of distance Green considers is 'logical distance': this relates to objects which are believed to be real but cannot be subject to direct observation. In all these cases it is the work of imagination to overcome distance. Green's observation of the spatial distance involved in relation to microcosmic and macrocosmic realities is related to Johnson's suggestion that we tend to make sense of unknown domains by transferring images from a better understood domain: the experience of embodiment and of 'meso-cosmic' (as opposed to micro-cosmic or macro-cosmic) reality.[103] Objects of imagination may be real or illusory: we can imagine what really happened (or at least what may have happened) in the past (the greater the temporal distance the more imagination is required); we can imagine what may happen in the future; we can imagine real people or objects in other places; we can construct illusory objects or states of affairs which may be related to, or completely separate from experienced reality (we can imagine political change, or a world of sheer fantasy). In all of these instances we involve ourselves: we imagine ourselves looking, feeling, hearing, experiencing the objects in question. Moral imagination focuses this ability on to the issues that arise from our relationships with God and with other people. Our memory, empathy and ability to generate new possibilities may all be involved in ethical reflection. In relation to faith, Brown notes the strength of tradition but suggests that traditional views may also become a 'prison' unless some of the faithful possess 'an open imagination that insists on the exploration of alternative possibilities'.[104] The cumulative insights of a community will be greater than those of any individual but individuals with imagination are necessary if the whole community is to move in fresh directions. The central role of creative imagination implies not only that artistic enterprises have a role in moral formation but also that the processes of artistic creativity may serve as a model for ethical reflection: morality and the arts are both historically and culturally situated communal enterprises.

[103] Green, *Imagining God*, 66. Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, xix.

[104] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 292.

Traditionally the Christian justification of artistic creativity has been the incarnation,[105] as in the iconoclastic controversy of the seventh and eighth centuries when the veneration of icons was justified on the grounds that the incarnation itself constituted an act of creative representation. In the incarnation 'God chose an unexpected and stunningly imaginative way of making his love and forgiveness unmistakably real'.[106] The incarnation is a dynamic and creative act: the Word, the divine *logos*, is *spoken* to humankind. In the incarnation the Son embraces the radical particularity of a human life and God provides both an 'image' and a narrative to communicate his love and forgiveness: the Word was not just 'made flesh' but also made icon and story. John de Gruchy suggests that social change requires a revolution of the imagination:

> artistic creativity is not only God-given but one of the main ways whereby the power of God is unleashed, awakening both a thirst for justice and a hunger for beauty.[107]

In Jesus, God embraced human creativity: Jesus himself used imaginative ways of communicating as he negotiated the tension between tradition and innovation guided by the Holy Spirit. He needed imaginatively to overcome historical and interpersonal distance just as much as we do when we try to re-appropriate his story for our situation through imaginative reconstruction. In incarnation, God chose to become historically, culturally and linguistically situated: he embraced the limitations and possibilities of a particular culture at a particular point in history. Jesus lived his life in a specific context and in relation to a particular community. As Oliver O'Donovan puts it:

> the foundation of Christian ethics [is] in the incarnation. Since the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, transcendent divine authority has presented itself as worldly moral authority ... The meaning of Jesus' life and teaching must be a worldly meaning, a reality of human existence which can command our lives in the world and reorder them in the restored creation.[108]

The incarnation suggests that God's way is not the way of abstraction (nor indeed the way of classical theism) but rather the way of identification with humankind. That identification continues in the work of the Holy Spirit. Creating narrative order and co-authoring our own particular narrative is an exercise in composition that requires imagination and inspiration. We must now turn to consider *how* creativity is to be

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[105] See e.g. Hart, 'Through the Arts', 15-25.

[106] Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 122.

[107] John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 241.

[108] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 143. See also de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 244.

expressed within Christian ethics (section 6.5), and to consider the normative role of community and context (section 6.6).

6.5 Improvisation as a model for Christian ethics

Samuel Wells identifies three strands in contemporary Christian ethics: the universal, the subversive, and the ecclesial.[109] The universal strand, he suggests, is concerned to find the common ground with all people of good will, is usually content with deontological and consequentialist approaches, and seeks to make Christianity 'reasonable'. The subversive strand challenges existing power relationships and the church's involvement in them, either by seeking to establish a society where all voices are heard or by creating a church which adopts the values of the marginalised. It is the ecclesial strand (where Wells locates his own work) that seeks to articulate a distinctively Christian ethic. Ecclesial ethics seeks dialogue with others but also seeks to respect the particularity of the Christian tradition. Wells suggests that true liberation does not lie in overcoming (subversive strand) or ignoring (universal strand) the tradition but in being faithful to its particularity. The emphasis on tradition in Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests this may be the best approach for a hermeneutical ethics although it must be accompanied by openness to other traditions and the possibility of ideology critique and liberation. For Wells, the focus of God's involvement with the world, and the focus for ethical deliberation is the sacred community of the church. The church has its own narrative identity centred on practices through which it is formed, extended and restored. Imaginative engagement with narratives and practices forms disciples and this includes their moral formation.[110]

We have noted the communal nature of imagination and its inherent linguisticality. The implication of the communal context of moral deliberation is that it is in fact constituted by the overlap and interaction of many narratives. The context is not that of a single story unfolding but of many stories interacting. Wells suggests that the notion of drama is a more appropriate model than simple narrative: 'Christians find their character by becoming a character in God's story'.[111] Ethics becomes a matter of performance. [112]

[109] Wells, *Improvisation*, 33.

[110] Wells, *Improvisation*, 41.

[111] Wells, *Improvisation*, 57.

Nicholas Lash introduced the notion of performance in relation to the interpretation of Scripture:

> Christian practice, as interpretative action, consists in *the performance* of texts which are construed as 'rendering,' bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, 'rendered' the truth of God in human history.[113]

In ethics we cannot simply *imitate* the story of Jesus: new contexts require us to interpret the narrative in order to relate it to our own situation. We need to engage our imagination and as we do that together, as a church community, we perform a drama. The concept of 'performance', whilst allowing for a good deal of interpretation is still, for Wells, too closely controlled by the original 'script'. He suggests that even the concept of drama is too static:

> there is a dimension of Christian life that requires more than repetition, more even than interpretation - but not so much as origination, or creation de novo. That dimension, the key to abiding faithfulness, is improvisation.[114]

He suggests that the model of dramatic improvisation is appropriate for Christian ethics. He characterises theatrical improvisation as 'a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear'.[115] Christian ethics is a faithful improvisation on the Christian tradition so that Christians can face novel situations without fear. Theatrical improvisation requires thorough training: actors form habits and practices, they learn to act instinctively and to respond to the changing situation. This is a good description of the goal of moral formation. The Duke of Wellington's assertion that 'The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton' emphasizes the importance of character in times of crisis; Wells's ethics is a form of virtue ethics: 'the heart of ethics lies in the formation of character ... In every moral "situation" the real decisions are ones that have been taken some time before.'[116]

Jeremy Begbie argues that theology has much to learn from the models and methods of music, again especially improvisation.[117] Kathleen Higgins suggests that ethics has

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[112] Wells, *Improvisation*, 59.

[113] Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: S.C.M., 1986), 42.

[114] Wells, *Improvisation*, 65.

[115] Wells, *Improvisation*, 11.

[116] Wells, *Improvisation*, 74.

[117] Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

much to learn as well.[118] The temporality of narrative; cultural situatedness; and the importance of interrelationships; are mirrored in musical tradition. Here the physicality of the experience is obvious: the physical nature of instruments and the physiological constitution of human beings combine to allow the experience we call music. Music is a dynamic temporal process involving the possible combination of different notes at any one time and the creation and resolution of tension on multiple levels. Music is a communal practice that involves, at its most basic, two processes: music-making and music-hearing.[119] In music

> we are dealing with practices, interactions with sounds, concrete encounters with the physical world, drawing on many facets of our human make-up ... music is 'performative' through and through.[120]

Performance and appreciation in music are paralleled by creativity and evaluation in ethics: we create our own moral life and we evaluate the moral lives of ourselves and others. The traditional approach of ethics is to seek the resolution of tension although, as we have seen, the hermeneutical nature of understanding and the inevitability of the hermeneutic circle imply that we cannot always dissipate the tension (in fact we can rarely do so): what we need to do is to see the tension as constructive and learn to live with it. In music it is tension that contributes a sense of flow to a piece although the situation is dynamic and complex. Tensions on one level can contribute to resolutions on other levels. Well-handled maintenance of tension may similarly be ethically desirable: 'a good life involves creative appropriation, even cultivation, of tension ...'[121] The traditional focus on ethical *choices* can obscure the fact that ethical decisions are almost always part of a similarly dynamic and complex process: each decision is part of a narrative (several, in fact) and having made a decision does not absolve us from the continued effort of monitoring the effects of our actions and of making further choices. The situation and the agent are constituted by, and help to constitute, a complex web of relationship. We need to recognise 'the fragmented texture of experience in which the majority of our ethical choices take place.'[122] Using static models to handle complex and dynamic ethical 'situations' is inappropriate leading to undue pessimism (with no apparent resolution, the situation is hopeless) or undue optimism (this static model can provide all the answers). The model of music can help to overcome such limitations:

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[118] For an exploration of music in relation to ethics see Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*.

[119] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 9.

[120] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 272.

[121] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 167.

[122] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 193.

