MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF PLURALISM

by

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B.Ed., The University of British Columbia, 1990

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Educational Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October 1996

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Date OCT. 11/96.
Abstract

Moral development is a topic that has consistently elicited contention because of the difficulties, vaguenesses and uncertainties of the moral life. Combine this with the contemporary pluralistic milieu and the problems of communicating unambiguously about moral development are only exacerbated for a commitment to pluralism involves not only recognition of the fact of diversity itself but the adoption of a normative position commending diversity as a means of enriching our lives. In both descriptive and prescriptive senses, pluralism poses significant problems for any discussion of moral development not least of which is the challenge of ethical relativism. In this thesis I seek to articulate an orientation toward moral development sensitive to the context of pluralism.

Along the way I address the themes of universal principles, traditions, ethical relativism and moral languages—all with an eye toward relating them to moral progress. I argue that universal principles understood as culture-transcendent arbiters of moral disagreement are impossible to access, that our inescapable starting point within a tradition precludes gazing directly into the Moral Law but that this need not lead to relativism. In addition, I discuss moral languages in depth and conclude that they not only provide the framework for expressing moral concerns but significantly determine our form of life.

Picking up on these themes, I harmonize a carefully delineated conception of universalism—rejecting problematic senses—with cultural embeddedness and elaborate on the notion of progress from "within." It is within a tradition that we develop habits of affection and behaviour and exercise virtues we need in order to become virtuous. We can then reflect upon, analyze and criticize the efficacy of customs and conventions and this implies a conception of the good life that transcends the particularities of the moral language(s) we speak. The result is a stereoscopic view of moral progress in which we revise our understanding of the good in light of our experience and develop our conception of the good and the habit of right judgment and action in tandem, each being corrected in the light of the other as we move dialectically between them.
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Introduction

Pluralistic society—sometimes called liberal society or liberal political orders—is the contemporary context in which discussion of moral development generally and moral education specifically must be couched and I take it that we want to maintain and further develop a healthy pluralistic society; at least this is the assumption underlying the work of this thesis. It is within the context of pluralism that I want to address moral development and do so with the intent of developing an orientation toward it.

Phrasing my task in terms of an orientation toward moral development allows me to limit my project by freeing me from dealing with specifics of moral education in depth—things like definitions of education and particular approaches. To avoid misunderstanding, let me hasten to add that not dealing in depth with such specifics is not the same thing as saying that nothing will be said on these matters. I will assume that, in a broad sense, moral education is moral development, that education is, in large part, concerned with development in one form or another. By describing the following as an orientation, though, I can encapsulate my goal as encouraging a certain direction of thought. The import, therefore, will be philosophical in that what follows will be a preliminary investigation designed to set the background and lay the groundwork which the specifics must take into account.

Chapter one will be an attempt, in large part, to show why we must avoid aspiring to a culture-transcendent view suggested by a focus on universal principles and to deny that this leads inevitably to relativism thereby making moral development a moot point. I will argue that viewing moral principles as universal principles is a mistake because a culture-transcendent thing-in-itself cannot perform the role of final judge and arbiter in cases of moral dispute. Access to the Moral Law now becomes the point at issue. Our

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1 This assumption would be disputed by MacIntyre (1984) who argues that the “acids of modernity” have dissolved the necessary conventions or consensus required for rational agreement on a conception of the good and that only in smaller unified societies lies our hope of survival but supported by Stout (1988) who contends that the multiplicity of moral standpoints does not threaten coherent moral discourse.
embeddedness within a community or culture precludes escaping culture and history altogether and gazing directly into the Moral Law examining it for points of correspondence and using it as a standard by which to judge moral propositions. My position will not involve questioning the underlying rationale for seeking principles nor doubting the existence of moral truths. Rather, it will be the location of principles in ultimate foundations that is at issue and not the existence or necessary abstractness of principles themselves. My remarks, therefore, will be epistemological and not ontological in nature.

In chapters two and three I seek to elaborate on the concept of moral languages. The discussion of language in general will relate it to knowledge, thought and action and conclude that language characterized as a form of life is very apt. More than just words we use, our linguistic capacity is essential in understanding ourselves and an integral part in determining who we are. By extension, therefore, moral languages not only provide the framework for expressing moral concerns but significantly determine our (moral) form of life. Studying and learning them aids moral development because, not only does comparative inquiry explain away apparent differences between cultures, reveal opinions to be justified but false or show another group to be irrational, but such study may result in uncovering our own distortions and can show us where we have gone wrong. Moral language learning, then, can aid our attempts to live a moral life within a pluralistic community by enhancing moral perception.

Chapters four and five pick up on the major themes of the first three chapters and deal with moral development directly and in depth. There I seek to wed what may, at first, seem incompatible lines of thought as I try to combine a carefully delineated conception of universalism (rejecting the troublesome senses I would rather do without) with cultural embeddedness. The result will be a stereoscopic view of moral progress (reminiscent of Stout's (1988) conception of stereoscopic social criticism) in which any appearance of paradox can be overcome through dialectical interplay between the components. And finally, I will offer some concluding remarks.
The Context of Pluralism

John Kekes (1993) states that "the pluralistic view of individuality is that it involves constructing a good life out of the available plural possibilities." (p. 14) Granting the existence of plural possibilities, we can zero in on a key tenet of pluralism and that is the recognition of a \textit{prima facie} right to difference. This notion of difference requires some explanation.

At one level, diversity can be thought of as differences in lifestyles. Visible—I might add, superficial—differences like clothing styles and food preferences fall in this category. But the previous quote from Kekes about constructing a good life clearly uses pluralism to encompass more than the existence of superficial differences. Pluralism conjoined with good lives (emphasis on the "good") portrays differences not only in a shallow sense but in the much deeper sense of having moral significance.

Value pluralism, among other things, points to diversity in conceptions of morality.\footnote{There are, of course, other values that swing free of moral significance such as those associated with aesthetics, artistic creativity, the cultivation of style and the superficial differences of clothing styles and food preferences just mentioned.} James Wilson (1993) illustrates using the moral code of an Apache warrior versus that of a professor of philosophy.

The Apache warrior may have been far more loyal to his family and caring of his offspring than a contemporary professor of philosophy, but where the Apache would kill without remorse a warrior from another tribe, the philosopher would feel obliged not only to spare the life of a sociologist but to go to great lengths to ensure that the latter was given equal opportunity and personal liberty. (p. 194)

In this case one might argue that there is no fundamental disagreement between the professor and the warrior over not harming others and that the only real disagreement lies in the extent of application of the principle not to harm others.\footnote{I will have a great deal more to say on this in subsequent chapters.} But this example does show at least a difference in priorities. Generally speaking, different conceptions of morality have different priorities and ideals often stemming from varying cultural and
religious practices. For my purposes right now, using the term "pluralism" with reference to differences both moral and nonmoral is to use it in a purely descriptive sense to refer to the fact of diversity itself.

There is another sense, however, in which the term "pluralism" can be used and that is in a prescriptive sense. When I said that a key tenet of pluralism was the recognition of a *prima facie* right to difference, much more than the fact of diversity alone is involved. A *right* to be different—or a right to anything else for that matter—implies the taking of an evaluative stance about the way something ought to be. Pluralism thus construed is a normative position taken regarding diversity. Conceptualized this way it involves defending people's freedom to do as they please and express themselves as they see fit within constraints set only by the freedom of others. Human diversity is to be encouraged rather than crushed and, as an ideal, pluralism promotes diversity as a means of enrichment by enlarging the repertoire of possibilities for living meaningful lives.

It is in the prescriptive sense that pluralism poses significant problems for any discussion of moral development, problems which are unavoidable given the assumption stated at the outset that we want to maintain and further develop a healthy pluralistic society.\(^4\) I now want to focus on perhaps the most serious one which Dwight Boyd (1992) characterizes as "an insidious slide from the fact of cultural pluralism to the supposed 'fact' of ethical relativism." (p. 144) The factual existence of many different values—some of which seriously conflict with each other—can be turned into a virtue leading to relativism "despite the fact that the latter move [to ethical relativism] bids to undercut why one should

\(^4\)It is not within the scope of this work to argue for this in any detailed way, but consider the following from Professor Orlando Patterson (I take the "valorization of personal liberty" as a notion finding a congenial home in pluralism): "...the valorization of personal liberty is the noblest achievement of Western civilization. That people are free to do as they please within limits set only by the personal freedom of others; that legally all persons are equal before the law; that philosophically the individual's separate existence is inviolable; that psychologically the ultimate human condition is to be liberated from all internal and external constraints on one's desire to realize one's self; and that spiritually the son of God made himself incarnate, then gave up his life in order to redeem mankind from spiritual thralldom and to make people free and equal before God—all add up to a value complex that...in its profundity and power, is superior to any other single complex of values conceived by mankind." (quoted in Wilson, 1993, p. 195)
be morally worried about the first real fact [the existence of many values] (and despite the fact that the seemingly natural appeal to tolerance for grounding policy claims is itself undercut).” (p. 144) To deal with this will require a separate chapter.
Chapter One

UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES

Introduction

Since the Enlightenment, the common pursuit of most moral philosophers has been the search for universal principles which could be used to justify alternative courses of action in every sphere of life. Concerning what he calls the Enlightenment Project, MacIntyre (1988) comments:

So, it was hoped, reason would displace authority and tradition. Rational justification was to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities which the Enlightenment thinkers took to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places. (p. 6)

Not surprisingly, the work of many moral development theorists has focussed on the development and application of such principles as justice, respect for persons, impartiality and so forth--principles which it was thought could carry the burden of universality and could be used in moral problem solving. One notable theory is Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental approach to moral education in which moral development progresses through a series of stages, finally culminating in an orientation toward universal ethical principles. On his view, a universal conception of justice, not particular societal norms, should define the goals of moral education.

As MacIntyre is quick to point out, however, neither the thinkers of the Enlightenment nor their successors were able to agree on which principles would be found undeniable by all rational persons. Bentham's utilitarianism and Kant's categorical imperative are two striking examples and one parallel in moral education can be seen in the work of Carol Gilligan (1987) and Nell Noddings (1984), both of whom criticize Kohlberg on the basis that his orientation towards justice unfairly discriminates against women whose moral perspectives are often dominated by a focus on care rather than justice.

Historical and current lack of agreement is, I think, something we might have expected. As Kekes (1993) notes, any attempt to articulate a medium for ranking values faces two
serious obstacles.¹ For one, the more objective the medium is, the less its capacity to allow for cultural and individual differences in the way values are ranked and any move to interpret the medium more subjectively only detracts from its original purpose of ranking all values in an unbiased fashion. For another, using a specific value like pleasure or justice against which to rank all types of values creates problems of translation. "The objection to any specific medium," he says "will be that there are some types of values so utterly different from it as to make their translation into the terms of the specific medium grotesquely inappropriate." (p. 69)

While it is, no doubt, possible to flesh out the conception of a specific value like Kohlbergian justice so as to include Nodding's focus on care thereby easing problems of translation, differences in emphasis are sure to linger. How serious these may be I will postpone discussing until later. For the moment, though, I do not want to lose sight of the Enlightenment aim of articulating universal principles "independent of social and cultural particularities." Presupposed in this effort and perhaps lurking beneath the surface is a substantive and detailed conception of the good life, a telos defining a single way of life all human beings should seek to attain regardless of historical and cultural contingencies. And agreement on a substantive, detailed conception of the good is hard to come by in contemporary liberal society.

Historical and current lack of agreement aside, there have been a number of recent challenges to the conception of morality as a set of universally binding principles constraining all rational persons which attempt to show how this conception is unnecessary, undesirable and impossible.² One result, according to Annette Baier, is that it is no longer "hard to see how there could be any such thing as moral philosophy if there were no such thing as 'the moral law'."³ It is this notion of what has been variously

¹See especially p. 69.
²For an overview, see Clarke and Simpson (1989), Antithesis in Ethics and Moral Conservatism. (pp. 1-26).
described as universal principles, the Moral Law, first principles, foundational principles or a culture-transcendent thing-in-itself that I intend to examine. In particular, I will argue that articulating moral principles as culture-transcendent things-in-themselves is ultimately misguided (though most likely done with the best of intentions as a means of avoiding relativism). I will then address the question of whether giving up appeals to a culture-transcendent Moral Law means succumbing to radical relativism or even treading dangerously close. While it might at first appear this is the inevitable result, it will be seen that this is by no means necessarily the case.

**Universal Principles**

In order to clarify my position, two things need to be done. The first is to register a caveat, and the second is to acknowledge as legitimate the demand for independent criteria to which we can appeal in resolving moral disputes.

Concerning the caveat, what I am not questioning is the underlying rationale for seeking principles. Surely we want good reasons for undertaking one course of action over another or holding the beliefs that we do. Nor am I doubting that—in some sense which will be commented on later—an absolute moral law exists. What I am questioning is the possibility of appealing to ultimately foundational principles in an effort to resolve moral disputes or get to the "truth of a matter." Thus, it is the location of principles in ultimate foundations that is at issue and not the existence or necessary abstractness of principles themselves. This needs to be made clear at the outset for the position that I am taking must not be confused with ethical skepticism whereby one denies the possibility of justified beliefs. The rationality of moral thinking need not be rejected when ultimate foundations are called into question.