> It gives us practice in an alternative method, engaging us in thought that is temporally extended and tolerant of the currents of tension. And music presents tensions, not as obstructions, but as themselves vehicles to the achievement of resolution.[123]

Music calls for divided attention: it calls for the grasp of numerous different elements in continually changing relationships. The fragmented texture of moral experience noted by Higgins implies that here too our attention will be divided. Higgins suggests four kinds of thinking that are involved in the appreciation of music. First: the 'imaginative grasp of similarities and nuances of difference'. Second: 'appreciation of the conditions of balance' in an unstable context. Third: an awareness of the focus produced at any given time 'by the mental assertion of a foreground/background framework of interpretation'. Fourth: continuous reappraisal of one's 'structural understanding' to date. In ethics, similar approaches allow us to make sense of our moral lives situated within multiple narratives.[124]

The tensions between the limitations imposed by tradition and language, and the possibilities they offer (the tensions between constraint and freedom), are exemplified in both dramatic and musical improvisation. There is a good deal of freedom in musical improvisation but also a great deal is 'given': the physical constraints of the nature of performers and instruments; a tradition of previous work; expectations and so on. Improvisation is not without its 'rules': without constraints there could be no intelligible outcome, only chaos.

> What is typical of much improvisation, and arguably a key to the pleasure it affords, is, first a strong *contrast* between the contingent and the non-negotiable 'given' constraints ... second, an *interplay* between them; and, third, a *mutual enhancement* as they interact – they not only engage with, but also highlight and magnify, each other.[125]

Improvisation (dramatic or musical) is not about perfection, about the precise rendering of a score or script; rather there is a relaxed freedom ('close enough for jazz') and also the possibility that 'mistakes' can be taken up, or 'reincorporated', in the whole process.[126] Such mistakes can be illuminating and productive: Sharon Welch is prepared to wager that

> the innovation, creativity, power, precision, beauty, and responsiveness that heals and affects people's lives, our lives in positive ways, may emerge as

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[123] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 167.

[124] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 196-97.

[125] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 185, emphasis original.

[126] Wells, *Improvisation*, 143.

> readily from our acknowledgement and check to each others' constitutive weaknesses as from building on each others' strengths. There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that one jazz musician, asked where he came up with the ideas for such original improvizations said that it came from having to do something with the other musicians' mistakes.[127]

Many of the rules and constraints which govern responsible improvisation grow out of the communal practice of music or drama: they are *a priori* givens for a particular performance but develop connaturally through the experience of performance and accommodate the *a posteriori* reflections of a community on previous performances. Norm and context (and agents) interact and co-determine one another: tradition evolves. Our response to these tensions should not be to try and overcome them (in any case Gadamer's hermeneutics suggest that we cannot) but to operate within them. The constraints exert a 'normative' influence on the performers. Begbie characterises the work of composers such as Boulez and Cage as attempts to overcome the constraints of tradition, physicality and temporality which they see as problematic. In attempting to escape from tradition they abandon 'corporate musical memory' and the conventions, strategies and devices of previous composers. Their approach is one of abstraction; the result is music that has been described as chaotic or sterile or indeed deemed not to be music at all. It may be that their compositions will be incorporated into a new tradition of music, but the dangers of attempted abstraction seem to mirror those in ethics. True freedom, as opposed to chaos, is dependent upon constraint:

> Theologically speaking, to be free is not to enjoy some supposedly unbounded contingency, it is to be at home in the world, at peace with each other and with God.[128]
>
> The ethical ideal is to move freely and gracefully in harmony with the world.[129]

Our human nature and temporality already imply constraints; we cannot choose to be other than we are, and therein lies the beginning of our situatedness, and the impossibility of overcoming it.

> the order of sound is intrinsic to the being and meaning of music and [is grounded] in physical features of the non-human world as well as in universal characteristics of our own constitution.[130]

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[127] Sharon Welch, 'Communitarian Ethics after Hauerwas', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 10, no. 1 (1997), 82-95, at 93.

[128] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 198-99.

[129] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 170.

[130] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 233.

Perhaps goodness is similarly intrinsic to the being and meaning of ethics and is similarly grounded in physicality (temporality) and in our constitution: goodness always implies goodness 'for someone' in a particular context. All of this is modelled by improvisation. Improvisation does justice to the notions of process, particularity and contingency which are so basic to a theology of tradition. The processes of improvisation (gathering, passing on, improvising, and re-improvising) remind us of the development of tradition. Attempts to escape from tradition are futile and potentially damaging. Appropriation of a tradition entails the creative production of a novel and fruitful future. The constraints of tradition are not a threat to freedom; rather they are a condition of its possibility.[131] Improvisation can help us to understand the dynamics of this process, and is relevant to ethical theory as well as to Christian doctrine more generally.

6.6 The art of control: community and inspiration

The central focus, and perhaps the main attraction, of the traditional rationalist approaches to ethics is the possibility that practical reason can guide our will and control our passions, thus promising moral order and control. Ethics, like science, is to be univocal: dilemmas have one 'right answer'; universality removes cultural variables; and the exclusion of agent-relative features such as emotion avoids the spectre of subjectivity. The process of moral deliberation becomes ordered, rational and predictable, even pedantic. Arthur Schopenhauer characterises such 'moral pedantry' as a 'form of folly' that

> arises from a man's having little confidence in his own understanding, and therefore not liking to leave things to its discretion, to recognise what is right directly in the particular case. Accordingly, he puts his understanding entirely under the guardianship of his reason, and makes use thereof on all occasions; in other words, he wants always to start from general concepts, rules and maxims, and to stick strictly to these in life, in art and even in ethical good conduct.[132]

Higgins suggests that our experience with music should alert us to the danger here: too much analysis can impoverish our listening experience; we should attend to the 'whole musical matrix' and not just disconnected musical elements. We need to appreciate the flow and beauty of the music and not simply identify its component parts. Higgins

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[131] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 216-21.

[132] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 60-61.

suggests that in ethics as much as in music we should recognise the value of intuition and emotion.[133]

Compared to the traditional approaches, ethics that involves character and imagination and which seeks to learn from our experiences of art and music can appear to some to be 'woolly' and arbitrary. Creative imagination and responsible improvisation might be seen to represent a certain 'loss of control'; as effectively no more than relativism or emotivism. As we have seen, the hermeneutical approach to ethics, and the process of improvisation, arise within a tradition and are subject to numerous constraints. The concerns about relativism arise as part of the postmodernist critique of authority when claims to objectivity and absolute truth are undermined. However Gadamer's hermeneutics stand, to a large extent, outside this debate: reason and scientific method were never granted the status of providing the sole access to truth. Gadamer's critical realism and his emphasis on the provisional nature of all knowledge do not even allow the distinction between 'absolute' and 'relative' to be drawn. The constraints of tradition, culture and language, together with the *sensus communis*, militate against a charge of relativism. However, as with dramatic and musical improvisation there is still a good deal of freedom within the constraints and the results of improvisation are open to aesthetic evaluation: some will be judged 'good' others 'bad'; some will be celebrated and passed on, others will be ignored and passed by. If ethics is to become part of the hermeneutical project then we will need to address these questions of evaluation and the charge of loss of control. How are we to evaluate the results of hermeneutical approaches to ethics? How are we to adjudicate differences of opinion?

We have already suggested that it may be possible to make a case for evaluating judgements of the good in a similar way to evaluating judgements of the beautiful. The achievements of ethics which we will need to evaluate are not simply decisions; rather they are decisions made by agents (with a history and motivation) in particular situations. Neither the decision alone, nor the consequences alone, will enable us to judge the balance and composition of the whole. Judgements will be complex and will necessarily be partial and provisional. Higgins reminds us of the 'commonplace that music is never the same twice': no two performances of a particular work are ever identical in every respect. Sometimes the differences are aesthetically crucial;

[133] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 199.

sometimes trivial and barely detectable. Two performers working from the same score (or the same performer on different occasions) can produce radically different 'interpretations' of a piece.

> Each musical experience is unique. In this respect it parallels our ethical situation. The universal character of most traditional moral ideals ignores the importance and potential value of the uniqueness of the particular situation. Realism in ethics dictates that we take this character into account. The complications and confusions of 'learning from experience' arise in large part from our recognition in practice that the present situation is unique, no mere repetition of a previous or recurrent situation.[134]

As well as providing normative control, the communal nature of traditions allows for the possibility of critique: new communities reconfigure old assumptions. Alternative sets of narratives and practices from different traditions are brought to bear on concepts and assumptions. Human beings are almost always members of multiple traditions which will require reconciliation. All traditions will be committed to a diversity of goods. Also, it is possible for a tradition to 'retrace its steps' to examine the origin and development of its understanding and commitments: it can examine the effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of its canonical texts (or text-analogues). It is in negotiating this plurality of goods and traditions, and in constant vigilance, that the possibility of effective critique lies. Brown urges openness to 'plural voices' (especially, in relation to Scripture, the Jewish voice) and awareness of effective history as a corrective against too simplistic a view of tradition:

> Neither religion [Judaism or Christianity] will do adequate justice to the history of its developing tradition, so long as its own trajectories are seen as simple and obvious, and the creativity of other alternatives not fully acknowledged.[135]

This is in accord with Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue and on openness to others as the defence against ideology in hermeneutics. Alasdair MacIntyre recognises that 'moral philosophies ... always ... articulate the morality of some particular social and cultural standpoint',[136] but argues that this does not entail an inability to criticise those traditions. In *After Virtue* and in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[137] he makes a sustained case for the possibility of progress in moral theory. Johnson makes 'the somewhat weaker claim that we can learn from our collective experience'.[138] Learning

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[134] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 200.

[135] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 302.

[136] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985), 268.

[137] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

[138] *MI*, 64.

from experience (and openness to dialogue with others) requires us to put our prejudices at risk, to relinquish the 'control' of rational certainty.[139]

If all our understanding is perspectival and inherently provisional then the search for objective criteria by which to evaluate ethical decisions and moral lives is futile. However, this does not mean that there is no possibility at all for judging between different actions and interpretations; rather they must be judged according to criteria that are internal to the tradition (or by comparison with other traditions); criteria that are aesthetic rather than scientific, and are inherently communal. Brown suggests criteria for evaluating new formulations of Scriptural truth, some of which may be helpful here.[140] First, they should take account of the effective history of the 'text' and address key historical questions. Second, they should be compatible with empirical facts and scientific discoveries. Third, they should be coherent and intelligible. Fourth, they should demonstrate continuity with the tradition as it has developed so far. Fifth, they should recognise that the person and teachings of Christ lie at the heart of the Christian faith. Sixth, they should engage the imagination. Seventh, they should make use of effective analogies. Eighth, they should be acceptable to the Church. McFague adduces other criteria in relation to the evaluation of theological models:

> One reason the great theologians are great – in addition to their faithfulness to the root-metaphor of the classic text of Christianity is that they offer total, well-integrated, *aesthetically satisfying* systems derived from expanding the implications of that root-metaphor.[141]

She identifies criteria of consistency and comprehensiveness, as well as the ability to cope with anomalies, to fit with empirical data and to fit with our experience of God. Also she urges that they should be intrinsically open to other perspectives.[142] Hauerwas suggests four criteria for 'true stories'. First: they should have power to release us from destructive alternatives. Second: they should offer ways of seeing through current distortions. Third: they should leave room to keep us from having to resort to violence. Fourth: they should have a sense for the tragic. MacIntyre suggests that ethical theories should be able to confront successive challenges.

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[139] See Chapter Five, 193.

[140] Brown, Discipleship and Imagination, 389-405.

[141] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 139, emphasis mine.

[142] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 139-43.

Similar criteria to these may help us to evaluate ethical decisions and moral lives but it seems unlikely that we will be able to elucidate adequate criteria for particular judgements without reference to context and agent. Rather, these criteria may function more like a list of 'artistic techniques': approaches which, experience has determined, are often employed by artists whose works are frequently deemed 'good' or 'beautiful', even though the techniques alone do not justify such a judgement and the direct contravention of one or more techniques might not preclude such a judgement. Ultimately it may be impossible to completely characterise the criteria upon which moral evaluations are based; rather they will depend upon taste, an overall 'aesthetic' assessment of composition, balance and so on; or they will depend upon a similar sort of response to that engendered by particularly effective (beautiful or 'fitting') pieces of art. As art-critic the moral theologian is our guide: the control of Christian ethics is no longer purely rational but becomes a communal responsibility within the life of a worshipping community that is guided by the Holy Spirit. It may be that the doctrines of creation and incarnation, and the parables of The Good Samaritan and The Last Judgement, will turn out to be more effective 'criteria'.

At the end of Chapter Four[143] we noted that Christian ethics based on Gadamer's hermeneutics could have in common with other forms of ethics an appreciation of ethical understanding as partial and revisable, an emphasis on learning from others, especially those outside one's own tradition, and a creative element. The distinctiveness of such a Christian ethics would be the place of inspiration and the work of the Holy Spirit within a Christian tradition and context. It seems that what is required is a form of 'inspired improvisation' as the Holy Spirit prompts and guides the Church in its creative re-appropriation of tradition and of the foundation narratives of Christ's life and ministry. Such improvisation is to be judged by 'aesthetic' criteria and controlled by the *sensus communis*. The moral life is not simply about an individual imitating the life of Christ but about a faithful community exploring how the moral authority of that life can be expressed within their particular culture and language: ethics is not a monologue but a collection of dialogues; it is not about reproduction but about performance and improvisation. The ultimate authority for Christian ethics is to be found in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures have authority because 'they render Christ, the image of God, fully and

[143] Chapter Four, 157-158.

coherently to the imagination':[144] the Bible represents a normative paradigm for Christian moral imagination. The Christian faith, including Christian ethics, is characterised by the exercise of a faithful imagination attempting to shape our lives, individually and communally, according to the pattern of Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies life and opens up the possibility of a future in the eternal Kingdom. The Holy Spirit enables us imaginatively to grasp and respond to the image of God the Father in Jesus Christ.

David Cunningham notes that the modern understanding of human persons as *individuals* makes it 'extraordinarily difficult to imagine how anything could be exhaustively described by the category of relation'. However, he argues that this is precisely the case with God: the Trinity is not a collection of three independent beings who just happen to relate to one another; rather God is 'relation without remainder'.[145] Begbie and Cunningham[146] both suggest that the polyphony of music can offer a helpful model. Cunningham characterises the Christian understanding of God as polyphonic:

> Attention to any one of the Three does not imply a diminished role for the others; all three have their distinctive melodies, and all are 'played' and 'heard' simultaneously without damage to God's unity.[147]

Begbie suggests that the appropriate musical model might be the fugue. He also suggests that the true goal of salvation is not the 'rescue of solitary individuals'; rather, it is the creation of 'a community sustained by the Spirit'.[148] Cunningham uses the term 'participation' to signify this interrelationship and suggests that this virtue of participation can be characteristic of our lives too: we can begin imaginatively to explore what it means to dwell in, and be indwelt by, both the life of God and the lives of others. This emphasis on participation runs counter to any emphasis on the individual, and is entirely consonant with the model of ethics as hermeneutics that we have been exploring: Tradition, culture and language, and so ethics, are all essentially communal enterprises. Cunningham sees the individualism of the Enlightenment, like its rationalism, as an illegitimate abstraction. He also notes the challenge of modern individualism to Christian faith:

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[144] Green, *Imagining God*, 125.

[145] David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 165. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 115.

[146] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, passim; Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 127-64.

[147] Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 129.

[148] Jeremy Begbie, 'Through Music: Sound Mix', in Begbie (ed.), *Beholding the Glory*, 138-54, at 150.

> calling into question the ideal of mutual participation both within the believing community and within God. Christians have understood themselves as called into communion with each other because they bear the image of the triune God; consequently, to raise doubts about the indispensability of the common life is to raise doubts about the Trinitarian conception of God.[149]

In *Spirit and* Beauty Patrick Sherry develops three claims:

> that the Spirit of God communicates God's beauty to the world, both through Creation, in the case of natural beauty, and through inspiration, in the case of artistic beauty; that earthly beauty is thus a reflection of divine glory, and a sign of the way in which the Spirit is perfecting creation; and that beauty has an eschatological significance, in that it is an anticipation of the restored and transfigured world which will be the fullness of God's kingdom.[150]

If, as we have suggested, goodness and beauty are closely related, and if ethical creativity can be seen as parallel to artistic creativity then claims similar to those above could be made for the Spirit's work in the moral lives of individuals: the Spirit communicates God's goodness to the world through inspiration in relation to 'moral beauty'; that holy lives are a reflection of divine glory, and a sign of the Spirit's role in the continuing creation; and that the 'beauty of holiness' has a similar eschatological significance. This speculation really represents no more than an interim reflection on the metaphorical projection from the aesthetic to the moral which we noted earlier.

Sherry suggests that the concept of inspiration is really part of the doctrine of Creation: inspiration is the way that God through the Spirit allows us to participate in the continuing creation.[151] He refers to biblical inspiration and to artistic or scientific originality; I would want to add 'moral creativity'. In relation to biblical inspiration, Sherry recommends widening the concept of inspiration to include not just the original creation of a text but also the subsequent selection and reworking of the material.[152] Brown would add that inspiration can also guide our appropriation of; imaginative engagement with; and development of; tradition and revelation.[153] Imagination, inspiration and creativity can be expressed as much by the use of metaphorical projection and the reorientation of semantic fields into new patterns as by novel acts of creative genius: indeed, even these 'paradigm shifts' are born out of historical, cultural

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[149] Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 171.

[150] Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 2.

[151] Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 113.

[152] Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 119.

[153] This is the main thrust of: Brown, *Tradition & Imagination.*

and linguistic situatedness. God may create *ex nihilo* but hermeneutics suggests that human beings never do. In both art and ethics, imagination and inspiration seem to be closely linked. Having restored the central role of imagination in understanding and in reason, we may well conclude that inspiration always involves imagination and that, in Christian terms, inspiration represents the work of the Holy Spirit in continuing God's creation through human beings by engaging with their imaginations.[154] Such considerations seem to apply equally well to the notion of ethics as hermeneutics. As Brown argues, the truth that is revealed through inspiration does not constitute a permanently 'fixed' deposit: it is not universal in its scope and application but needs to be interpreted and applied in new contexts. Revelation, or inspiration, is intersubjective: God and human beings interact; truth emerges in that interaction and is constantly reformulated and developed in the life of a tradition. In this, our conception of ethics would be no different from our conception of revelation, or of theology more generally.

The terms 'inspired' and 'uninspired' generally connote positive and negative judgements respectively. Often such judgements are made retrospectively and usually they are made by others in the community rather than by the individuals themselves. It is Hume's 'true judges' or the *sensus communis* or the 'artworld'[155] that pronounce on the beautiful and inspired in art. It is the Church (or Christian community) that pronounces on the holy and inspired in Christian ethics. Our understanding of art and our understanding of the good are subject to change in the light of works by geniuses or virtuosos. A new style in art (or in ethics) may require a modified definition of beauty (or goodness).

For Hauerwas, Wells and Vanhoozer, worship is central to the formation of Christian moral imagination.[156] Worship 'forms our imaginations and hence our sensibilities as to what is fitting in the created (and redeemed) order':[157] it forms our habits and character and is thus central to the formation of disciples. Discipleship is inescapably social and

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[154] For another account of improvisation and inspiration see Frances Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), 160-92.