With regard to criteria, I acknowledge that some sense of their independence is necessary if we are to make justifiable moral pronouncements at all. The problems associated with not having independent criteria are serious ones. Stanley Clarke and Evan Simpson (1989) contend that the "most pungent reason" against rejecting the Moral Law as
a culture-transcendent thing-in-itself is "moral anxiety at giving up theoretical foundations for moral belief. Without foundations we seem in danger of going off the rails, and we have no intellectual weapons against cultures which have, in our view, already done so." (p. 19) In the same vein, Sabina Lovibond (1983) states that the notion of rationality as not being grounded in universal principles is often seen as problematic because it "does nothing to commend any specific policy toward groups or individuals whose practices diverge from our own." (p. 212)

But granting criteria independence still leaves the question of the extent of such independence unanswered. At a minimum, of course, it means not being subject to arbitrary individual choice. But between this and transcultural universal principles lies a whole spectrum of different points at which we might want to posit the limit where sufficient independence is attained. While answering this question in a definitive way is outside my purview (and may in fact be impossible), part of what follows will address this, albeit in a limited way.

For the time being, I want to return to the first part of my main topic which is the articulation of universal rational principles and the reasons why this project is misguided. By saying it is misguided, though, I do not want to minimize the great deal of effort over a period of centuries that has gone to explicating such principles nor some powerful reasons for doing so. One such reason was a shift—given impetus by Enlightenment ideals—from blind obedience to authority to a reliance on one's own reason. At root in the Enlightenment philosophical emphasis on rationalism was the belief that human beings could be understood by the use of natural faculties. The authority of revealed religion, ancient custom or hereditary monarches was a form of tutelage to be dispensed with and replaced by a reliance on one's own reason, such reason being grounded in principles undeniable by any rational person and thus independent of social and cultural particularities. No doubt such a move was hastened by the corruptions of religious and political authorities.
Another reason for articulating universal principles (closer to home for most of us) is worry over disagreement and diversity in ethics. Without universal rational principles to which we can appeal, are not moral nihilism, skepticism and relativism our only options? How can we—as Clarke and Simpson and Lovibond remind us—respond to other groups, individuals or cultures with whom we are so obviously deeply at odds?

Leaving these questions to the side for the moment, though, consider what is involved in any appeal to universal principles. The search for a presuppositionless first principle or principles upon which our reasoning (including our moral reasoning) can be founded is perhaps most famously articulated by Descartes (1968). He writes, "I had to undertake seriously once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted up to then, and to begin afresh from the foundations, if I wished to establish something firm and constant..." (p. 95) Now beginning afresh as a means of correcting past mistakes and preventing future ones is a laudable endeavour and it obviously never occurred to Descartes to question the viability of his project. Had he seriously done so, however, he might have discovered that such a project, far from merely not meeting with success, could not even be started.

Important to note here is how Descartes starts from the assumption that he knows nothing whatsoever. Yet can he legitimately say this? Notice that one feature of the universe he is not putting into doubt is his capacity to use language and this is an oversight of enormous magnitude for with a language comes an inheritance through expression in a set of meanings. It is language which furnishes one with a way of ordering thoughts, and the meanings expressed through language can only be recognized as meanings on the assumption that there is someone else to whom they can be conveyed. Meaning is, in part, that which is conveyed and those to whom meaning is conveyed constitute what can be called a community.

The following argument is made by Alasdair MacIntyre in "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," in Clarke and Simpson (1989).

Chapters two and three of this thesis take an extended look at language in general and moral language in particular. I touch on the topic here because it is indispensable in making the argument for cultural embeddedness.
To possess a language is tantamount to being embedded in a community in the sense of the customary beliefs shared by a racial, social, or religious group. Because communities change over time, it makes sense to speak of meanings as having a history which, in turn, explains why it is correct to say that with a language comes an inheritance. Meanings are handed down from one generation to the next or passed on within a generation and just as it is with a material inheritance like property whose use can change over time, so it is with meanings.

For Descartes to understand his task as "beginning afresh," then, is not to realize that if one really knew nothing, embarking on a course of radical doubt would not be possible. It is to be blind to the context of community and culture within which we all exist. In MacIntyre's words: "What thus goes unrecognized by Descartes is the presence not only of languages, but of a tradition—a tradition that he took himself to have successfully disowned." Had Descartes been more aware, MacIntyre goes on to say, he might have noticed that his ideas were actually reflections of material from his school textbooks and that even the *Cogito* was to be found in Saint Augustine.

The significance of this for the question of the necessity of the Moral Law must not be overlooked. Despite the reasons for having a transcendent thing-in-itself called the Moral Law or universal principles it is questionable what kind of help it can give us since what is now at issue is our access to the Moral Law. If it is the case that we are necessarily embedded within a community or a culture, then any attempt to apply a transcendent thing-in-itself would involve describing it in our own terms—terms which presuppose a language and the attendant history of meanings which accompany it. The moment this is done says Jeffrey Stout (1988), we are no longer "appealing to a thing-in-itself but rather to a belief about the truth of the matter in question. When we test our beliefs for truth or rational acceptability, we appeal not to the thing-in-itself—to which, by definition, we could never

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have access—but rather to further beliefs not currently in question..." (p. 23) One conclusion to be drawn from all of this, again in Stout's words, is that "you can't somehow leap out of culture and history altogether and gaze directly into the Moral Law, using it as a standard for judging the justification or truth of moral propositions, any more than you can gaze directly into the mind of God." (p. 23)

Questioning the efficacy of the Moral Law as arbiter in cases of moral dispute or as a criterion for judging the truth of moral propositions, however, need not bring moral nihilism in its train, a tendency for some to which it is difficult not to succumb. It is simply a non sequitur to say that there are no moral truths. Earlier I mentioned that, in some sense, the Moral Law does exist. In just what sense is this?

Following Stout, nothing in what has been said about access to a culture-transcendent Moral Law prevents us from using it as a name for all the moral truths, known now or yet to be discovered, that can be formulated in all possible moral vocabularies. "The problems," says Stout, "come when we appeal to the Moral Law, in our explanations or criteria of moral truth, in a way that requires denying that we are necessarily employing culturally embedded categories as we do. For then the implied sense of the phrase 'culture-transcendent Moral Law' is: 'a set of moral truths one could know or understand without making use of a moral vocabulary.' And there is no such thing." (p. 34)

Another way to put the distinction is to rigourously separate epistemological from ontological considerations. Testing our beliefs by reference to "further beliefs not currently in question" tells us something about the justification procedure, not about whether moral truths exist or not. The point is that appeals to a culture-transcendent Moral Law are epistemologically impossible because they must occur within a moral vocabulary which, in turn, is couched in a cultural tradition thereby making a culture-transcendent thing-in-itself something described in our own terms and therefore inaccessible as something that is culture-transcendent. The existence of the Moral Law (if this means moral truths) is not in
question. The use of a transcultural Moral Law—translated into universal principles to arbitrate moral disputes or as a criterion for judging the truth of moral propositions—is.

But if articulating moral principles as transcultural things-in-themselves is ultimately misguided, must we embrace relativism or even tread dangerously close? If we cannot point to something indisputable like first principles to arbitrate moral disputes must we dispense with notions of justification and truth? And does this mean moral development is a mere fiction?

The answers to these questions depend on what we mean by relativism but before dealing with this I want to point out that on purely theoretical grounds, nothing in what has been concluded to this point precludes moral development. Moral truth, and therefore something to aim at, is not in question. Granted, our task is nothing so simple as choosing the correct principle to systematically apply to particular cases as one would choose the correct wrench to tighten a bolt. On "practical" grounds, therefore, we may not have much. But there is no fundamental rejection of moral truth. The problem lies in securing some kind of agreement on the good or what counts as moral truth in the absence of universal principles to which all people on pain of irrationality must appeal. It is with this problem as a backdrop that I want to briefly examine relativism.

The Challenge of Relativism

If what we mean by relativism is that all truth is relative, I would agree that moral development per se would be hard to delineate. But even in the contemporary context of diversity, we need not grant relativity of truth for we can draw an important distinction between relativity of truth and relativity of justification. Consider the following.7

Despite the problems of appealing to a transcendent thing-in-itself in justifying moral propositions, it does not follow that two people involved in a moral dispute have nothing in common. For disagreement to take place at all, there must be enough in common between

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the disputants to make sense of what it is they are disagreeing about. If what one person calls right and good is completely unlike what another calls right and good, it would be difficult to say that what they disagree over is really about rightness or goodness after all. Where no overlap whatsoever exists, whatever disagreement there is must be merely verbal. Thus, there must be a limit—vague and problematical though it may be—to the amount of disagreement that can be allowed on moral matters if the disagreement is to be about moral matters at all. Too much disagreement and and the subject simply changes or becomes unintelligible. The problem as already mentioned, of course, comes in determining how or where we can place the limit since our earlier considerations showed the difficulty of positing it in a set of universal principles all must agree on if rationality is to be preserved.

In dealing with this problem Stout (1988) comments: "Doubting whether a Moral Law...is needed to give moral propositions something to be true of in order to keep the bottom from falling out of moral objectivity isn't the same as doubting that moral propositions have truth-value." (p. 24) The way the term "true" functions in our language does not, and indeed cannot, require correspondence to the Moral Law because of the culturally embedded state of all of our knowledge. But, says Stout, if we follow J.L. Austin and Donald Davidson in examining the use of true in sentences like "'Murder is unjust' is true if and only if murder is unjust," we will see that we do not need an epistemological theory for it. All we need to know comes through the use of the term in our language.8

Suspicion, then, about certain criteria such as universal principles does not mean jettisoning the term "true" and, as already noted, we need not even object to the notion of universal principles or the Moral Law if what they represent are all the moral truths, known and unknown, that can be formulated in all possible moral languages. The objection comes

8The role of language in this area will be discussed in some detail in chapter three.
when attempting to formulate a correspondence to such "things-in-themselves" because of the culturally-embedded state in which we find ourselves. Sabina Lovibond (1983) sums it up nicely:

we wish to purge our critical concepts (such as 'truth', 'rationality', 'validity') of the absolutist or transcendent connotations attaching to them in the context of a foundational epistemology; but we do not wish, in the process, to find ourselves abolishing those concepts altogether. What is difficult is to pursue the twofold aim of showing, on one hand, that it does not make sense to look for a source of authority external to human practice which would certify as true...those propositions that we call true; while, on the other hand, resisting the proffered alternative to our former, metaphysically contaminated use of those concepts—an alternative which would consist simply in jettisoning the concepts in question and replacing them by others. (p. 45)

Given these considerations, we are now in a position to shed some more light on the issue of relativism.

When there are disagreements on ethical matters, these can only make sense if there is some common ground and some truth of the matter to disagree over. Such a truth of the matter also commits one to saying that another's beliefs are wrong if they conflict with beliefs one holds to be true. But of critical importance is that such ascriptions as "you are wrong" can swing free of imputing blame if we are willing to distinguish justification from truth.

Stout asks us to consider the scientific proposition, once commonly held, that the earth was flat. Thousands of years ago the best available evidence provided justification for believing this to be the case and, despite current evidence to the contrary, at the time it would have made sense to apply the term "true" to such a belief even though the "truth" (understood as unvarying over time) is that the earth really is round. If we grant this in the scientific arena, why not in the ethical? We may, for example, rightly say that human sacrifice is wrong without necessarily imputing blame to those who practise it or who do not find it morally problematical. We do not think that devastatingly infectious diseases can be averted in this way--but others, given their particular historical context, may believe this
and be conceivably justified in doing so. The point is that we can go on confidently using the term true in a straightforward manner, all the while recognizing that some beliefs we consider true may someday be discovered to be false. What this amounts to is saying that justification is relative to a particular context while truth is not.

The relativity implied here, though, is not a matter of subjective, arbitrary individual choice. Saying that justification is relative to a context implies there is more than individual choice. It includes one's epistemic circumstance or what Stout calls a cognitive context. One aspect of this context includes standards native to it in the sense of consensus in some areas and shared intentions and desires in others. Admittedly, the ingredient in all of this that brings in a measure of subjectivity is the fact of the human subject's own involvement but this is only one ingredient. Other ingredients in the contextual mix include "facts about what my peers take for granted, about judgmental dispositions acquired by members of my society during successful training in the relevant practices, about the history of casuistical precedents in my tradition, about evidence available to me and so on" (Stout, 1988, p. 30) and these facts are all open to objective scrutiny.

It is the presupposition of shared standards molded by embeddedness in a cultural tradition which forms the common ground necessary for normative discourse to even take place and be recognized as normative discourse. Our inability to explain truth with reference to universal principles need not eliminate the notion of truth criteria in the sense of norms as long as we posit such norms in a context. Because this context is open to revision and change, justification is relative in a way that truth is not. The truth of the proposition that human sacrifice is wrong does not vary over time or from one context to another but what we are justified in believing about it may well vary depending on historical and cultural particularities. I hope this discussion addresses in part my earlier mention of criteria independence, its extent and the spectrum of points between individual choice and universal principles at which sufficient independence is attained.
The threat of relativism to moral development, then, need not be perceived to be as serious as some believe. The threat would be a serious one if relativism extended as far as the truth of moral propositions. In cases of moral deadlock, this brand of relativism could foster intolerance and thereby contribute to violent forms of resolution. But a willingness to distinguish justification from truth can provide us the wherewithal to affirm our own convictions without blaming a different culture for believing differently.