[155] According to Arthur Danto's theory it is the 'artworld' that confers status on individual works of art and constructs the 'canon' of approved work. See Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571-84.

[156] See Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom;* Wells, *Improvisation*, 82; Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song'. For an extended consideration of this contention: Hauerwas and Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*.

[157] Vanhoozer, 'Praising in Song', 111.

the Church's authority rests upon shared values and common worship.[158] Worship helps us to attend to the world; 'to see the world under the mode of the divine'.[159] The lives of others in the communion of saints (historical or contemporary) can provoke our imagination and inspire our moral lives. The stories of the Saints function in a similar way to the parables: they function as models of hermeneutical engagement with tradition and experience. We need to approach the lives of others as 'text-analogues' to be interpreted and understood as part of the hermeneutical engagement which constitutes ethics. In this, once more, narrative is central: 'from a sense of what we have become, among a range of present possibilities, we project our future being'.[160] This narrative engagement is constituted by the community at worship, and in turn is constitutive of that community. Catherine Wallace suggests that the two great commandments are actually one. Each presupposes and elicits the other:

> The storytelling that grounds our relationship with one another also grounds our relationship with God ... Our creative storytelling sustains us as living members of the network of relationships and histories that theologians call 'the risen body of the living Christ'.[161]

These conclusions regarding 'moral inspiration' seem to be in accord with our intuition; they appear to be theologically coherent. In the same way that modern Trinitarian theology can offer some answers to the criticisms of modern atheism and a corrective to classical theism[162], ethics as hermeneutics offers answers to post-modern deconstruction (and charges of emotivism and relativism) and a corrective to modernist absolutism:

> Persons can only be persons in community; the community can only be free in its personal members. The equilibrium between personal freedom and a just society should be possible in the light of the triune God and his resonance in the church, provided that the ecumenically united church can understand and present itself as the *avant garde* of a redeemed humanity, freed from its division and enmities.[163]

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[158] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination*, 340.

[159] Brown, *Discipleship & Imagination;* Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Significance of Vision: Towards an Aesthetic Ethic', in *Vision and Virtue*, 30-47, at 46.

[160] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47. Taylor is summarising Heidegger's insight into the temporal structure of being in the world. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1926], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

[161] Catherine M. Wallace, 'Storytelling, Doctrine and Spiritual Formation', *Anglican Theological Review* 81, no. 1 (1999), 39-59, at 59

[162] See e.g. Robert W. Jenson, 'What Is the Point of Trinitarian Theology?' in Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today*, 1-30.

[163] Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: S.C.M., 2000), 332.

Not everyone will be part of the same community. So, what happens when different communities meet? We must now consider the nature of inter-community public debate in ethics and the role of narrative within it.

6.7 From personal narrative to public ethics: rhetoric and casuistry

Nicholas Adams identifies as a theological problem the relationship between narrative and argument. He notes that Habermas draws a distinction between philosophical argument, as the application of techniques to solving problems, and poetry, as disclosing the world through the making of associations. He relegates philosophy and aesthetics to separate autonomous spheres. Adams is critical of Habermas for drawing this distinction too sharply and suggests that theologians should refuse this 'choice'. Narrative and argument are not separate practices but represent only different aspects of language use. Adams notes that philosophical arguments can be constructed in narrative form and that what Christian communities need when debating vital issues is not isolated proof-texting but biblical *stories*. These stories are not just preliminaries to more formal philosophical debate:

> These stories ... can be used as focal points for interpretation while participants reason through the problems set before the community.[164]

Telling stories *within* traditions or communities is not problematic; the problem which Adams identifies is the relationship between narrative and *public* argument: what happens when different groups, telling different stories, meet. Habermas fears that they will simply be unable to interact: they might listen to each other's narratives but no 'argument' would be possible. He attempts to resolve this difficulty by appealing to a notion of reason that transcends tradition and a universal ethics that similarly transcends commitment to a particular community: communities should suspend their narratives in favour of formal procedure or method. Of course, Gadamer's hermeneutics renders both the appeal to transcendent reason and the adoption of method illegitimate. As Adams notes, John Milbank suggests a different approach: we cannot 'argue' against another tradition, only 'out-narrate' it in a process of redescription and renarration. We need, for example, to 'persuade people – for reasons of 'literary taste'– that Christianity offers a much better story'.[165] For Milbank, narratives and rules are historically situated: we

[164] Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 218.

[165] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 330.

need both but we also need to remember their status. We can perhaps characterise these positions in terms of the modernist/postmodernist divide that we have already encountered. Habermas' position is the 'modern' one; communication and persuasion depend on reason and argument. What he fears is the total relativism of postmodernity: without reason and argument there can be no communication or interaction. Milbank's position (and Gadamer's, and mine) is extra-modern: communication and interaction never depended solely on reason and argument in the first place: it is imagination that allows a fusion of horizons. Narrative and argument combine to form 'argumentative narrative' or rhetoric.

Albert Jonsen & Stephen Toulmin note the importance of rhetoric in ethics:

> Practical moral reasoning today still fits the patterns of topical (or rhetorical) argumentation better than it does those of formal (or geometrical) demonstration.[166]

Theology and ethics are about persuasion not proof:

> The task of such a [socio-linguistic] theology is not apologetic, nor even argument, rather it is to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality.[167]

Adams suggests that both Habermas and Milbank have given up on metaphysical truth claims, arguing that such universal claims cannot be made from within particular traditions. Gadamer's critical realist position would allow us to argue that such claims can be made but that they can only ever be provisional. Hermeneutics and rhetoric allow for understanding and persuasion whilst excluding absolute truth and universal method. We must maintain an openness to others and a readiness to listen: true rhetoric is not simply about dominance. Rhetoric is not simply a matter of repeating the narratives in a louder tone.[168] Nor is it about 'each side [hoping] to win a monopoly for the categories in which they themselves frame the question'.[169] The goal of interaction and rhetoric may not be for one group to out-narrate another; it may rather be to find a broader narrative into which both can be accommodated or to preserve both narratives together as contributions to our understanding (Rorty's metaphor of understanding as breadth

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[166] Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 326.

[167] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.

[168] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 383.

[169] Oliver O'Donovan, 'Homosexuality in the Church: Can There Be a Fruitful Theological Debate?' in Eugene F. Rogers Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 373-86, at 374.

rather than depth). The connection between traditions is the fundamentally imaginative character of human beings and it is here that the beginning of understanding and communication lies. Such imaginative engagement between traditions can be a necessary corrective to distortions within traditions. There is no certainty in this approach and, in principle, everything is open to question: ethics is an art not a science. The traditional approach of philosophical argument and problem-solving utilises only reason, seeks universal application and gives rise to deontology; the narrative rhetorical approach engages the imagination, addresses itself to particular situations and inevitably issues in some form of casuistry.

Casuistry has a bad name. Since Blaise Pascal's excoriating critique of the Jesuits in *Les Lettres Provinciales* casuistry has been thought of as a form of sophistry, or a way of avoiding one's moral duty.[170] While this criticism may have been true of the Jesuits at the seventeenth-century French court, who were being unreasonably accommodating towards rich or high-born penitents, it need not be true of all casuistry. I suggest that in its rejection of casuistry, much modern ethical theory has deprived itself of a useful ethical tool. It may be that the reaction against casuistry has contributed to a distorted understanding of the nature of ethics and an unjustified emphasis on rational *a priori* principles. Jonsen and Toulmin are critical of the 'tyranny of principles'. They note that

> once we accept rules and principles as the heart and soul of ethics, no middle way can be found between absolutism and relativism.[171]

At the most basic level, all ethics requires some form of casuistry. G. E. Moore argues that 'casuistry is the goal of ethical investigation': that all ethical theories must eventually get to grips with cases.[172] However, casuistry has traditionally been about mitigating circumstances and possible exceptions. As we have seen, for Gadamer, situations in which we are required to act are, by definition, special cases. Ethical judgement can never be simply about applying universal principles; rather the case 'co-determines, corrects and supplements' the principle.[173] Circumstances always alter cases; so a properly hermeneutical form of ethics will inevitably involve casuistry.

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[170] Blaise Pascal, *The Provincial Letters* [1656-7], trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

[171] Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, 6.

[172] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 5.

[173] *TM*, 39.

The traditional understanding of casuistry works on the assumption of a top-down application of principles. Jonsen & Toulmin make a stronger claim for casuistry which actually challenges the understanding of the nature of principles and rules together with the assumption that ethics is a top-down affair. They argue that moral knowledge is essentially *particular* and that moral theory *requires* an understanding of cases and circumstances. Casuistry is not simply about fitting rules to cases (as in statute law): rather, morality develops from case to case, or from the bottom up (as in case law). Casuistry is not simply 'applied ethics'; it is also, at the same time, an account of the derivation of moral principles. On this view, moral principles are the distilled wisdom of a community's bottom-up deliberations. This distilled wisdom may then be re-applied in a top-down fashion to future cases. Intuitively this does seem to be the way in which we actually 'do' ethics but we are regularly prone to losing sight of this origin of our moral principles. Principles are invested with a universal, *a priori*, status that can allow for no exceptions when we forget that the principles have emerged from a culture's reflection on moral experience.[174] If their origin is kept in mind principles can be recognised as *a posteriori* and as open to development and modification. Nigel Biggar argues that there should be a 'dynamic, dialectical relationship' between casuistry and history so that rules allow cases to be brought within our rational scope while cases are able to modify rules.[175] In other words, there should be scope for responsible improvisation.

In relation to casuistry, Nigel Biggar observes that:

> One of the most common objections [to casuistry]... is that its rational procedure is so logically mechanical as to lack the flexibility necessary to do justice to the uniqueness and novelty of an historical situation... casuistry abstracts the process of making moral decisions from the theological historicity of the moral agent.[176]

This criticism seems unjustified: certainly casuistry sets out to do the exact opposite by paying particular attention to the historical situatedness of the agent and the particularity of the situation. Such criticisms are perhaps more properly directed at inappropriately rigid forms of casuistry, or at ethics which is conducted within a framework of a priori principles and deductive logic. As we have seen Mark Johnson constructs an ethics based on inductive logic; on prototypical concepts and radial categories; and on the creative imagination. This allows us to modify our concepts in the light of experience

[174] There are parallels here with 'literal truth' arising from the death of a metaphor.

[175] Nigel Biggar, 'A Case for Casuistry in the Church', *Modern Theology* 6, no. 1 (1989), 29-51, 42

[176] Biggar, 'Casuistry', 36

whilst still preserving the core of our concepts unchanged.[177] Our understanding of an immoral notion, e.g. 'theft', depends upon a prototype or paradigm case. Other cases may be included in the definition if they are sufficiently close to the paradigm case. Certainty of judgement decreases as the 'radial' distance increases. Categories may overlap or conflict. Judgement is required to determine which is the most appropriate conclusion in a particular case.

This process is far closer to Jonsen and Toulmin's description of the casuistical process than to any formal deductive model of ethical reasoning. They suggest that the heart of moral experience is located in the wisdom that comes from seeing how the ideas behind rules work out in the course of people's lives; 'in particular, seeing more exactly what is involved in insisting on (or waiving) this or that rule in one or another set of circumstances'.[178] Moral knowledge, then, is more about 'affective sensibility' than about the cognitive ability to make ethical deductions. Hauerwas says:

> Casuistry therefore cannot be limited simply to consideration of 'cases' or situations, but also requires the imaginative testing of our habits of life against the well-lived and virtuous lives of others... [though] we cannot do exactly what they did. Rather we must let their lives imaginatively challenge our own, so that we may learn how to embody the virtues which determined not only what they did, but how they did it.[179]

Casuistry is an artistic enterprise, involving creativity, imagination, inspiration and the testing of moral judgements against a 'canon' of traditional judgements within a community and a tradition. For Hauerwas the church must be such a community of discourse and he stresses the intuitive character of some judgements: a natural 'feeling for the good':

> Often some of the community's best 'casuists' may not even be those who manifest the strongest rational skills. Those with intuitive gifts may simply 'know' better than they can say what the gospel requires of us. The church must be a community of moral discourse so that the moral significance of those people is not lost because we fear the prophet.[180]

Casuistry is not just a necessary complement to moral theory which guides our conduct in specific cases: rather, it is a central part of ethical deliberation: theory and cases codetermine one another; principles inform cases but are derived from cases in the first

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[177] *MI*, 9.

[178] Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, 314.

[179] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 121.

[180] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 134.

place (another hermeneutic circle). Principles are no more than markers for the outer limits of communal self-understanding. Moral principles, though useful, are provisional and revisable. Casuistry however need not lead to moral relativism; history, tradition and the *sensus communis* provide adequate control. What is required is a form of casuistry that is more artistic than scientific and whose judgements have more in common with aesthetic judgements than with traditional ethical judgements. The moral life is an artistic project which requires all the gifts and skills (inspiration, imagination, creativity, composition, bricolage, proportion ... etc.) of a trained artist. Casuistry will be an indispensable tool for a properly hermeneutical ethics. Abstracted ethics is really no ethics at all unless it gets to grips with cases. Charles Pinches' comments on action theory are pertinent here:

> action theory has been guided by a pressing interest to extract particular actions from the rich mix of narratives that characterise human life ... since [the] procedure began with the extraction, sooner or later the reinsertion will prove difficult. The difficulty is with the governing idea that the true identity of an action can be found out by removing it ... from its various homes in human life.[181]

Similarly, the true nature of moral deliberation depends on its situation in its various homes in human life. As far as possible, we must hear 'the full story' before we frame situations, let alone before we dare to offer a judgement. This is quite a challenge: as Julius Kovesi observes, we may 'need a whole novel to state all the facts'.[182] However, it is a challenge that we simply cannot avoid. Again we must recognise that, even at its best, our ethical deliberation is partial and provisional. Adams urges that we should test the claims of moral norms in as many ways as possible, remembering 'that forms of testing are just as culturally specific as the norms they test'.[183] His bottom line is a thoroughly tradition-bound commitment to the "Summary of the Law".

6.8 Conclusions

Gadamer's hermeneutics support Jonsen and Toulmin's strong case for casuistry: moral knowledge is essentially *particular* and the resolution of moral problems *requires* an understanding of cases and circumstances. Moral principles can only ever be provisional

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[181] Charles R. Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 27.

[182] Julius Kovesi, *Moral Notions* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 112.

[183] Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, 229.

and must constantly be open to change: moral choices must be made on the basis of probability, not certainty.

In this brief, and inevitably cursory, exploration of the implications of the notion of moral imagination for Christian ethics we have begun to see a coherent approach to ethics that is consistent with Gadamer's hermeneutics and is consonant with recent developments in theology.

We have characterised Gadamer's approach as a form of critical realism and this seems to be an appropriate stance in relation to ethical knowledge. Indeed we have suggested that it is an equally appropriate approach in science and in art: all three can convey truth but our understanding is inevitably limited. In this sense the transcendentals are reunited: ethics, aesthetics and scientific inference all represent branches of Gadamer's universal hermeneutics.

The imagination resonates with the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation and Trinity. The recovery of the role of imagination in ethics perhaps represents a paradigm shift, away from the 'normal' ethics of the Enlightenment and of postmodernity: it is, at the very least, an important corrective to the dominant rationalistic, abstracted and reductive models of ethics. Imagination, whilst not quite a 'theory of everything', does seem to be relevant and productive in many areas of theology and it certainly seems to provide a better account of the phenomenology of moral deliberation. A proper understanding of the central role of moral imagination may allow us to survey the ethical landscape afresh, offering new ways of interpreting moral notions (of reorganising semantic frames and exploring areas of overlap) such as Natural Law, Moral Sense, conscience and reason. The lessons from improvisation, and especially music, offer the hope of an ethical approach more suited to complex, dynamic and temporal moral situations than the traditional static, univocal and universal models.

As well as the centrality of imagination to moral reasoning we have also observed the fundamental role of narrative, and the significance of parables and the lives of the Saints. Such stories engage with real people in real life situations. Ethics is no longer simply either *a priori* or *a posteriori*: rather, it develops connaturally and is subject to the limitation and potential of a hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is

unavoidable and the attempts by moral absolutism and utilitarianism to step outside it by means of abstraction or reduction are futile: there can be no absolute truth and no universal method. The importance of tradition has been restated and the normative control offered by the *sensus communis* has been described: the result of these considerations has been to align a hermeneutical model of ethics with narrative ethics (and narrative theology more generally) and ecclesial ethics, although the latter is not to be seen as in any way exclusive but rather as constantly vigilant, constantly engaged in conversation, and constantly open to others.

We have noted the pervasiveness of aesthetic language in our moral deliberation and the concept of virtue as beauty of the soul. The good life has become an artistic project, involving artistic techniques and aesthetic evaluation. Higgins argues that this can provide a more positive, open-minded and imaginative ethical orientation as we seek to live our lives with harmony and grace.[184] We have seen the importance of vision and a notion of the good in offering moral 'attraction' rather than moral obligation; love of the good is what empowers us to be good.[185] Aesthetics and ethics should not be conflated but there is more overlap than the traditional approaches to ethics have been prepared to allow. Living well has an aesthetic character; art and literature have a place in ethics; and moral formation is about training the moral imagination. The distinctiveness of Christian ethics lies in its tradition and context, together with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Gadamer requires us to adopt a hermeneutical approach to the whole of our ethical deliberation: imagination will be needed to understand scripture, the gospel, tradition, history, ethical texts, art, literature, culture, the narratives of moral lives (our own and others), and our moral experience. The 'situation' must retain its significance but be orientated within its historical, cultural and linguistic contexts (once more like Fletcher's situationist). We should acknowledge that negotiating this hermeneutic circle is an artistic endeavour, and that, while we may not wish to adopt Fletcher's crude and simplistic 'agapeic calculus', the ability to promote that love enjoined by the summary of the law may be amongst the aesthetic criteria for its evaluation.

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[184] Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives*, 204.

[185] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In the introduction I proposed two major theses. First, that ethics (including Christian ethics) should adopt a stance that is properly *hermeneutical*: that ethics is part of the universal project of hermeneutics. Second, that human beings are fundamentally *imaginative* moral beings: imagination is central to ethics because it is central to language and reason. If, as I have argued, these suggestions are correct then we will need to explore the changes in the ethical landscape brought about by their adoption; and reflect upon their implications for future ethical deliberation. In this chapter I will review the arguments up to this point (section 7.1). I will then briefly consider a hermeneutical approach to our understanding of 'experience' (section 7.2) before reflecting, as an example, on the current debate in the Anglican Communion concerning homosexuality (section 7.3). Finally, I will draw some conclusions and make some closing comments (section 7.4).

7.1 Summary

In Chapter Two I considered Finnis's account of moral absolutes together with the method of utilitarianism. We identified a number of problems with these approaches which stemmed from their failure to appreciate the complexity, and significance for moral deliberation, of the context of our actions and choices (the twin failings of abstraction and reduction). We also noted their reliance on Enlightenment reason and their attempts to escape from the limitations of tradition and language in their search for a universal standpoint. We expressed concerns about Finnis' understanding of absolute truth, and about the reductive approach of utilitarianism and its adoption of scientific method.