**Conclusion**

In light of all of this, it would seem that any educational push for moral development must include more than merely instruction in principles or a bag of virtues approach. Let me not be misunderstood. I am not denigrating the need for principled living nor the inculcation of virtues as part of the process of moral education. Principles do provide reasons for acting and believing as we do. And training in virtues such as honesty is also valuable if we concur with C.S. Lewis (1978) who writes: "I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite sceptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat,' than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers." (p. 19)

What I am saying is that moral education needs to be conceived of as a broader enterprise than mere teaching of principles and virtues particularly because we live in a pluralistic society in which there is great diversity. When our disagreements cannot be solved rationally, violence often ensues. Even when this does not happen, in addition to disagreements over moral propositions, it is often the case that we fail to understand what others are saying to us. It is as if we were being spoken to in another language and within our pluralistic society there seem to be many moral languages. The problem and the challenge for moral education is, in large part, to help us become conversant with each other. Stout (1988) comments: "Our capacity to live peaceably with each other depends upon our ability to converse intelligibly and reason coherently. But this ability is weakened
by the very differences that make it necessary. The more we need it, the weaker it becomes, and we need it very badly indeed." (p. 3)

Moral development, therefore, will be achieved in large part through moral language learning, a topic covered extensively in the next two chapters. But just before tackling this topic, I want to very briefly comment on whether, given the amount and depth of disagreement we encounter in our society, we can really expect to meet with success.

At least one contemporary philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), argues that the necessary conventions needed to converse intelligibly simply do not exist. Our disagreements are both too many and too deep and he points to the interminable character of contemporary public debates over warfare, abortion, and freedom and equality to make his point. It is not that he excludes the possibility of necessary conventions. Earlier communities such as the Greek polis did exhibit them. His argument is that our contemporary situation lacks them.

But if we recall the preceding argument about levels of disagreement, I do not think the current situation is as catastrophic as MacIntyre suggests, for if disagreement is pushed too far, it disappears by becoming merely verbal. Disagreement only makes sense against a background of agreement or, in other words, when there really is a "truth of the matter." Our disagreement on what is right or good, therefore, cannot be total and the problem of a current lack of consensus about our ultimate telos need not cause undue alarm.

Granted, what exactly the common ground consists of may be difficult to clearly articulate but, in any case, is unambiguous articulation really necessary? Pang (1994) notes: "Our understanding of our commonality is itself changeable and open to deepening. Nor is it the case that when we do have a sense of our commonality, we need be able to clearly articulate that sense... neither of these qualifications weakens the significance of having this sense." (p. 141)

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9See After Virtue, pp. 6, 7.
For all of this, MacIntyre may, in the end, turn out to be right. Even where sufficient agreement and conceptual resources exist, lack of willpower and corruption in our religious, political and economic institutions may have forced us into an inexorable downward spiral toward ruin. If this is the case, then (no triteness intended) too bad for us. In any event, in spite of undeniable problems in the contemporary societal milieu, I will assume we are not on an inexorable headlong rush toward ruin. This said, I turn to the topic of moral languages.
Chapter Two
LANGUAGE
Introduction

Having mentioned moral language learning at several points, I would like to elaborate on the concept of moral languages. If—as I have already stated and will argue more explicitly for later—learning them needs to be a vital component of moral development, we will need to have a clear understanding of what we mean by them. The topic of language in general, which is where we must begin, has generated an extensive literature. What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive study but it will deal in some depth with salient points of language in general which are relevant to moral languages in particular. To give a sense of direction to what follows, let me state that the gist of what I have to say about moral languages is that they are secondarily defined by their concrete linguistic forms and primarily refer to different conceptualities within which we understand and evaluate character, behaviour and community. Thus, the languages of morals not only provide the framework for expressing moral concerns but significantly determine our form of life. This is as succinct as I can be at stating my position, so now let me turn to supporting it.

Language as Tool

One of the definitions of language offered by Webster's dictionary is "the words...used and understood by a considerable community." (italics mine) I suspect that most people, if asked to define language, would very quickly focus on the use of words in order to communicate and in a penetrating essay called "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell (1982) shows just how important one's vocabulary can be in making one's meaning clear.

In his essay Orwell mounts a sustained attack on muddy writing and thinking. His thesis is that writing is closely akin to thinking and that by clarifying one you clarify the other. Through many examples he isolates categories such as dying metaphors, pretentious diction, and meaningless words--ways of writing which, he claims, "fall upon the facts like
soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details." (p. 501) Such ways of writing, he claims, can do more than merely obscure one's meaning; they can even go so far as to change one's meaning. Now whether we are convinced by his argument or whether we follow Derrida and the Deconstructionists in razing determinate meaning by rejecting the "metaphysics of presence" and, from the rubble, constructing the indeterminate text, is, for my present purposes, beside the point. What Orwell illustrates exceptionally well is how one's vocabulary can impact communication.

Consider, he says, the following well-known passage from Ecclesiastes 9:11:

\[ \text{I have seen something else under the sun:} \]
\[ \text{The race is not to the swift} \]
\[ \text{or the battle to the strong,} \]
\[ \text{nor does food come to the wise} \]
\[ \text{or wealth to the brilliant} \]
\[ \text{or favour to the learned;} \]
\[ \text{but time and chance happen to them all.} \]

Here is Orwell's parody of how the same passage might read in "modern" English:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (p. 497)

Whether we find the result humourous or detestable--Orwell would certainly fall in the latter category--we should notice that something less than a full translation has been made. Analyzing the two sentences reveals that the first sentence contains forty-six words and fifty-four syllables and all the words come from everyday life. The second contains only thirty-eight words but increases the syllable count to a total of ninety; and, according to Orwell, eighteen words come from Latin roots and one from Greek. If asked to describe the linguistic form of each rendering, I would call the first ordinary language\(^2\) and the

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\(^1\)All Scripture passages in this thesis are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

\(^2\)Poetry, perhaps, but poetry using ordinary language.
second academic language. Note also that the second, again according to Orwell, actually gives a shortened version of the meaning found in the first because, subsumed under the nebulous phrase "success or failure in competitive activities," are the concrete illustrations of race, battle and food. The loss of precision and detail is, I think, rather charitably described by Orwell as resulting in a shortened version of the meaning found in the first. We can be harsher in our criticism by saying that the second sentence actually obscures the meaning of the first.

It might be argued that the distinction between ordinary and academic language is none too significant and on the basis of the above example, I would be hard pressed to argue the point. Vague translation of a scripture passage that contains mere observation as opposed to denunciation of sin, exhortation to endure hardship, or a commandment to love one's neighbour may seem harmless. The point is that other passages such as the ones just mentioned also exist and, at least to the Christian, are important. Of possibly more general interest, consider how political language furnishes a second example of how vocabulary can obscure meaning.

A socialist by conviction, Orwell continually warned of the dangers of a totalitarian state and declared that political language—especially under these regimes—was necessarily vague and euphemistic because it often involved defense of the indefensible. Thus, pacification really means bombing defenseless villages, driving out the inhabitants and setting their homes on fire. Elimination of undesirable elements really means imprisonment without trial, or a shot in the back. Rectification of frontiers really means robbing peasants of their farms and sending them off with no more than they can carry. To these we can add contemporary American "militarisms" such as theatre of operations which really means a war zone where people die; or "terminate with extreme prejudice" which means to make certain someone is killed. In all of these examples there is a certain amount of deception which may or may not be a bad thing. Sometimes we want to be sheltered from the harsher realities of life. At other times, however, deliberate attempts are made to deceive us into
compliance with what really is indefensible and those attempts often use vocabulary designed to mask or temper the brutal measures used.

A third example of the importance of vocabulary in making one's meaning clear (or vague) comes from Ethics after Babel by Jeffrey Stout (1988). He cites the following five "Codes of Human Conduct" in what he calls ancient and contemporary interpretations:

1. The Spirit of Contribution Loyalty to Country
2. The Spirit of Respect Obedience to Parents
3. The Spirit of Harmony and Unity Honour Friendship
4. The Spirit of Determination No Retreat in battle
5. The Spirit of Humanity In Killing, Choose with Sense and Honour. (p. ix)

In the same way that Orwell translated the Ecclesiastes passage into "modern" English, someone obviously felt the need to do the same here. And like Orwell, Stout is quick to point out that something has been lost in the translation, so much so that in the fifth case we might either laugh or be troubled. In describing the contemporary interpretation, I think we can charitably call it sheer cloudy vagueness. At best it is a move to abstraction which dilutes the meaning of the ancient interpretation. The operation seems to be one of unclothing quality garments and then re-clothing in shabby raiment. I should point out, however, that for my present purposes it does not matter whether we think the exact opposite. We may view the contemporary interpretation as far superior to the ancient one. What is clear from either perspective is that one's choice of vocabulary or the linguistic form one uses impacts communication and meaning.

Part of the purpose of citing the preceding three examples of linguistic forms was simply to illustrate how they affect conveyed meaning and if this were all we could glean from them, I admit we could probably have dispensed with them as illustrating a point too obvious to mention. But there is more.

One of the common threads running through each example is the notion of language as a discrete thing, a tool or an instrument under the control of the subject. This is perhaps most clearly seen in Orwell's example of the political language of totalitarian regimes where unacceptable brutality and injustice is tempered to the point of seeming legitimacy. Here
language is used by a few who are in power to dull the sensitivities of the many and to garner support or at least non-resistance for the actions they take. Language as an instrument is also evident in the modern interpretation of the codes of human conduct. Translation into a language deemed more suitable to us in the twentieth century assumes some kind of understanding of the original language and an ability to convey the same meaning (at least the gist of it) in another language. The point is that some person or group of people must do the translating using the tool called language in much the same way that a person uses an instrument called the axe to fell a tree.

It is not my intention to deny that language is an instrument which we shape for our own purposes. Orwell's argument in "Politics and the English Language" is a successful attempt to show that language can be viewed this way and not merely as a natural growth. It is my intention, though, to argue that language is not only a tool under the control of the subject and that if we are to grasp what moral language as a subset (a very large one, I think) of language is, we will need to include other facets of equal importance. Along with Harpham (1992), I concur that:

Language is the site of so many operations that are critical to a human form of being that it is extremely difficult to get hold of what, after all, we are talking about when we talk about language. Activated by individual acts of will and intention, language seems a supplement to a world essentially complete without it; and yet the world is already saturated with language, and it is pointless to try to imagine...a world that is newly altered by language, as though language belatedly imposed itself from the outside. Something less than an agent and more than a medium, at once "nowhere" and "everywhere," language is neither "responsible" nor "neutral," neither fully active nor entirely passive; its power is at best, or at least, a kind of pseudo-power to inform and shape the norms, values, objects, and states that acquire form and shape in it. (p. 73)

To say that language is "activated by individual acts of will and intention" is akin to describing it as a tool under the control of the subject. To say that language is "critical to a human form of being," that the world is "saturated with language" and that language possesses "a kind of pseudo-power to inform and shape the norms, values, objects, and
states that acquire form and shape in it" is to accord to language a role much greater than that of a mere tool. To get a sense of why this is the case, I want to outline how language relates to knowledge, thought, and action.

**Language and Knowledge**

The standard account of knowledge, often called the tripartite account because there are three parts to it, defines knowledge as justified true belief. This account defines propositional knowledge, knowledge that something is the case, as opposed to knowledge by acquaintance as in "John knows who you are," or knowledge-how as in knowing how to play basketball.

Accompanying this standard definition are some standard problems. One of them focuses on what counts as a justified belief. If by justified we mean having adequate evidence, the question then arises as to how adequate our evidence must be. We would have to insist on more than merely some evidence and something less than logically conclusive evidence for logically conclusive evidence would reduce knowledge to distressingly few propositions the denial of which are self-contradictory, e.g., "2 + 2 = 4." Another problem raised by E.L. Gettier details how one can have a justified but false belief which can be used to justifiably believe something which only happens to be true and this could hardly be counted as knowledge either.

I mention these points for two reasons. First, I want to acknowledge that the problem of defining knowledge is still not completely resolved. This need not deter us, however, for Wittgenstein (1958) has convincingly argued that a concept does not have to be definable in order to be useful. The fact that we have instances of a concept is all we need. No element common to all instances is required (§§ 66, 67). Second, the standard account of knowledge as justified true belief provides the context for what follows.