In Chapter Three I set out an overview of Gadamer's hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, paying particular attention to those elements which may have the most direct and immediate bearing on ethics although, in truth, all of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, clarifying as it does the processes of understanding in all fields, will be relevant to ethics. In our extended thought experiment we observed that all our

understanding is thoroughly situated: it is simply not possible to escape the limitations (and possibilities) of tradition, culture and language. We saw that Gadamer addressed similar problems in the 'human sciences' to those which we had identified in ethics. We also noted Gadamer's denial of the possibility of absolute truth and his thoroughgoing criticism of scientific method in the human sciences, which I have explicitly taken to include ethics. We noted Gadamer's inclusion of aesthetics within the hermeneutical project and I suggested that ethics too should be incorporated into hermeneutics: ethics should be properly 'situated', taking full account of tradition, culture, language and the particularity of context. Perhaps the most important observations concerned the historically conditioned nature of reason and the centrality of language to all our considerations.

In Chapter Four I considered the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for ethical reflection. We concluded that the attempt to achieve abstraction was a fault common to both moral absolutism and utilitarianism; and that proper attention to Gadamer's hermeneutics may be able to address some of the shortcomings we identified in Chapter Two. We also considered criticisms and developments of Gadamer's hermeneutics, concluding that the criticisms were not fatal and that, with some modifications, hermeneutics, particularly as it has been developed by Ricoeur, could provide a fruitful approach to ethical theory.

In Chapter Five I considered the importance of moral notions and of the moral language in which we conceive and express them. We recognised that language is central to all understanding and that it allows us to interpret and communicate our experience. We considered the nature and function of metaphor. Taking up Gadamer's observations on metaphor and concept formation, we have examined Johnson's claim that our language is ineradicably metaphorical and that metaphor is particularly important in our use of abstract language. We characterised Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' as a work of imagination and noted the importance of conversation within a community of discourse. We examined in some detail the implications of cognitive science for ethics; in particular, Mark Johnson's conception of reason and his model of moral imagination. We saw that imagination is essential to language and to reason, and so is essential to knowledge, to theology and to ethics. We considered the importance of narrative in self-identity and in moral deliberation. We considered the role of imagination in conscience

and noted parallels between conscience and taste. We noted, with Johnson, that the descriptions of our reasoning (including our ethical reasoning) provided by cognitive science do not accord with the traditional Enlightenment view. I suggested that Johnson's description of moral imagination could provide a coherent approach to ethical reflection and proposed the model of an art-critic as appropriate to the moral theorist.

In Chapter Six I explored the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics specifically for Christian ethics. We characterised Gadamer's position in relation to truth as a form of critical realism and noted the implications of this: that truth can only ever be provisional and that we must adopt an open listening stance towards others. We briefly considered the nature of goodness, truth and beauty, and the relationship of ethics to aesthetics. We noted the involvement of imagination in our apprehension of revelation, and its importance in a developing tradition. We noted the connections between imagination and creativity, and explored briefly the connections with the Christian doctrines of Creation and Incarnation. We explored the model of improvisation as an approach to Christian ethics; noting the normative control of tradition and the *sensus communis*, and the significance of inspiration by the Holy Spirit. I suggested that Christian ethics, conceived as a hermeneutical endeavour would need to adopt the approach of rhetoric rather than simple logical argument, and that casuistry would be an important element. I suggested that ethical deliberation should be considered as an art and that its judgements might best be evaluated by aesthetic criteria. Whilst not adopting Fletcher's agapeistic calculus, we noted that ethical deliberation would have to take proper account of the 'situation' and that love would be an important criterion in the evaluation of ethical judgements.

7.2 The hermeneutics of experience

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer strives to do justice to the truth of aesthetic experience and overcome the radical subjectivisation of the aesthetic that began with Kant. Aesthetic experience cannot be abstracted from real life and it should not be denied as a mode of knowledge which conveys truth. I have argued that the same considerations are true of our moral experience (our experience of the good and of relationship with others). Gadamer argues against the notion of experience in the natural sciences, suggesting that its meaning has become severely restricted: the 'inner historicity of

experience' is simply ignored. He also argues that 'language is already present in any acquisition of experience'[1] and that 'pure reason' is simply a fantasy as we are completely unable to free ourselves from the prejudices and predispositions of our language. How then should we approach 'experience' as a theological source?

Christian theology has recognised four main sources: Scripture, reason, tradition and experience. 'Experience' in this context refers primarily to the subjective inner life of individuals, their feelings and emotions, in contrast to the 'objective' outward world. Experience has been seen either as a privileged source of divine revelation; or as standing in need of interpretation within a theological framework. As a source of divine revelation, appeals have often been made to a core religious experience common to all humankind. George Lindbeck concludes that there is little evidence for such universal experience and dismisses the theory as hopelessly vague and incapable of verification.[2] At the other extreme, rather than unwarranted confidence in experience there has been unwarranted scepticism: experience by itself has been regarded as unable to offer any reliable theological data: rather, it must always be interpreted and corrected by theology. Ludwig Feuerbach, for example, provided a devastating critique of theologies based on experience in his account of projection: what we interpret as experience of God may in truth be no more than experience of ourselves.[3] A similar dichotomy in relation to the role and authority of experience exists in moral theory: it has been well characterised by Sabina Lovibond.[4]

It seems to me that Gadamer's hermeneutics may offer a middle road: a more reasonable approach to the place of experience in theology generally, and more specifically in ethics. If we adopt a hermeneutical approach to understanding experience then we may be able to chart a safe course between the *Scylla* of naïve realism and the *Charybdis* of projection and total relativism. Critical realism allows us to assert the reality encountered in experience whilst accepting that our understanding of it is necessarily limited by our historical, cultural and linguistic situation. Experience is constituted by, and constitutive of, language and concepts, and is mediated by

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1 *TM*, 348.

2 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 31.

3 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* [1841], trans. George Eliot (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989).

4 Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

imagination: Lovibond makes the case for imagination as the mediator between emotivist and realist ethical theories. We have encountered another hermeneutic circle: tradition and theology are interpreted by experience, and experience is interpreted by tradition and theology. Experience can no longer be simply accepted as authoritative, nor can it be summarily dismissed. We will now consider some of the implications of such a hermeneutical approach for the current debate in the Anglican Communion concerning homosexuality.

7.3 The Anglican debate about homosexuality

Andrew Goddard is rightly critical of

> those who ... manage to combine a remarkably naïve hermeneutic in relation to experience (especially when the interpretation of their own experience offered by those who present as marginalised or victims is granted an almost sacred quality which puts it beyond critique) while emphasising the complexities of interpreting biblical texts and employing a hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to them.[5]

It seems to me that what is required is a thoroughly hermeneutical approach to experience, as well as to Scripture, and indeed to tradition, culture, ethical texts, art, literature, culture, and the narratives of moral lives (our own and others). Such an approach will find places for imaginative engagement, for listening to others, and for a hermeneutic of suspicion and self-criticism. Space will not allow a thorough exploration of the implications of a hermeneutical approach to all aspects of this complex debate.[6] However, I hope to identify some areas where such an approach may have useful insights to offer, particularly in terms of *how* the debate is conducted rather than in terms of the conclusions it should reach.

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[5] Andrew Goddard, 'Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen', 2006, Fulcrum (http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/newsletter10.cfm?doc=149), 8.

[6] See Christina Sumners, *Reconsider: A Response to Issues in Human Sexuality and a Plea to the Church to Deal Boldly with Sexual Ethics* (London: Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement,, 1995); Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker (eds.), *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report* (Winchester: O Books, 2005); Andrew Linzey, *Has Anglicanism a Future? A Response to the Windsor Report* (London: LGCM, 2005); The House of Bishops, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003); The House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991); The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2004); Mark Bonnington and Bob Fyall, *Homosexuality and the Bible* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996); Anglican Mainstream UK and The Church of England Evangelical Council, *Repair the Tear. The Windsor Report: An Assessment and Call for Action* (London: 2004); Oliver O'Donovan, 'Homosexuality in the Church: Can There Be a Fruitful Theological Debate?' in Eugene F. Rogers Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 373-86.

Michael Vasey suggests that much of the debate on homosexuality suffers from a failure to address the presuppositions and interpretive frameworks that people bring to it.[7] Admittedly the situation is complex and there are many contextual factors operating: for example, the different secular understandings of homosexuality in different parts of the world and among different groups of people; the missionary situation of the church (directed primarily against secularism in the West and against Islam in many parts of Africa); the inherited faith of African and South American churches and a backlash against European imperialism; different approaches to biblical hermeneutics; Western postmodernism and African and South American premodernism mixed with colonially imposed modernism;[8] and no doubt many others.[9] The debate should not be too readily reduced to a matter of disagreement about the interpretation of Scripture or to a contest between the Northern and Southern hemispheres.[10] A hermeneutical approach would require us to pay more attention to contextual factors and might allow us to conclude that the issues under debate are not actually the same on all occasions; that there is not simply one debate about homosexuality in the Anglican Communion but several. While all parties tend to frame 'homosexuality' according to their own understanding, it may be that even the nature of the 'homosexuality' in question is not the same in all cases. As Oliver O'Donovan notes:

> If there is anything more disconcerting than the hesitation and uncertainty with which theologians propose their answers on this subject, it is the dogmatic certainty with which they frame their questions.[11]

It may be that there will be more than one 'right answer' and that the church will need to adopt different approaches in different contexts. Contributions to the debate are sometimes based on a particular conception of homosexuality and may be phrased in inflammatory language, like the following from the Archbishop of Nigeria, Peter Akinola:

> Homosexuality or lesbianism or bestiality is to us a form of slavery, and redemption from it is readily available through repentance and faith in the saving grace of our Lord, Jesus the Christ.[12]

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[7] Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 23-67.