In my earlier comments on the concept of truth, I said that the way the term "true" functions in our language does not and cannot require correspondence with reality because of the culturally embedded state in which we find ourselves. Our inability to divorce
ourselves from our cultural context prevents a God's-eye view of reality. The same argument applies to the concept of knowledge. Sabina Lovibond (1983) sums it up as follows:

...knowledge can no more be elucidated in terms of rationally justified belief than truth can be elucidated in terms of correspondence with reality. It is not that the postulated conceptual connection is spurious: the link between the idea of knowledge and that of cogent evidence is real enough. The point is, rather, that all we can hope to gain by focusing attention on that link is a sharpened awareness of the grammar of our language; what we cannot hope to gain is a substantial metaphysical insight...The reason why such an insight is not forthcoming coincides with the reason why none is forthcoming from the 'correspondence theory of truth'. It resides in our lack of access to any distinction between those of our beliefs which are actually true, and those which are merely held true by us. (p. 37)

What follows, then, from our inability to explain knowledge in terms of justified true belief? One result is the rejection of the empiricist's claim that sensory evidence is the ultimate rational basis of knowledge. This is not to say, though, that rational justification of beliefs and actions is also rejected; it is to say that we do not look for absolute bedrock upon which to found our beliefs and actions because none is forthcoming. The process of justification, rather, is relative to a context and it is here that language enters the picture.

Among the many and wide-ranging definitions of knowledge that Webster's dictionary provides is "the circumstance or condition of apprehending truth." If knowledge is related to our apprehension of truth or reality, then it will find expression, at least in part, in our language. Consider scientific knowledge. A distinct vocabulary comprised of terms like isotope, electromagnetic, gamma ray, and Doppler effect, has been developed the better to communicate. Even common words like weight are assigned exclusive meanings (here describing the force of gravity on an object) to differentiate them from what is often erroneously taken to be identical concepts like mass (the amount of matter in an object).

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3 At least that we have access to.
Not all languages, however, are capable of supporting scientific knowledge as we know it. In a primitive culture, for example, where the members have only a rudimentary knowledge of mathematics and are only familiar with the cardinal numbers up to twenty, knowledge about weight defined as the force of gravity on an object would be impossible to transmit from English into their language. Even if a word corresponding to the English word gravity could be coined, it would have no meaning because it would be without the necessary context supplied by the idea of force and the measurement of 9.8 m/s$^2$ for the force of gravity at the earth's surface. Particular languages, then, are limited in what they can express being embedded in communities and their attendant social practices. This conclusion, of course, is nothing new. Wittgenstein (1958) comments that language is founded on convention (§ 355). As such it is a social institution, which, like other institutions is grounded in the shared way of life of a community.

It would be a mistake, though, to conclude that languages are static systems frozen in time. Social practices are open to change and if languages are embedded in social practices, then they will change over time as well. Returning to our previous example of a primitive culture, suppose conditions changed so as to make meeting basic needs like food and shelter relatively simple. And suppose time were thus made available to indulge interests apart from subsistence needs. It is not hard to imagine the kinds of changes that might develop: politically, forms of government could change; culturally, the arts would have time to flourish; technologically, advances in transportation might occur. And in conjunction with all of this new vocabularies would necessarily develop to make discussion in these new arenas of interest possible. Languages are therefore dynamic entities, evolving with changes in environment, practice, and ways of proceeding, their relationship to knowledge consisting in their contribution to making that knowledge expressible.

**Language and Thought**

Turning to the relationship between language and thought we find that it is of much the same ilk as that between language and knowledge. By that I mean that we cannot have one
without the other. One way of viewing the upshot of the preceding analysis of language and knowledge is to say that the possession of knowledge requires a shared form of life which in turn involves, among other things, sharing a language. It also means that knowledge acquisition is not a matter of gazing into some transcendent region where "pure" knowledge unadulterated by misemphasis and incompleteness resides because we cannot access such a region (even if it does exist) due to our cultural embeddedness. The only knowledge we can have access to resides in the context of human practice and it is wishful thinking to expect a source external to this which could certify beliefs which, as the previous quote from Lovibond says, are \textit{actually true} from those which are merely \textit{held true by us}.

In the same way, our reasoning also resides in the context of human practice, such practices being variously described as parts of a tradition or community. Jeffrey Stout (1988) puts the point nicely:

\begin{quote}
None of us starts from scratch in...reasoning. Nor can we ever start over again, accepting only beliefs that have been deduced from certitudes or demonstrable facts. We begin already immersed in the assumptions and precedents of a tradition, whether religious or secular, and we revise these assumptions and set new precedents as we learn more about ourselves and our world. Our starting point is not so much arbitrary as inescapable: we are who we are, the heirs of this tradition as opposed to that one, born into one epoch rather than another, our intuitions shaped by the grammar of our native tongue. We demonstrate our rationality, if at all, by how we move out from that starting point-subjecting this or that assumption or precedent to criticism as real doubts arise, employing old vocabularies or inventing new ones, the better to think and live well. (p. 120)
\end{quote}

Stout's denial of the Cartesian position ("Nor can we ever start over again, accepting only beliefs that have been deduced from certitudes or demonstrable facts") should not be overlooked. Descartes' response to his epistemological crisis as outlined in the Discourse and the Meditations has been very influential. Starting from the assumption that he can know nothing, Descartes begins his search for a presuppositionless first principle upon which to found everything else without realizing that one who really knows nothing would
not even know how to begin. As MacIntyre (1989) points out, Descartes does not recognize that "...among the features of the universe that he is not putting in doubt is his own capacity not only to use the French and the Latin Languages, but even to express the same thought in both languages; and as a consequence he does not put in doubt what he has inherited in and with these languages, namely, a way of ordering both thought and the world expressed in a set of meanings." (p. 247) Because of this failure to recognize the presence of language, MacIntyre goes on to say, Descartes failed to notice that what he took to be the spontaneous reflections of his own mind were actually ideas that were found in his school textbooks and that even the Cogito was to be found in Saint Augustine.

The tie that MacIntyre makes between language and thought consists in the provision through language of a way of ordering thought. We can tighten the connection or elaborate on it by saying that thought is embodied in a linguistic medium. According to Wittgenstein (1958): "When I think in language, there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought." (§ 329) Lovibond (1983) puts it as follows: "The expression of thought in language is likened to its expression in any other artistic medium: until it is embodied in the medium, it is without determinate content." (p. 28) What this amounts to is a denial of the view that thought and language are two logically distinct entities: that which is in our minds and that which provides the means of communicating our thoughts.

If it is the case that thought is embodied in a linguistic medium and language is embedded in a shared form of life, then in the same way that particular languages can embody or encompass certain forms of knowledge and not others, different languages can be the medium for certain thoughts and not others. What is significant here is how the waters of moral diversity thus become even more muddied. Now it is not just that two groups or cultures can differ morally by denying each other's propositions (that is, by taking different sides on issues both sides agree are moral ones) but they can also differ, courtesy of different forms of discourse, over what counts as a moral issue in the first
place. Different languages will contribute different possibilities for what counts as a moral issue. This will be important later when I discuss moral languages in particular and the necessity of learning them. For the moment, though, let me turn to the relationship between language and action.

**Language and Action**

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein (1974) states, "it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language-game." (§204) Lovibond (1983) interprets this by saying that "according to Wittgenstein's conception of language, objective discourse 'rests upon' or 'is grounded in', a consensus within the speech community—an agreement initially in judgements, but *ultimately in actions*." (p. 54 italics mine) Once again we are confronted with the notion of language as a social institution determined by the shared life of a community. Objective discourse, Wittgenstein argues, is made possible by the uniformity of practice within a community and not by an authority independent of the community be it logic, correspondence to a "thing-in-itself" or anything else.

Once again, also, the varying and differing capacities of different languages to support different concepts has important ramifications. When we act we are exercising our ability to choose between different courses. This goes beyond mere behaving which can be a conditioned response like Pavlov's dogs salivating at the sound of a bell. The point of contact (more accurately the continuum of contact) between language and action is an intimate one. It is not just that our linguistic capacity provides the very possibility of conceiving different ways of proceeding, but different courses of action as distinct possibilities are a function of the particular language in which we are immersed. An example might help clarify what I mean.

In *Ethics After Babel*, Jeffrey Stout (1988) claims that the moral language we use in daily life determines what kind of life we lead and what kind of people we are. (p. 71) To illustrate, he compares two imaginary social groups, dubbing one the Old World Corleones (derived from the ethos of ancient Sicily as described by Mario Puzo in his novels) and the
other, the Modernists (descendants of a band of lost Kantian explorers). The language of the Old World Corleones is filled with references to purity, honour, and role-specific virtues and obligations; that of the Modernists with references to human rights, respect for persons and freedom. To the Corleones, personal revenge is justice. Not to repay insult with vengeance is to lose the right to respect from others. Such acts issue from concepts like honour which figure prominently in their language. Modernists, on the other hand, denounce personal revenge on the basis of presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial, ideas which likewise issue from concepts like human rights in their language. In both cases, language (involving complicity in a way of life) is a determining factor not only in the assumptions and beliefs we hold but in the kinds of acts we engage in.

Summary

Let me pull together the discussion so far and try to make good on one of my introductory statements—namely that moral languages not only provide the framework for expressing moral concerns but significantly determine our form of life. And let me, for the moment, dispense with moral languages in particular and focus on language in general. Nothing really is lost by doing so for, in Harpham's words (1992), "language is ...a medium saturated with otherness, and thus with ethics." (p. 61) This is also reminiscent of an earlier parenthetical statement I made about moral language forming a very large subset of language in general.

Harpham (1992) states: "In a sense, language is a word for that for which we have no words, that which is constantly spoken, but never truly spoken about" and follows this with a quote from Heidegger saying that "the essential being of language cannot be anything linguistic...our relation to language is vague, obscure, almost speechless." (p. 72) On the basis of the preceding analysis, such statements should not strike us as queer. They imply that language is not simply a medium, faculty or system. Language is not something

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4See pp. 61, 62.
that can somehow be detached from us and examined like a lab specimen in a research
centre. All that I have said about language in its relation to knowledge, thought and action
comes into play here. Without language, knowledge is unattainable; without language in
which to express our thoughts, they have no determinate content; without language, our
actions lack explanation.

To characterize language, then, as a form of life is very apt. According to Wittgenstein
(1958), "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." (§ 19) And as I quoted
from Harpham (1992) earlier, "language is the site of so many operations that are critical to
a human form of being"; language is "at once 'nowhere' and 'everywhere'." Thus
language seems to represent everything but itself. It is more than just words we use. Our
linguistic capacity is essential in understanding ourselves. It is an integral part in
determining who we are.
Chapter Three
MORAL LANGUAGES
Introduction

Turning now to the topic of moral languages in particular, I trust it is evident that when we examine them we are referring to more than just concrete linguistic forms. We are, in fact, referring to particular forms of life such languages support. Before delving into the topic I want to point out that there need be no inconsistency with the earlier two occasions in which I alluded to moral language as a large subset of language in general. Harpham (1992) points out that language in general is ethical (p. 73) and if we accept language as a form of life and Socrates' simple formulation of morality as "how we ought to live," then it might be argued that moral language as a distinct category of language is superfluous. Despite the preceding discussion, though, in which I sought to locate the burden of emphasis in a form of life, we must not forget that the concrete linguistic form of moral languages does have an, albeit, secondary role to play. The term "moral language" can be used in the same way that we use the terms scientific language or poetic language; that is, as a particular form of discourse in a particular arena of interest or inquiry. Scientific language is the discourse in which we analyze the physical world; poetic language is the language of imagery. Moral language is the discourse we employ to evaluate character, behaviour and community. In this language appear familiar words like "obedience," "virtue" and "ought." This is one reason why we cannot ignore entirely the concrete linguistic form. Communicating or translating between moral languages requires some understanding of the vocabulary used.

Moral Languages

What is it, then, that makes a language a moral language? Put rather baldly, if we accept the conceptualization of languages as forms of life, moral languages reflect and support specifically moral forms of life. On a secondary level, moral language is the medium through which we express moral concerns. What these moral concerns are, I will deal very
briefly with later but let me comment first on the rather odd phrase "specifically moral forms of life."

The queerness of expression turns on the use of the word "specific." Morality defined as how we ought to live seems to pervade every aspect of our existence. It includes our character as well as all of our relationships. And these relationships do not stop with the interaction between human beings. In his classic *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold (1966) argues persuasively for a land ethic governing the relationships between not only humans and animals but between humans and the rocks, trees and soil themselves. To use the word "specific" in reference to moral forms of life, thus, seems to be a misnomer.

To try to make some sense of my choice of the term, consider scientific languages. Consistent with moral languages, I would say that scientific languages are the medium through which we express scientific concerns and that they support specifically scientific forms of life. Here there does not seem to be the same oddity of expression because we can always contrast scientific pursuits with artistic pursuits for example. Granted, one could still argue that the two are not mutually exclusive but the point is that we can still achieve a measure of distance between the two that does not seem possible between the notions of morality and forms of life.

We can resolve the confusion if we recall both Stout's and MacIntyre's contention that we all work from within a particular moral tradition. Stout (1988) says that "we begin already immersed in the assumptions and precedents of a tradition;" MacIntyre (1989), that with our languages we have an inheritance, "a way of ordering both thought and the world expressed in a set of meanings." Now there are many traditions. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre (1988) outlines three distinct traditions: the one running from Homer to Aristotle, the one transmitted from the Bible to Aquinas via Augustine, and the Scottish moral tradition from Calvinist Aristotelianism to Hume. He also develops the argument that, despite modern liberalism's attempt to find a rationality independent of tradition, closer examination reveals liberalism to have all the characteristics of other
traditions. We may quibble with some of the details of MacIntyre's narrative, but it would be hard to come away without the basic contention of a plurality of conflicting traditions. Most important for my purposes is that these conflicting traditions posit different moral forms of life. As I commented earlier, it is not just that moral diversity occurs in disagreements over propositions like "abortion is wrong" but that there is conceptual diversity as well. Let me give two examples.

According to MacIntyre (1988), Aristotle argues that the rationality of right action is its primary determinant. Reason independently motivates one toward right action. Augustine, on the other hand, views the rationality of right action not as its primary determinant but as a secondary consequence of right willing. Right action is ultimately determined by the human will which in turn must be redirected by God away from its sinful bent due to Adam's original sin. Grossly over simplified though this is, it is obvious that we have two radically different accounts of what determines right action and thus two different moral forms of life.

A second example comes from Stout (1988). Recall the five codes of human conduct in their ancient and contemporary interpretations quoted above. Noting the great conceptual distance between the two columns, Stout comments:

The two columns betoken nothing so simple as a disagreement over the truth of particular moral propositions. Liberals might dissent from traditional opinions about patriotism or filial piety. Pacifists might object to ancient injunctions to kill with honour. But the differences go beyond that level. They point, it would seem, to distinct moral languages, organized around different central concepts and at home in different social settings. (p. ix)

With these two examples in mind, we can clarify the ambiguous phrase "specifically moral forms of life." Note that in MacIntyre's recounting of the Aristotelian and Augustinian positions of the genesis of right action the common ground is right action.

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1 See especially chapter 17.
2 See chapter 9.
There is something about morality that members of both traditions agree upon. In this case it is the centrality of right action to anyone's conception of morality. This is to speak of morality at the level of category. Right action is a distinguishing feature in the division of morality in a system of classification. To speak in terms of category is to say something about moral concerns that, though not independent of moral languages, yet transcends the particularities of any single moral language. Is this the same as saying that there are some aspects of human nature that are universal? My answer would be a qualified "yes" but I will not pursue the details at this point. Suffice it to say, along with Wittgenstein (1958), that we need not look for particular characteristic features but rather "family resemblances" which overlap and criss-cross but may not have a characteristic common to all. (§ 66, 67)

Where the difference occurs between the Aristotelian and Augustinian positions is at the level of concrete articulation--namely what the genesis of right action actually is. Of course this has enormous implications for the way in which we go about, for lack of a better way of saying it, producing right action and in the way in which we seek to morally educate.

The same distinction between moral language at the level of category and concrete articulations of moral concerns within a moral language hold in the second example as well. Here it is a trivial matter to find the common ground that identifies both lists as moral in category. The title plainly states it is "Codes of Human Conduct." It is equally trivial to identify the difference in concrete articulation. As Stout points out, the conceptual distance between all five items and especially the fifth one--"The Spirit of Humanity" versus "In Killing, Choose with Sense and Honour"--is great.

Morality at the level of category, then, permits moral forms of life to have something in common which allows us to identify them as moral in the first place, while differing concrete articulations permits the notion of specificity. Throughout, it is the languages of morals both in their similarities and particularities that provide the medium without which

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3The issues of human nature and universal principles are covered in some depth in chapters four and five.
our moral concerns would have no determinate content. Moral language is the vehicle of moral concern.

Just what these moral concerns are is not as straightforward a question as one might think but we need to deal with it if only briefly. One reason the question does not lend itself to a straightforward answer in the same way that a question about weather conditions does is because any answer I give would necessarily reflect the tradition of which I am a part and be voiced in the moral language in which I am immersed. To those from the same tradition, my answer would probably be unambiguous. To others, it might not. Take, for example, someone from a Mennonite or Quaker tradition. The issue of self-defence presents more of a thorny issue morally speaking for them than it would for others. During the Russian Revolution bands of robbers pillaged Mennonite colonies, raping women and killing them along with many of the men. While most Mennonites tried to practise the principle of non-resistance, a minority of the young men organized a *Selbstschutz* (self-defense) with advice and equipment from German forces and offered armed resistance. This was subsequently condemned by Mennonite church conferences as not only a tactical mistake but a violation of historic biblical non-resistance. In citing this example I am not arguing that self-defense does not fall within the category of morality for those outside of the Mennonite tradition. I would say that self-defense does not qualify as a moral *issue* in the sense of a point of controversy or debate. The Mennonite response to those of their own community who participated in it is rather unique. Few people would engage in such self-recrimination and conclude that it was the wrong thing to do even within broader evangelical Christianity.

Having said this, I think there are examples of typical moral concerns that, if not universal, are widely shared among cultures. One example can be found by looking no further than the nursery where such platitudes as "lying is wrong" are uttered by parents of

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4Wilson (1993) makes an interesting distinction between universal rules and universal impulses or sentiments, but again, I postpone discussing this until chapters four and five.
Every cultural stripe. Another example can be found in world-wide efforts to curb the proliferation of nuclear arms. Demonstrations against nations that persist in testing nuclear weapons are common. I suspect we could come up with many more examples but I think these suffice to illustrate some widely held typical moral concerns.

The significance of having this agreement is great. As I argued earlier in the context of relativity, disagreement itself can only take place when there is enough in common between the disputants to make sense of what it is they are disagreeing about. In the context of human society, despite lack of perfect agreement on the common good, the level of agreement we do have in areas such as honesty allows for the smooth—or at least tolerably good--functioning of institutions such as our legal and educational systems. In the context of moral education, such agreement is enough, I think, to begin making a case against the relativists who say it cannot even be started. This level of commonality also explains why it is not a contradiction to speak as if morality is disputed but at the same time not disputed. Because there must be an implicit assumption that we are all talking about the same thing, the presupposition of shared standards which forms the common ground necessary for normative discourse to even take place and be recognized as normative discourse naturally follows.

**Differentiating, Comparing and Learning Moral Languages**

I next want to broach the topic of differentiating moral languages and to begin, something needs to be said about why a careful analysis is necessary. Despite some widespread agreement on aspects of morality, the fact remains that we live in a pluralistic society in which interactions between many different people speaking many different moral languages takes place. When there is disagreement and it cannot be solved rationally, violence sometimes ensues. Even when this does not happen it is often the case that we fail to understand what others are saying to us. Feelings of aversion and mistrust common to initial contact between significantly different moral ways of life can prevent the dialogue necessary to achieve such understanding. If one of the goals of moral education is to help
students live a moral life within a moral community, then one challenge to be met is to help us become conversant with each other. Stout (1988) comments: "Our capacity to live peaceably with each other depends upon our ability to converse intelligibly and reason coherently. But this ability is weakened by the very differences that make it necessary. The more we need it, the weaker it becomes, and we need it very badly indeed." (p. 3)

In saying that dialogue between different moral traditions is necessary, I do not mean to imply that once such dialogue is struck all conflicts will dissolve into mutual acceptance. The differences in question may turn out to be acceptable or they may not. If we encountered a culture that routinely practised human sacrifice, the difference between our and their beliefs would not be acceptable. This does not give us carte blanche to mount an armed invasion and demand the practice be halted. Dialogue could very well reveal that sacrifice is used to ward off devastatingly infectious diseases. That we do not believe this shows our differences lie not in judgments of value but in beliefs about fact. A willingness to distinguish justification from truth can provide us the wherewithal to affirm our own convictions without blaming a different culture for believing differently and one process by which we determine how other cultures justify their actions is through learning their moral language. Learning their moral language, however, does not commit us to adopting their moral beliefs. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

A second reason to differentiate moral languages arises from a further goal of moral education which is to enhance moral perception. In arguing that the ethical standards of different cultures reveal an outline of universally accepted value, C.S. Lewis (1980) nevertheless acknowledges that there are differences between cultures, differences which amount to blindnesses in particular cultures just as there are cultures whose members cannot count up to twenty. (p. 104) In the context of reading old books Lewis (1970) makes a similar point. Every age, he says, has its own outlook. Every age has its

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characteristic blindness based on a great mass of—in many cases unrecognized—common assumptions. By reading only modern books we ensure continued ignorance of this blindness because "where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books." (p. 202) Lest we conclude that people of the past were somehow more clever than they are now, Lewis is careful to point out that they made mistakes just as we do--it is just that they did not make the same mistakes. Therefore, old books will not perpetuate errors we are already committing and their own errors will not endanger us because they have already been exposed over the course of time.

I am not sure what Lewis would declare as the characteristic moral blindness of our own time. There might be many. Posterity will surely notice and point them out as we have done with those preceding us. The inescapable fact of the matter, though, is that we have ideological distortions and make errors in moral judgement just like anyone else; but, too often this is overlooked. We are sometimes too prone to "look at the speck of sawdust in [our] brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in [our] own eye." (Matt. 7:3) This is, after all, much easier to do. My previous example of human sacrifice as a practice in some foreign cultures--an example I used to illustrate cultural differences--was easier to formulate than an equally detestable practice drawn from my own culture. Comparative inquiry--in addition to explaining away apparent differences, revealing opinions to be justified but false, or showing another group to be irrational--opens the door to exposing our own errors. Stout (1988) says that our dialogue with the dead (presumably through old books) or the foreign may result in uncovering our own distortions and changing our minds. (p. 32) To neglect possibilities like these is "to make comparative inquiry into an exercise in self-congratulation--an imperialistic discipline in which one announces, with perfect hubris
Comparative ethics, then, can be a valuable tool in enhancing moral perception. Our conception of the good and our evaluation of our moral judgments may change. Instead of only passing judgment on the groups we study, we may learn from them. And this is where differentiating moral languages comes in. I have mentioned the plurality of moral languages several times without discussing how they are to be individuated but, of course, if there really are many different moral languages, some way of differentiating them must be evident or there would be no point in asserting their plurality in the first place. Since moral differences are expressed through different moral languages, we will need to know what it means to say someone speaks a different moral language from our own. Before discussing this, though, let me state that we need to be careful in bandying about the term "moral languages" too freely. As I commented in the previous example about human sacrifice, dialogue might reveal sacrifice as an attempt to appease the gods and ward off disease pointing not to differences between us in judgments of value but in beliefs about fact. In learning from other cultures, therefore, we need to determine what counts as relevant differences of a moral nature. This is far from being as cut and dried as might first appear.

So how might we, then, differentiate moral languages in the relevant sense? A hint of the answer came when I said, in the context of language and thought, that different forms of discourse offer different possibilities as to what counts as a moral issue in the first place. Stout (1988) comments as follows:

moral languages, in the relevant sense, can be individuated by reference to the sets of candidates for truth and falsehood they make available. Not that moral languages are merely sets of candidates for truth and falsehood: we do many things with our moral vocabularies, and entertaining candidates for truth and falsehood is only one of them. My point is not to identify a moral language with the set of candidates it makes available, [it is] rather to individuate moral languages by reference to sets of candidates. (p. 68)
Just what might such candidates look like? Consider again the languages of the Old World Corleones and the Kantians. The former can be characterized as the language of honour and the latter as the language of human rights. The two differ in that words are used in different ways, in significantly different ways. Two things contribute to a significant difference. The first is that words are used in ways different enough that translation becomes extremely difficult. Orwellian considerations are pertinent here not so much that deliberate attempts to deceive (pacification means bombing defenseless villages) are made but that words mean just what we want them to mean. Words are like tools so that "loyalty to country" becomes "the spirit of contribution." The second thing contributing to a significant difference, closely related to the different ways in which words are used, is the alteration of what propositions come "up for grabs as true-or-false." John Kekes (1993) can help us here with an example. Addressing the disagreement between supporters and critics in such areas as abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality, he remarks that it is "not that one side regards the conduct in question as morally good, while the other thinks of it as morally bad. The dispute is whether moral judgments are normally appropriate." (p. 6) By normally appropriate he means whether such conduct should fall under the category of moral judgment at all or, if they once did, should that change so they no longer do? There is precedent for the change. Moral censure seems to be loosening its grip over extramarital sex and divorce. On the other hand, it is now making forays into environmental concerns with talk about a land ethic.

To answer the question of what candidates for truth or falsehood look like, one way to go about it is to consider the different ways in which words are used. When there is no analogue between the ways in which two different societies frame moral concepts different sets of candidates for truth and falsehood will have to be acknowledged. If the Kantians, steeped in the notion of rights, are unable to translate Corleone references to honour, then

6Reminiscent of Humpty Dumpty's comment to Alice in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass.
the reasonableness (from the Corleone perspective) of a daughter's father killing a jilted suitor for comments questioning her purity or chastity will escape the Kantian translator. The terms in which Corleones live their lives, their particular candidates for truth or falsehood, will have proven too elusive. The candidates for truth or falsehood, understood as the terms in which one lives a life, made available through the language of honour are obviously different from those made available through the language of rights. Within a society where translation is not a problem, candidates for truth or falsehood can take the form of new ways of living in the world and new ways of viewing ourselves as people. Profound changes for family life follow from accepting extramarital sex and divorce as normal, particularly for children.