[8] See e.g. Anglican Mainstream UK and The Church of England Evangelical Council, *Repair the Tear. The Windsor Report: An Assessment and Call for Action.* Anglican Mainstream criticise ECUSA for their 'apparently uncritical embrace of post-modern and relativist understandings of truth'.

[9] See Ruth Gledhill, 'For God's Sake: An Interview with Peter Akinola', *The Times* (London), July 5 2007.

[10] The Anglican Communion, 'The Listening Process Website: An Overview of the Summaries', 2007 (http://www.aco.org/listening/reports/).

[11] O'Donovan, 'Homosexuality in the Church', 377.

Obviously it is an important question whether homosexuality is a transcultural psychological condition (the essentialist view) or a series of diverse, historically conditioned stances more akin to ethnic or national character (the constructionist view). Certainly, we need to be aware that the moral notions and moral language that we use in this debate are contemporary constructions. K. Rudy offers a properly hermeneutical insight:

> It is only because we live in a culture that bifurcates straight from gay (and uses one to define the other) that we see certain historical practices as 'gay'.[13]

Certainly, the prevailing secular views on sexuality have changed. Vasey comments:

> the twentieth century... perspective sees sexual activity as essentially good and associates it primarily with relationship rather than procreation.[14]

Once the Church accepts this position and agrees that the unitive purposes of sexual behaviour alone are an adequate basis for a moral relationship the issue becomes simply the gender of the partners. It is worth remembering that the full range of sexual practices available to homosexual couples is also indulged in by many heterosexual couples. Consequently, judgements as to the morality of certain abstracted 'acts' do not help to distinguish between homosexuality and heterosexuality but apply equally to both. As M. J. Hartwig observes:

> the fundamental question about the morality of homosexual activity remains that of whether the homosexual relationship is a context within which individuals can grow in their love for God and for others.[15]

The Church has to deal imaginatively with new data arising from the experience of homosexual people; 'from the particular stories of those who live integrated, virtuous, and flourishing lives as covenanted homosexuals'[16] and from those who believe that homosexuality does constitute a 'parallel and alternative form of human sexuality as complete within the terms of the created order as the heterosexual'?[17] The Episcopal Church of the USA, for example, sees itself at the end of a forty year 'listening process' with its own momentum in which they have already heard the voices of lesbian and gay

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[12] Simon Sarmiento, 'What Archbishop Akinola Said (or Not)', 2005, Thinking Anglicans (http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000985.html).

[13] K. Rudy, 'The Social Construction of Sexual Identity and the Ordination of Practicing Homosexuals', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 1 (1997), 133-38, at 137.

[14] Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, 46.

[15] M. J. Hartwig, 'Galileo, Gene Researchers and the Ethics of Homosexuality', *Theology & Sexuality* 1 (1994), 106-11, at 109.

[16] S. J. Pope, 'Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 1 (1997), 127-46, at 112.

[17] The House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality*, 40.

Christians; pastoral sensitivity now demands their full inclusion.[18] They have no wish to impose such an answer on the whole of the Communion; they simply want the autonomy to proceed as they feel called by the Holy Spirit.

The Anglican Communion has been encouraged since at least 1978 to listen to the experience of gay and lesbian people:

> The Church, recognising the need for pastoral concern for those who are homosexual, encourages dialogue with them.[19]

This was reaffirmed in 1988[20] and in 1998[21] but the whole process has, as Andrew Goddard has shrewdly noted, been hindered by an impaired understanding (on both sides of the debate) of the nature of such a listening process. Goddard writes from an evangelical position and is conservative on this issue ('the proper context for sexual expression is the union of a man and a woman in marriage') but he engages creatively and imaginatively with those of different views and, unlike some of those he criticises, refuses to close down the debate before it has even begun. He quotes an Anglican Mainstream article 'What is meant by listening?' which outlines their understanding in relation to Lambeth Resolution 1.10:

> It is clear that the comment on listening is subservient to the fact that such relationships are wrong in Scripture ... the reason we have to listen to [those who live in same-sex relationships] is so that they can be transformed and not continue in relationships which are unscriptural.[22]

Goddard argues that such an understanding does no justice to the concept of 'dialogue' as set out in the original resolution. The emphasis in the Lambeth resolution was on overcoming homophobia through true dialogue and not simply on restating the traditional position on homosexuality. As Goddard suggests, what is needed is *real* listening, a properly hermeneutical openness to the voices and traditions of others as we attempt to interpret secular culture guided by the Holy Spirit. It is vitally important that the Church listens to the experience of all people and acknowledges that she has much to learn about the experiences of homosexual people and the contexts and situations in

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[18] See The Episcopal Church of the USA, *To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report Paragraph 135* (New York: ECUSA, 2005), 40-43, also foreword and appendix.

[19] The Lambeth Conference, 'Resolutions from 1978' (http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1978/). Resolution 10.

[20] The Lambeth Conference, 'Resolutions from 1988' (http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1988/). Resolution 64.

[21] The Lambeth Conference, 'Resolutions from 1998, (http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998/). Resolution 1.10.

[22] Anglican Mainstream, 'What Is Meant by Listening?' 2006 (http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/?p=298).

which they live. Listening must be more 'open, humble and fluid than the rather precise, controlling and limiting definition offered by Anglican Mainstream'.[23] In such a hermeneutical listening process both sides must be open to the possibility that they may be transformed by the encounter; both sides must be prepared to put their own prejudices at risk. It is simply not possible to define the nature of any such transformation in advance.[24]

The Anglican Communion characterises its 'Listening Process' in this way:

> A listening process is an open commitment to engage actively in the world and thought of the person or people to whom you are listening and a corresponding commitment on the part of the other person or people to enter into yours. It does not presume agreement or disagreement; it presumes a striving for empathy.[25]

This seems to be an entirely appropriate and properly hermeneutical way of approaching this particular ethical debate. However, it requires that people approach the debate with humility (acknowledging the provisional status of knowledge and revelation) and openness to transformation. Goddard concludes that it is perfectly possible to understand 'listening' in ways that allow for new insights and the development of understanding without either undermining the authority of Scripture or ascribing unwarranted privileged status to 'experience'. However, such listening may lead to changes in the teaching of the Church. Evangelicals may well have

> a firm conviction that ... listening to experience should never lead a faithful Christian to the conclusion that the Bible is wrong and an unreliable guide to God's will for us.[26]

Some gay and lesbian Christians will have an equally firm conviction that listening to experience or Scripture should not lead them to deny the reality of their understanding of their sexual identity. All involved 'must not be so selective in [their] listening that we filter out unwelcome voices'.[27] Indeed, as David Brown notes, perceived 'conflict' may be integral to the development of the church's understanding.[28]

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[23] Goddard, 'Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen', 5.

[24] Goddard, 'Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen', 11.

[25] The Anglican Communion, 'The Listening Process Website: What Is the Listening Process?' 2007 (http://www.aco.org/listening/whatis.cfm).

[26] Goddard, 'Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen', 10.

[27] Goddard, 'Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen', 11.

[28] David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 293-342.

Unfortunately, this is often not the approach that is adopted. African (and other evangelical) churches committed to literal interpretations of Scripture see any accommodation with homosexuality as sinful and as undermining the gospel, a position they would impose on the whole of the Anglican Communion.[29] Anglican Mainstream, for example, see themselves as

> committed to promote, teach and maintain the Scriptural truths on which the Anglican Church was founded.[30]

For them, these truths are fixed and unchanging. A hermeneutical approach to ethics and to Scripture offers a different understanding. In a discussion of interpretation in relation to the authority of Scripture, Trevor Hart is critical of those who believe they can uncover a final fixed meaning in biblical texts as well as those who believe that the meaning of a text is wholly created by its readers. His suggested solution is a form of critical realism:

> A properly Christian approach to Scripture ... will be one that seeks to submit to the text, presuming on the presence of communicative intent mediated through the text, seeking to be constrained in its initial approaches and subsequent responses by a discipline of hearing what the text is saying, so far as it is possible, and recognizing the partial and provisional nature of all its readings, thereby being open and committed to a continuing process of disciplined listening and hearing.[31]

This approach is thoroughly hermeneutical and in full accord with the approach to ethics that I have outlined. If we replace 'Scripture' with 'ethics', 'readings' with 'understanding', and 'text' with 'ethical text' or 'other' or 'art' or 'literature' or 'narrative of a moral life' the passage outlines a properly hermeneutical approach to ethics, and the openness and commitment to listening are what hermeneutical vigilance demands..

There are no easy answers to the problems facing the Anglican Communion: many involved believe they have nothing to learn from listening. However, a more hermeneutical and imaginative approach might lead to a different understanding of the questions and to a generous and tolerant debate more fitting to the traditions of Anglicanism: imagination may serve us better than reason, and metaphor better than

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[29] Gledhill, 'Times Article'. Maurice Sinclair, 'Response to *a Catechesis on Homosexuality*', 1996 (http://www.episcopalian.org/cclec/paper-cathomo-sinclair.htm).

[30] Anglican Mainstream, 'Who We Are', 2007 (http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/?page_id=216).