Individuating moral languages on the basis of sets of candidates for truth or falsehood raises two interesting questions. The first is: how many different moral languages are there? I can hear a moral educator saying that, if moral education must include moral language learning, it might be nice to know the magnitude of the task. My response to such a concern is two-pronged. Concerning the number of different moral languages we cannot be precise. According to our principle of differentiation even fragments of what we might call the moral language of a particular group would have to count. In our own language, traces of many kinds of moral concepts are evident due to our engagement in comparative ethics. Thus, for example, the language fragments of rights and, to a lesser extent, of honour, which both find a home in our discourse, would count as separate moral languages. Our individuation principle of reference to candidates for truth or falsehood does not provide a sharp line of demarcation which is not surprising given Kekian considerations about the changing status of judgments in the moral sphere.

Concerning the magnitude of the task of moral education, let me suggest that, by asking the question, we misunderstand the nature of the task. Implicit within the question of magnitude is the assumption that here we have a task we will complete sometime in the future. Unfortunately, if this is our goal, we will be disappointed. New moral languages
will continually come into being and will continually provide fodder for moral education to
digest. Why this is the case I will postpone discussing in greater detail for the moment.
Suffice it to say for now that moral language study is an on-going endeavour.

The second question raised by referring to sets of candidates for truth and falsehood as a
way to differentiate moral languages is whether another society could have a moral
language we could not recognize. Is it possible another culture might have a moral
language with absolutely no parallels to our own? By way of response, let me pose
another question. Unless there were some substantial parallels, how could we recognize
another culture's moral language as being moral in the first place? In the same vein, Stout
(1988) remarks: "to say that another society has a moral language is to say that it has views
on at least some of the topics we denominate as moral. A society that never assessed
conduct, character, or community as good or bad, right or wrong, honourable or
dishonourable, just or unjust, as contributing to or detracting from human well-being, and
so on across the board, would simply not possess a moral language." (pp. 69, 70) Some
element of commonality or at least family resemblance must be evident or we could not
know we were talking about the same thing.

The idea of evidence for commonality or family resemblance bears some examination.
When we speak of quadrilaterals in mathematics, the evidence for squares, rectangles,
parallelograms and trapezoids falling into this category is clear and easy to articulate. Each
of the figures named has four sides. In the moral realm this kind of clear articulation may
not be quite so readily available but some form of articulation is surely possible. Earlier I
referred to parents of every cultural stripe telling their children that lying is wrong. Of
course there may be exceptions here that might not be found in mathematics. Lying as a
means of saving a life is one such exception and there even seems to be scriptural support
for this.\(^7\) When the king of Egypt commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male

\(^7\)See Exodus 1:15-22.
children as a means of controlling a burgeoning population and reducing the Israelite threat, they boldly defied the order claiming that, unlike the Egyptian women, Hebrew women were so vigorous they gave birth before the midwives could arrive. One wonders why, if this really were the case, midwives were needed in the first place. The record goes on to say that, because the midwives feared God, He was kind to them and gave them families of their own, a quite considerable gift given the importance of bearing children to Hebrew women of that era. So, despite the fact that clear articulation in the sense of no exceptions may be difficult to find in the moral realm, our sense of commonality is, nevertheless, a significant one.

It is also the case that we can grow in our understanding of our (moral) commonality. The conditions required to make these points of similarity evident may or may not be in place, but if they are not, we need not necessarily despair that they never can be. Again let me use a mathematical analogy. One popular method of proving that the square root of \( x \) is irrational (i.e., a non-repeating, non-terminating decimal) when \( x \) is not a perfect square is to proceed as if it were rational (i.e., expressible in the form \( \frac{p}{q} \), \( q \neq 0 \)) and then arrive at a contradiction. In the course of the proof, one gets to the point where two expressions are equated, one of them having an even number of prime factors, and the other an odd number of prime factors. Since this is impossible the square root of \( x \) must be irrational. I suspect that for most of us the conditions required to make sense of the details of the proof are not fulfilled. My point is that such conditions can be met if we apply ourselves to learning the language of mathematics, to becoming familiar with the specialized definitions of rational and irrational and the concept of prime factors. And if here, why not in moral languages as well?

These considerations in response to the question of whether it is possible for another culture to have a moral language with no parallels to our own suggest first that any talk of cross-cultural moral languages must involve some element or elements of commonality in order for there to be discussion at all. Furthermore, while we might not be able to point
with absolute clarity to any one particular thing about which there would be no dispute, our sense of commonality is still very significant. And lastly, our understanding of our moral commonality can grow. Or can it?

Part of learning the language of mathematics and becoming familiar with the specialized definitions will involve translation into terms which we can understand and which are sufficiently close in meaning to the originals that not too much is lost in the process. The same holds true in learning a new language of morals. But can this always be accomplished? Might it not be the case that our current language does not have the conceptual richness necessary to accommodate the new concepts?

Whether the job of translation can always be accomplished is debatable, but much of what may now be considered to be untranslatable may be overcome by what Stout (1988) calls hermeneutical innovation. (p. 64) In our earlier analysis of the relationship between language and knowledge, I mentioned that languages are embedded in social practices which change over time. Languages need not be thought of as synchronic, as static and frozen in time. Rather they are (more or less) diachronistic, changing over time. At least this is the case with languages currently in use. Thus, a given proposition currently expressible in one language but not in another may yet become expressible in the other language over the course of time. As Stout (1988) puts it: "nothing in the nature of conceptual diversity itself prevents one culture from developing the means for expressing an alien culture's moral propositions or grasping their truth." (pp. 64, 65)

How difficult it is to develop such means will vary. In our previous example of the primitive culture where the members could only count up to twenty, acquiring new habits of observation and adopting the scientific method of hypothesis-making and experimentation would necessarily have to occur if they were to understand our scientific language and make sense of, for example, our medical practices. This would be very difficult, requiring quite probably decades of time. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) would require extremely long commentaries and footnotes to set the context necessary for
understanding such technology. Moral expressions might be equally opaque, also requiring extended explanations to appreciate their subtleties. On the other hand, more developed cultures that engage in comparative ethics usually have at least the residue of many different moral concepts surviving in their language. Presumably translation would require much less time although the dangers of ethnocentric interpretation are always present.

Thomas Kuhn (1970) points out that what we see depends not only on what we look at but on what our prior visual-conceptual experience has taught us to see.\(^8\) Now while it may be true that "something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself," it must be remembered that it is only a prerequisite. Phenomenological considerations are important here in that they alert us to the perils of assuming only one correct version of reality. The danger of doing so says Neil Evernden (1993) is that "there is more than one kind of knowledge, and that the one we choose to emphasize may pale in significance beside those we ignore." (p. 105) Any aspect of reality can be described or apprehended in many different ways. The kinds of knowledge Evernden is contrasting derive on the one hand from the abstract analysis of science in which the Cartesian dichotomy between thinking matter and extended matter forms the basis of knowledge as the understanding of non-thinking objects by thinking subjects. On the other hand, and opposed to the scientific abstraction, is the Romantic insistence on the significance of concrete experience. Personal experience, subjective though it may be, is a fact of existence. Discounting it entirely in favour of scientific abstraction only succeeds in narrowing and impoverishing reality. In moral parlance and from an ethnocentric perspective, if the sentences in a different moral language are made to seem too familiar too quickly--through perhaps an interpretive theory that works well in explaining aspects of our own society--important subtleties essential for genuine understanding may be missed. I will discuss this in some detail later with reference to the work of Charles Taylor.

\(^8\)See chapter 10.
There is thus a very delicate balance between the unavoidability of our starting point in moral language learning as an exercise in looking for similarities in other cultures and a continued quest for genuine understanding in which such posits must be left open to question. The task of any moral educator is a complicated one. On the one hand, he or she must be adept at recognizing points of contact between cultures. On the other, a great deal of attention must be paid to developing an acute sensitivity to detail so that our interpretations are not seriously flawed. The dangers of misrepresentation are great. And the complexity does not end here.

Earlier I noted that new moral languages would continually come into being and would continually provide fodder for moral education to digest. How quickly this occurs will vary but the time parameters will likely be measured in decades. As people with different moral languages in our pluralistic society interact, new ways of using words and new styles of reasoning will result contributing to the expressibility of new propositions and a fuller understanding of the implications of current ones. Political correctness is one recent example of a new turn of phrase where, among other things, the rights, desires, and feelings of minorities are given new expression. Our moral languages will therefore change bringing about new candidates for truth and falsehood. The interaction between different cultures which precipitates such change can be viewed both negatively and positively. Negatively, this interaction can lead to misunderstanding and serious, sometimes violent, conflict. Positively, however, it can be seen as opportunity for moral improvement. Some of our ideological distortions might be corrected; unflattering stereotypes (are there any other kind?) might be unearthed and subsequently discarded; and improved moral reasoning might result as we seek to justify practices others find offensive or do not understand.

In all of this the task of the moral educator is a difficult one. Sometimes his or her role will be that of a referee in debates over controversial issues. Sometimes it will involve defense of both approach and topics in the face of conflicting parental concerns. Charges
of being too tolerant of "alien cultural values" or of conditioning and indoctrinating students are almost certain to surface. In addition, if it really is the case that we all inhabit a particular moral tradition and are complicit in a way of life, any subscription to neutrality (on the educator's and students' parts) will have to be discarded. Values Clarification as an example of a desire for neutrality can, at best, furnish a starting point. Justification of one's views and the assumption that improvement is possible is critical. It is a mystery to me that Values Clarification could be conceived of without this as one goal. It may have been felt that putting students "in touch with themselves" was an improvement but then no one could ever have been sure since this is merely another value that could be no better or worse or more justified than all the rest.

But perhaps the most difficult role of the non-neutral moral educator arises in the combatting of the tendency to think that understanding the moral language of another culture commits one to adopting the moral beliefs of its members. Before rejecting this concern out of hand as being too trivial or obvious and therefore not worthy to be taken seriously, let us not forget that moral educators, at least in the public education system, are dealing with children and adolescents. Quite apart from any full-blown theory on child or adolescent psychology, my own experience as a teacher indicates how impressionable youth can be. Few will be able to resist the tendency to confuse explanation with justification which is another way to put the concern. To explain, for example, another culture's harsh treatment of strangers on the basis of (what students may not recognize as questionable) suspicions in the context of their form of life can easily lead to justification in the minds of impressionable youth. The trap, for lack of a better word, is akin to one commonly made in empirical research. Statistical analysis of data sometimes shows a strong correlation between two events, but, as every competent researcher knows, correlation does not imply causality. Yet how often is this mistake made even by experienced researchers?
What does it mean, then, to understand the moral language of another culture? Stout (1988) claims it involves the ability to imitate another culture's moralizing, describing it in "thick" detail and predicting what will be said in new cases. This need not, he goes on to say, lead one to join in with their moralizing or ever be influenced by it. (p. 67) But why is this the case? Stout has obviously recognized the tendency to confuse understanding with, if not adoption of a practice, at least sympathy for it. And such sympathy can lead to justification and even promotion of questionable practices. It is not uncommon to hear of cases where terrorist groups have taken captives who subsequently identified with their captors (Patricia Hearst comes immediately to mind), bought into an "end justifies the means" mentality, and began to think nothing of using violence as an acceptable means of accomplishing their goals. Granted, this is an extreme example and a complex one involving issues of "brain-washing" and indoctrination. My point is not to dwell on rare worst case scenarios but merely to reinforce the potentially subtle and delicate nature of the moral educator's task. I now want to return to the question of why it is not the case that understanding another culture's moral language necessarily leads one to join in with their moralizing.

In his essay, "Understanding and Explanation in the Geisteswissenschaften," Charles Taylor (1981) criticizes the position, sometimes called vulgar Wittgensteinianism, which confuses understanding a form of life (and hence a language) with incorrigibility of the agents' self-understanding. In order to provide an adequate explanatory account in the social sciences (Geisteswissenschaften means the Arts or humanities as opposed to the physical sciences), so the argument goes, we must insist on understanding the subjects' actions, feelings and aspirations in their own terms. Not to do so--even though we may bring to the task an interpretive theory couched in our terms which may be shown in some sense to be true--will quite likely result in missing the significance of the action, emotion, or moral theorizing under scrutiny. Finessing understanding by approaching a society with
a preconceived principle of interpretation that happens to work in our own society only leads to sterility.

Taylor gives the example of accounting for the religious and magical practices in a primitive society. The principle, couched in our own terms, we might bring to the task is that religious practices contribute to social integration. It would probably not be hard to show that this generally is the case. What this principle does not account for, however, are particularities of form or style. Any of a wide variety of religious rituals can help accomplish the task of social integration and, if this is the case, then it remains to explain why the medicine man uses the particular form in relation to his specific situation. Failure to account for the particularities can lead to missing not only nuances of meaning but core values themselves. "In short," Taylor says, "most of what we want to explain in a given society may lie outside the scope of the explanation; which may at the limit sink to the marginal significance of...background observation." (pp. 195,196)

The dilemma facing us now, though, is an approach to understanding which invites relativism versus a more objective "scientific" approach at the probable cost of understanding significance. To advocate that we understand what one does and feels in terms of their own society has far-reaching implications. Taking the language of the agent seriously means grappling with the agent's conception of human nature, God and what the universe is "really like." If the agent's self-understanding really is incorrigible, what do we do if we believe the portrayals to be wrong? How can we even begin to be critical of the overt or implied value and ontological commitments using the agent's language seems to entail?

One attempt to overcome this difficulty is to view the evaluations of a given language in the context of a form of life. Because forms of life are merely how people in fact live, they are not themselves subject to evaluation as good or bad. What a member of a society says only makes sense in the context of a form of life, but the forms themselves are "not the
kinds of thing which can be right or wrong, veridical or illusory." (p. 202) They simply are. Therefore, we cannot take a stand either for or against them.

Unfortunately, the assumption here is that forms of life are incorrigible and while this may be one way to accommodate subjectivist views about ethics which many see as the easiest way to account for ethical pluralism and avoid the perceived arrogance of claiming someone else is wrong, the drawback, in part, is that we succumb to what Taylor calls a "mind-numbing relativism." The fact is that we will be critical of what we take to be the embarrassing value and ontological commitments of the agent's language even if we do not admit it out loud. So what is the solution?

Taylor proposes dropping any notion that there can be no truth of the matter about evaluative statements—denying incorrigibility in the process—and claims this need not result in any arrogant or ethnocentric procedures. A moment ago, I mentioned that taking the language of the agent seriously meant grappling with the agent's conception of human nature, God and what the universe is "really like." Just how serious is this grappling? According to Taylor, it is serious enough not to automatically assume that our language is correct in its value/ontological commitments while all foreign languages are wrong. "We can," he says, "start with the assumption that we may learn something more about ourselves as well in coming to understand another society." (p. 205) If we hear a not so faint echo of Stout here, we do so with good reason. Actually, it is the other way about. Stout (1988) is echoing Taylor when, as I quoted him earlier, he says that neglecting the possibility that comparative ethics might reveal our own ideological distortions is to turn it into an "exercise in self-congratulation—an imperialistic discipline in which one announces, with perfect hubris and without ever questioning one's own views, where the great unwashed have gone wrong." (p. 32)

Since both our own language and the language of the culture under examination are inadequate to the task of understanding, Taylor suggests what he terms a language of perspicuous contrast—which he acknowledges as very close to Gadamer's conception of
the "fusion of horizons"--as the way to go. In this language, both forms of life would be viewed as "alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both...the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such variations...It is a language which enables us to give an account of the procedures of both societies in terms of the same cluster of possibilities." (pp. 205, 206, 209)

The implications of this language of perspicuous contrast are many. For starters, it prohibits "projecting our own gamut of activities on to the agents of the other society." (p. 209) We do not bring preconceived principles of interpretation to our scrutiny because we recognize that the activities in another society may have no corresponding counterpart in our own. This does not imply incommensurability and the conclusion that understanding can only be achieved through knowledge of the subject's actions and feelings on their own terms. It does require a search for the language of perspicuous contrast to find the human constants at work in both.9 Furthermore, this language of contrast denies incorrigibility of self-understanding allowing non-relativists like Taylor and myself to be critical. But it does not allow for criticism on irrelevant grounds since we have seriously undertaken to understand the other person's language of self-understanding thereby guarding against ethnocentric arrogance.

Taylor, therefore, helps us see how Stout can say that understanding another culture's moral language need not lead us to join in with their moralizing or ever be influenced by it although Stout may be overstating it when he says we might never be influenced by it. The language of contrast, by clarifying the alternative variations as human variations will quite probably almost always reveal something as a corrective to our own ideological distortions.

But it also allows us to be critical and discriminating. The concern which prompted this discussion (i.e., understanding a moral language can lead to adopting that particular

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9An extended example is given in Taylor (1981), pp. 207-209.
culture's moral beliefs) need not remain a concern. Furthermore, the same concern in a weaker form (i.e., understanding a moral language can lead to accepting that particular culture's moral beliefs as right for them even if not so for us) also need not follow. We can be critical and discerning. As part of its makeup, the language of contrast provides a separation perspective\(^\text{10}\) and hence a measure of objectivity since understanding the subject does not necessarily occur on their own terms. Thus, if a society practises discrimination against women--treating them as mere chattel, denying them opportunities of employment or paying them substantially less for work of equal value as that of men only because they are women--we can criticize on the basis of a principle (an example of Taylor's human constants?) requiring morally relevant reasons for treating people in ways we do not want to be treated ourselves.

**Conclusion**

Moral educators, then, need not, and indeed, should not shy away from pointing out that adoption of moral beliefs, acceptance of them or even sympathy for them does not always follow from understanding the moral language of another culture. Having said this, it is incumbent on us to recognize that moral educators in multicultural societies are in a peculiar and rather delicate position. To forcibly point out that the discrimination of women in a certain society is manifestly unjustified when members of that culture are represented in one's class may do as much harm as good. While it may be exciting to witness the development of new moral languages as people in pluralistic societies interact, the flip side is the pressure that builds when those in favoured positions (like men with respect to women in many societies) resist any change to the status quo.

Significant change is often a slow, painful and tumultuous process. Forcibly pointing out unjustified inequalities may be taken as a clarion call to arms, so to speak, with the result that change is pursued at too fast a rate. The experience of many immigrant

\(^\text{10}\)From Taylor (1981), p. 209.
adolescents struggling to "fit in" in a new country where parental control and authority is a mere shadow of that which parents typically exercise in their country of origin is poignant testimony to the difficulties involved in change. Peer group influence often conflicts—to a much more serious degree than is the case between "native" adolescents and their parents—with traditional ways of doing things favoured by parents. In some cultures, adolescent girls dating boys is unheard of and when girls engage in such activity in their new country, physical abuse, disownment, and even death can occur as fathers seek to maintain family honour. Advocating swift change might thus do as much harm as good.

At the same time, one could argue that no person or group in a privileged position has voluntarily given up power and that forcing the issue is necessary. In the case of women who are discriminated against, it may be felt that casualties along the way are a necessary evil to be endured to help effect change.

The issues are complex and any moral educator will at times find it a matter of considerable delicacy to navigate the shoals and rapids (to use a mariner's analogy) of the educational enterprise. What is clear is that moral education is a slow process and an ongoing task. While this might merely be stating the obvious, recognizing it has at least one result of purely practical import. I am referring to the incompatibility of moral education with politics and "quick fixes." Any government wishing quick results of new policy in this area as evidence of successful involvement is doomed to disappointment. If public concern over what best might be called moral degradation prompted a government to garner votes at re-election time by promising quick action and quick results, we could dismiss such promises as mere posturing.
Chapter Four

MORAL PROGRESS (PART I)

Introduction

At various points in the preceding discussion of moral languages I touched on some of the goals of moral education. Helping students become members of a moral community participating critically in its creation, enhancing moral perception, seeing from a moral point of view, and achieving moral excellence are some of the ways to articulate these goals. But it is not with any one goal in particular nor combination of them that I am here concerned. Rather, it is with the general thrust or trajectory of these goals considered together in which I am interested—namely moral progress.

Many things might be meant by moral progress and in the two chapters that follow I want to examine some of these things, weaving together various strands into a coherent conception of the nature of moral progress and how it might be achieved. Weaving is a particularly appropriate description for the argument will take several twists and turns and the effect will arise from its cumulative nature. Some strands will not appear until chapter five so I must ask for patience.

Before launching into the details, however, I want to indicate the direction the argument will take, to give a sense in outline form of what I take to be the key features of moral progress. Following on the heels of our discussion of moral languages, it should come as no surprise that I think one avenue to moral progress is through moral language study, both of our own languages and that of others. Augmenting our own culture's moral insights through comparative study of other cultures and expanding our horizons by bringing new considerations into view or perhaps half-forgotten ones back into focus can result in improved moral insight. Identifying moral problems that need solving (biased treatment of others on the basis of gender or race, for example) and examining our moral language resources for truths that take pride of place can help us reason well. It may also be that Charles Taylor's language of perspicuous contrast can be employed to put new candidates
for truth or falsehood "up for grabs" in ways that alter our views on what counts as biased
treatment of others in the first place. The example of the colonial drive for cheap labour
and the resulting enslavement of people on the basis of skin colour will be touched on in
chapter five.

The question that still begs an answer, though, is: what is the nature of moral progress?
Commenting on avenues of moral progress does not satisfactorily answer it. In order to try
to outline the course of the argument in this chapter and the next, let me place the issue
squarely within the constraints imposed by pluralism and first mention what the nature of
moral progress is not. If we accept the tenet of a *prima facie* right to difference in the
prescriptive sense of pluralism discussed in the introduction to this thesis, then moral
progress will not mean the increased realization of "the one true system of values" or
increasingly widespread application of substantive principles embodying one essential
concept. An ultimate *telos* derived from philosophical agreement on the human essence or
the meaning of life explicated in terms of the fundamental purpose of human existence is
not possible given the cultural embeddedness considerations raised in chapter one. A
detailed conception of an antecedently known good cannot be had without describing it in
terms belonging to a cultural inheritance at which point such a good could not claim
transcendence in-it-self. The good is not something that is first apprehended in its entirety
and then pursued. Our starting point in tradition finds us already committed to pursuing
certain goods, goods which undergo revision in light of our experience and knowledge of
their place in social practices and institutions.

Having said all of this, though, I do think it possible to be teleological in a limited sense
and do so without contradiction. This limited sense of teleology is necessary to
accommodate the particular conception of universalism I will be developing in this chapter
as one of the two ideas essential to moral progress. It can also be sensitive to evolving
traditions and our inescapable starting point within tradition (the second of the two ideas

essential to moral progress), leaving enough room to allow our conception of the good to undergo revision. Let me explain.

By claiming we can be teleological in a limited sense I am saying that, given our particular historical moment there is still a truth of the matter about the ends we should strive for and sufficient agreement on those ends that we can expect to attain. Given our understanding, for example, that morally relevant reasons are required to treat others in ways we do not want to be treated ourselves can foster substantial agreement that women and ethnic minorities ought not to be discriminated against because of gender or skin colour. But as our context changes, as our tradition confronts evolving concerns, a limited as opposed to ultimate telos allows not only our conception of the good to change but a significant measure of difference and variety in what constitutes good lives. What Stout and others call a provisional telos is a good description of what I am talking about. I am not suggesting for a moment that discrimination on the basis of gender or race might yet be justified due to changing circumstances. I am saying that some values, primary ones in Keke’s terminology, are features of all good lives and that others, secondary ones, are open to alteration.

I am intimating, then, that there are universal values based on universal aspects of human nature coupled with changing values in evolving contexts which need to both be kept in focus at the same time. I am suggesting that moral progress is a function of paying attention to both our starting point within a tradition as well as to "the good" which, while not being independent of moral languages yet transcends the particularities of any single moral language. While I do not subscribe to human universals in the form of substantive principles as providing an absolute endpoint to which we can approximate, universals in the form of widely-held dispositions and sentiments can inform the validity of proposed value changes in particular contexts. Moral progress here will be a function of applying Charles Taylor’s language of perspicuous contrast to formulate different ways of life as "alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both." An example
will be given in chapter five. In particular and changing contexts, moral progress will involve revising our conception of the good in the light of experience. This can be done on both an individual and collective level. Such revisions, if they are to assume the positive evaluation implied by progress, will require exercise of the requisite virtues—Aristotle's *phronesis* or practical wisdom comes to mind—and I will be commenting, again in chapter five, on several authors' notions of habituation and training in the virtues, the kind of thing that allows us as individuals to pay attention to the sorts of people we are becoming.

My understanding of moral progress, then, is not teleological in the classical sense but only in a limited provisional sense. Strict consensus on ultimate values will likely not be attained but some agreement there must be if only because there must be a background against which our disagreements make sense. On the other hand, evolving traditions and pluralistic contentions of a right to difference demand sufficient latitude for continually refining, altering and revising (in conjunction with the necessary virtues) our conception of the good in response, for example, to new social practices and institutions. Moral progress here will be a function of applying practical wisdom and "drawing the line here or there in countless particular cases, given our sense of the daily detail." (Stout, 1988, p. 242) It will involve exercising the requisite virtues in applying our conceptual resources and deliberating wisely as we evaluate new social practices and engage in moral problem solving. It will involve self-consciously working from within our own cultural and moral traditions, subjecting our moral ideas and ideals to, and evaluating them with reference to, the best insights supplied by our own particular tradition and then seeking to augment our collective wisdom through comparative study of other traditions. One of my contentions will be that our conception of the good and the habit of right judgment and action are developed in tandem, each being corrected in the light of the other as we move dialectically between them.

With this outline of moral progress in the background, I want, in the remainder of this chapter, to develop the theme of human universals in an attempt to remind us of the
background of agreement we tend to forget in our rush to focus on moral diversity and disagreements. The synthesis of these ideas with cultural embeddedness will occur in chapter five. Thus, this chapter will be but a preliminary to a fuller treatment on moral progress to follow.