[31] Trevor Hart, 'Tradition, Authority and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture', in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 194-95.

rigidly defined concepts. In his introductory notes to O'Donovan's 'Homosexuality in the Church', Eugene Rogers writes:

> This piece shows so much change from earlier, more abstract accounts of homosexuality [by O'Donovan] ... that I found myself moved. I asked O'Donovan how he mustered the tremendous effort of moral imagination it must have taken. He replied that he had written it by reading paragraphs over the phone to a friend dying of AIDS. [32]

So, abstraction can indeed be countered by moral imagination and openness to others once ethics becomes situated and personal (and hermeneutical).[33]

7.4 Conclusions

In this thesis I have attempted to answer the question: if Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics can govern an interpretation of what ethics is, and how it works, and how it can be justified, then what would ethics look like? This has been as a response to concerns about abstraction in ethical theory and about the separation of reason from the passions, the emotions and the imagination. We have seen that Gadamer's hermeneutics can indeed provide a horizon from which to approach ethics. I have suggested that ethics should be included in the universal project of hermeneutics, not just because it makes good theoretical sense and could help to address some of the shortcomings in contemporary ethical theory, but also because it may result in ethical judgements that make good practical sense.

The horizon offered by hermeneutics is one which seems to be already taken for granted, at least in part. We have already noted, for example, that the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Mark Johnson seems to be entirely consistent with Gadamer's hermeneutics, though without any explicit reference to his work. If this indebtedness were to be recognised then hermeneutics could be applied to ethics in a more rigorous and consistent way. Hermeneutics consistently argues against legalism (absolute truth) and utilitarianism (scientific method) and addresses directly the concerns which we raised in Chapter Two. In a properly hermeneutical ethics, norms and maxims cannot be absolute: the hermeneutic circle demands that we recognise them (together with all

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[32] Eugene F Rogers Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 373.

[33] For a further example of the possible impact of moral imagination (this time on international peacemaking) see John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

understanding) as provisional. We must talk in terms of provisionality, incompleteness and probability. Similarly, ethical judgement cannot depend on a universal method. A properly situated ethics, which takes account of tradition, history, culture and language simply cannot resort to legalism or to universal method. A hermeneutical ethics would also recognise Joseph Fletcher's basic position that the situation is decisively important in ethical deliberation: neither legalism nor antinomianism is adequate to the task. Ethics is no longer a competition between rival theories to provide 'deep' understanding of ethical judgements; rather, all ethical theories can cooperate to provide a 'broad' understanding. Norms and judgements are to be tested in as many ways as possible. So, moral sense, conscience, natural law, virtue and consequences can all be accommodated together with traditional moral principles: none is decisive alone. Critical self-understanding can be included within the hermeneutical and ethical project as Ricoeur's principles of recovery and suspicion. A properly hermeneutical ethics would adopt a critical realist stance in relation to truth. It would recognise ethical truth as real, but our understanding as partial. In this it would distance itself from non-cognitive (emotivist) ethics and from naïve realism while still acknowledging the role of emotion in ethics and insisting on the truth value of ethical norms and principles, even though they are ultimately revisable. Such an ethics would insist on openness to others and on the importance of conversation both within and between traditions. A properly hermeneutical ethics could not be characterised as either modern or postmodern: the scientific criteria of validation as a basis for truth claims (accepted by both) are denied. Such an ethics cannot therefore be considered as a form of relativism: as we have seen, such a charge is dependent upon the same criteria of validation together with a denial of their possibility. Normative control is provided both by tradition and by the *sensus communis*. Ethics is a communal enterprise as much as an individual one.

The importance of language in relation to understanding and its fundamental metaphorical character imply a central role for the imagination in ethical deliberation. Fusion of horizons is a work of the imagination. Gadamer's hermeneutics together with Johnson's account of moral imagination provide a better account of the phenomenology of ethical deliberation than do the traditional accounts. Johnson's account of the nature of reason, in the light of recent studies in cognitive science corrects the distorted Enlightenment view of abstract and universal reason and denies the separation of reason from will and emotion. Reason is properly situated and proceeds inductively utilising

prototype definitions and radial categories. The imaginative and creative elements of ethics can be illuminated by borrowing terms and ideas from aesthetics. 'The art of ethics' and 'moral imagination' are grounded in metaphoric projection from aesthetics to ethics; aesthetic criteria may be appropriate in evaluating moral judgements; conscience and taste have much in common. Further attention to these parallels may provide useful insights into the nature of ethics.

For Christian ethics, a hermeneutical approach could have great strength, insisting on a careful hermeneutical approach to Scripture, tradition, and experience within a framework of imaginative reasoning. It could also have significant connections with the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation and Trinity. There are also links with narrative ethics and with understandings of Christian life as 'performance'. The aesthetic rather than scientific approach allows room for the importance of improvisation and inspiration. Hermeneutics can help to clarify and justify an ecclesial ethics although it insists that any conclusions are provisional. Such an approach to ethics can combine considerations of virtue and character with those concerning actions and context. The notion of moral formation as training the imagination, together with the importance of listening to others brings ethics in line with contemplative prayer and *spiritual* formation: Christian discipleship is all of one piece.

Unfortunately, the book *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* came to my attention too late for any detailed consideration here.[34] However, many of the contributions (which concern performance, tradition, identity, worship, ethics and the arts) will be directly relevant. Also relevant will be Douglas Hedley's *Living Forms of the Imagination*, due to be published in 2008.

Much of this depends on a critical realist approach to truth and a developmental understanding of revelation. Christian ethics should be the ethics of a particular tradition that is constantly open to conversation with others. This openness is equally important within the church; particularly at a time when western hegemony is being challenged by the rise of the world church. Ethics and the gospel must be worked out in new contexts; new traditions must overlap. Gospel and ethics must be contextualised; and the process

[34] Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie (eds.), *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

will be easier if the western church recognises the contextual nature of its own understanding of the gospel and of ethics.[35] A hermeneutical ethics properly combines what David Brown identifies as the four main principles of what he calls the 'Catholic and Anglican' approach to ethics: natural law and conscience, formation and growth in holiness, love and the sacredness of the person, justice and the divine society.[36] It offers a rationale for the importance of such combination together with a unifying thread (the imagination) and guidance (aesthetic criteria) for the process without resorting to legalism or the application of universal method.

Ethical deliberation that is properly hermeneutical will adopt the insights of multiple theories and be always open to the voices of others. The ethical theorist or moral theologian might best be thought of as an art-critic staging an exhibition and writing the guidebook in order to develop a theme. Jeffrey Stout describes the process as 'bricolage':

> Calling attention to the processes of inclusion, exclusion and reconfiguration at work in creative moral thought should help us to avoid thinking of ethical reasoning merely as a procedure for determining the truth value of moral propositions ... The moral *bricoleur* needs to declare some propositions true, some false. But there is more to the process than that. *Bricolage* can put new candidates for truth and falsehood to work, recover old candidates from retirement, and alter the current division of conceptual labor. It can give some truths pride of place while making others seem trivial or irrelevant, though nonetheless true.[37]

MacIntyre considers the interminable disagreements that are the 'most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance'.[38] He argues that:

> What we possess are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely, lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.[39]

I think MacIntyre overstates his case: we may have lost the original understanding of the conceptual scheme; but it seems to me that, as our language and tradition have developed, we have created new ones. MacIntyre focuses on the disagreements between

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[35] See Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* [1978] (London: S.C.M., 2001).

[36] David Brown, *Choices: Ethics and the Christian* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 25-55.

[37] Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1988), 77.

[38] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 2nd ed, 1985), 4.

[39] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2.

the remnants of competing rival systems and concludes that they simply cannot understand one another. Stout, on the other hand, argues that there must be considerable basic level agreement between rival traditions for an argument even to develop: if there were no agreement or understanding at all, the parties would not recognise the issues as of sufficient importance to argue about.[40] It is the very fragments which MacIntyre identifies (and dismisses) that the moral *bricoleur* seeks to include, exclude or reconfigure. MacIntyre's strategy however is to attempt to retrieve the tradition of Aristotelian ethics. Gadamer's hermeneutics suggest that the historical distance involved can never be completely overcome; we can *never* retrieve Aristotle's ethics completely. We can only work with our partial and situated understandings. We should not be thinning out our moral theories; rather we should be considering their effective histories (*Wirkungsgeschichtes*) and encouraging conversation.

The form of hermeneutical ethics which I have proposed following our explorations of Gadamer and Johnson has, in my opinion, the potential to draw on the insights of other moral theories and perhaps to unite them into a coherent horizon. Hermeneutical ethics would have much in common with the contemporary retrieval of ethics from Aristotle[41] and Aquinas,[42] or developments in Natural Law ethics.[43] However, the emphases on the centrality of the imagination, the creative potential of moral language, and the conception of 'embodied reason' would set it apart. Hermeneutic ethics would allow new assessments, and perhaps even the overcoming, of several dichotomies in ethics: norm-context, cognitivist-noncognitivist, reason-passion, *a priori – a posteriori*, objective-subjective. The conclusions of such an ethics would represent a form of casuistry; they would be partial and provisional; they would be rational but not rationalistic; and they would be guided by judgements with many similarities to aesthetic judgements.

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[40] Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 13-32.

[41] E.g. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

[42] E.g. Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

[43] E.g. Rufus Black, *Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue, and the Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Natural Law and Human Dignity: Universal Ethics in an Historical World*, trans. Brian McNeil (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

This study differs from previous accounts of the ethical dimension of Gadamer's hermeneutics in its detailed engagement with *Truth and Method*; its identification of problems with, and common ground between, legalism and utilitarianism; its exploration of aesthetics and the parallels between taste and conscience; its development of the central role of imagination; its adoption of a form of critical realism; and its application to Christian ethics.

I believe that this study of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and its implications lends considerable weight to my two major theses: that ethics (including Christian ethics) should adopt a stance that is properly *hermeneutical*; and that human beings are fundamentally *imaginative* moral beings. Hermeneutical ethics could allow a greater role for the imagination in moral deliberation and provide a system which is flexible, creative and humane; and which properly reflects the goodness and beauty of God.

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