**Universalism**

In order to give classical teleology its due, let me highlight some reasons for advocating universal moral standards and grant, at the outset, that it would simplify things considerably if we could set aside pluralistic contentions that the "good life" is something to be constructed from a potentially infinite variety of reasonably worthy conceptions and valued possibilities. By articulating one true system of values, moral progress, according to teleological assumptions, would consist of an increasingly widespread realization of, and adherence to, this system. The suggestion is one of permanence and why this is thought to clearly account for moral progress is that it provides a fixed point to which we can more nearly approximate or from which we can recede. The idea is of a measuring rod which is independent of the things being measured.

In marked contrast to change which simply means to make different or alter or modify, progress, so the argument goes, involves a forward or onward movement, gradual (sometimes rapid) development and cumulative improvement. The tacit yet clear implication is that there is an objective, goal or terminus toward which our movement takes us. Apart from this, it is maintained, we could not describe progress as forward movement. If the terminus is not stable, at least for some definable interval of time, forward movement as a concept lacks meaning. And to those who feel that belief in an immutable moral code actually cuts off progress and causes acquiescence in 'stagnation', adherents of this line of reasoning can point to the following from C.S. Lewis (1980).

Stagnation, he says, is a term carrying illegitimate emotional power with its "suggestion of puddles and mantled pools." (p. 102) To strip it of its emotional power, he comments:

> If water stands too long it stinks. To infer thence that whatever stands long must be unwholesome is to be the
victim of metaphor. Space does not stink because it has preserved its three dimensions from the beginning. The square on the hypotenuse has not gone mouldy by continuing to equal the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Love is not dishonoured by constancy. We can go on getting a sum more and more nearly right only if the one perfectly right answer is 'stagnant'. (pp. 102, 103)

Now the motive for holding such a view is not simply to give us the means to measure how far along the road toward perfection we have travelled. It is, rather, an honest attempt to provide grounds for criticizing the Nazis under Hitler or apartheid in South Africa or Islamic treatment of women. Without the notion of a permanent moral standard we seem in danger of "going off the rails," of not being able to justify our revulsion of these practices, and of not being able to commend any specific policy towards these individuals or governments with whom we are so obviously deeply at odds. It can be a defense against relativistic contentions that moral comparisons between traditions cannot ultimately be drawn. Lewis definitely falls into this category. Writing during the period of the second world war,¹ he is at pains to point out that without an objective standard of good overarching the Axis and Allied powers, the Germans would be "as competent to create their ideology as we are to create ours. If 'good' and 'better' are terms deriving their sole meaning from the ideology of each people, then of course ideologies themselves cannot be better or worse than one another." (p. 100)

As the argument of chapter one shows, however, there is real difficulty in appealing to an absolute moral law or a transcultural natural law by means of some kind of direct access whereby actions and ideologies can be evaluated through a correspondence relation and this leaves a major assumption of this thesis--i.e., that good lives can be constructed from a variety of worthy conceptions and valued possibilities--a going concern. Even Christian claims that such access is possible by consulting scripture--divinely inspired and inerrant (in the original languages) though it may be--fail careful scrutiny. Alasdair MacIntyre

¹ "The Poison of Subjectivism," one of the essays in *Christian Reflections*, was originally published in 1943.
an Augustinian Christian himself, rejects appeals to the Bible as an all-sufficient guide. The problem, he says, is one of determining the shape of the Christian life in a specific social world. Doing so requires translating the Bible's message "into a particular and detailed set of discriminations among contemporary alternatives and for that task one needs types of concepts and types of enquiry not made available by the Bible itself." (p. 167) The parallels between this and the following from Stout are striking. Stout (1988) says: "What you can't do, if you are human, is have your judgment determined solely by the matter under consideration without relying on beliefs, habits of description, and patterns of reasoning that belong to a cultural inheritance." (p. 23) Stout's cultural inheritance is MacIntyre's specific social world and MacIntyre's types of concepts and enquiry are Stout's beliefs, habits of description and patterns of reasoning. The perspectives may be different but the conclusions are the same. We are immersed in a context that prevents a God's-eye view. This is not to doubt the existence of principles, deny that there is a "truth of the matter," or question whether there are moral propositions. Ontology is not the issue here. Epistemology is. Justifying beliefs by appeal to further beliefs rather than to an absolute moral law tells us something about how justification takes place; it does not make claims about what exists.

Yet it may be the case that we can get more mileage out of the transcultural natural law notion than Stout seems to think. In fact, I hope to show that Lewis's transcultural natural law is little more than Stout's provisional telos. In order to develop the provisional telos notion and to present the issues in a concrete fashion, I want to consider the views of Stout (1988), C.S. Lewis (1978 and 1980), Kekes (1993), Wittgenstein (1974) and Wilson (1993). The dividends of this inquiry in terms of our understanding of the nature of moral progress will handsomely reward our efforts.

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In his discussion of these matters, Stout compares the ideas of C.S. Lewis and Stanley Hauerwas. Lewis claims that the ethical standards of different cultures do not differ so widely that substantial similarities cannot be found. Hauerwas claims all moral reasoning is too contextual an affair to admit any appeal to a transcultural natural law. The one emphasizes the similarities between moralities while the other, the differences. In describing their positions, Stout portrays Lewis as imposing a false unity on moral belief and Hauerwas as adopting a stance that we are confronted with sheer chaos. Neither is acceptable to Stout and so he looks for a middle way between the two.

This middle way includes agreeing with Lewis that disagreement over any given moral proposition is inevitably accompanied by a lot of common ground without which disagreement makes little sense. What does not follow, Stout says, is any set of general principles that are universally acceptable because rational acceptability depends on contextual presuppositions. "We can always imagine some change in presuppositions that would make acceptance of a given substantive principle seem unreasonable." (p. 20)

Stout's account of Lewis's position, though, is less than adequate and shows some real misunderstandings in key places. It is true that Lewis is impressed with the similarities among moralities and believes in the Tao (i.e., The Way, or the Natural Law) as a transcultural standard of morality. He (1980) even goes so far as to say that "the pretence that we are presented with a mere chaos—that no outline of universally accepted value shows through—is simply false." (p. 104) But it is not accurate to imply, as Stout does,

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3 See especially chapter one of Ethics After Babel (1988).
4 There is little wonder this is the case. Stout's Lewisian source is a book entitled Mere Christianity. The book itself is a printed version of broadcast talks Lewis gave on the BBC. In the preface Lewis refers to not altering the "popular" or "familiar" tone he had intended for his radio addresses, clearly indicating his awareness of the "ordinary people" that comprised his audience. It is certainly not the place to begin to tease out the nuances of Lewis's position. A writer of his versatility (besides his publishing accomplishments as an Oxford and Cambridge professor of literary history, he wrote children's stories, some science fiction, and philosophical works in theology, ethics and education) needs to be carefully read for genre. The Abolition of Man and a collection of essays entitled Christian Reflections are a sampling of Lewis's philosophical works.
5 The appendix to The Abolition of Man (1978) is an attempt to illustrate the similarities in various ethical systems.
that Lewis thinks we can appeal directly to the Moral Law, leaving culture and history behind in the process, and examine it for instances of correspondence either as a way of explaining whether or not moral propositions are true or guiding our actions.

Granted, Lewis does use terms like moral law, traditional morality, doctrine of objective value, Natural Law and the (Chinese) Tao. One of his missions, if you will, is to deny emotivist claims that our practical reason (i.e., our judgment of good and evil) is merely an expression of our feelings; feelings, moreover, which we have been socially conditioned to have. He comments:

...if this is so, then we might have been conditioned to feel otherwise. 'Perhaps', thinks the reformer or the educational expert, 'it would be better if we were. Let us improve our morality.' Out of this apparently innocent idea comes the disease that will certainly end our species (and, in my view, damn our souls) if it is not crushed; the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its 'ideology' as men choose their clothes. (p. 99)

Elsewhere (1978), he says: "The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in." (p. 30)

Why Lewis argues so strongly against "value creation" and for the Tao bears some examination. Why does he call it "the disease that will certainly end our species?" For one, he says, if we can create value, if it is merely a sentiment that can be altered at will, then we have no grounds on which to criticize the Nazi definition of justice as that which is in the interest of the Third Reich. If that involves genocide, who are we to argue? Our own feelings of revulsion at Nazi tactics are merely the way we have been conditioned to feel by membership in our own particular society, a society which rejects any theory of a superior race. Given membership in a different society or subgroup, the Ku Klux Klan for example, our feelings would differ radically and genocide might seem more palatable.

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6The following is taken from the Abolition of Man (1978) and two essays entitled "The Poison of Subjectivism" and "On Ethics" in Christian Reflections (1980).
For another, Lewis (1978) claims that what purport to be "new" moralities are only "fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess." (p. 29) A very great deal has been said in this statement so let me try to unpack it.

According to Lewis the Tao is not one among a possible many different systems of value, it is the sole source of all value judgments. Two arguments are used to buttress this conclusion. First, ethically speaking we never start from a blank slate nor can we exist in an ethical vacuum from which vantage point we survey different ethical systems and make our choice between them. It is not that we can never be in an ethical vacuum but that we cannot be there and then emerge from it to adopt any particular ethical system as a result of an ethical motive. Being in the vacuum means we have no duty to emerge from it; if we did have such a duty, it would mean we were never in the vacuum to start with. What follows from this is the extreme difficulty if not impossibility of choosing between sharply differentiated ethical systems. Coming to a decision involves first coming to a moment of indecision in which there is no adherence to any ethical system (i.e., being in a vacuum), but how is it then possible to choose between ethical systems if there can be no ethical motive which being in a vacuum implies?

With this first of the Lewisian arguments we need have little quarrel. Any two ethical systems that are too sharply differentiated would not have enough in common to both be called ethical in the first place and this echoes a refrain from chapter one of this thesis. Furthermore, Lewis's insistence that we cannot be in an ethical vacuum from which it is our duty to emerge rings true not only on the logical grounds that it is contradictory to have a duty to thus emerge from the vacuum, but also seems to be simply another way of saying that we cannot escape our (cultural) context which I, along with Stout and others, agree is

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7Though this makes Lewis sound like a foundationalist, it will become clear through the course of this discussion that he is not.
impossible anyway. Stout (1988), in fact, uses strikingly similar vocabulary when he defines the word "abyss" as the place "where existentialists thought they were when choosing basic criteria or inventing values; the imaginary vacuum between conceptual schemes." (p. 293 italics mine)

Lewis's second argument against inventing values and for the Tao as the sole source of all value judgments is based on authority. As a result of observing what he variously described as monomaniac, eccentric, impoverished and truncated ethical systems (examples of which will be given in a moment), Lewis came to question how or if they could be justified. The question of how they came to be seemed relatively straightforward. As Lewis (1980) puts it:

As in the life of the individual so in that of a community, particular circumstances set a temporary excess of value on some one end. When we are in love, the beloved, when we are ill, health, when we are poor, money, when we are frightened, safety, seems the only thing worth having. Hence he who speaks to a class, a nation, or a culture, in the grip of some passion, will not find it difficult to insinuate into their minds the fatal idea of some one finite good which is worth achieving at all costs, and building an eccentric ethical system on that foundation. (p. 76)

But on what basis can a truncated morality be defended? By what authority, for example, does Communist ideology which rejects exploitation as an evil (and most of us would agree it really is an evil) at the same time attack justice as part of bourgeois ideology? Economic equality is, no doubt, a good thing, but can scruples about justice and good faith be set aside? If we do set them aside, we run into problems created by an end-justifies-the-means mentality. What warrant, asks Lewis, does the extreme nationalist have for placing the aspirations of his own people first? Why must all else yield to this? Though traditional morality acknowledges a duty to kin, alongside this duty and limiting it there also exist the "inflexible" demands of justice and the notion that all men are brothers. A special duty to one's own country is learned in the same place as a general duty to all human beings. Again, if duty to posterity is isolated from the rest of traditional morality and used to
construct a Futurist Ethic in which euthanasia for the aged and unfit is advocated, on what grounds do we reject duty to parents and ancestors which also finds its place in the Tao?

Finding no answers to these questions Lewis (1980) concludes that the Tao is the sole source of all value judgments. Any attempt to isolate a maxim and develop it into a monomaniac system from which vantage point one criticizes other moralities is equivalent, by analogy, to the rebellion of branches against the tree. "The trunk to whose root the reformer would lay the axe is the only support of the particular branch he wishes to retain." (p. 102) There is a "general (if not strictly universal) human tradition" (p. 74) and any selective retrieval from it elicits the question of why the rest can be ignored. The spirit of maxims such as "humanity ought to be preserved" can be found not only in Christianity but in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Babylonian Hymn, the Elder Edda, Confucius and Locke. At times this principle is truncated and shrinks to that of the nation, tribe, or family, but this is a mere subtraction from the generality and differs from it "not as ox from man but as dwarf from man." (p. 74) "New moralities can only be contractions or expansions of something already given." (p. 76) Agreeing with Kant on at least one point --namely that the imperative is categorical--Lewis claims that the ultimate ethical injunctions have always been premises and never conclusions.

My initial reading of Lewis prompted me to label him a foundationalist and one who adhered to a correspondence theory of truth. Statements like "ultimate ethical injunctions are premises," (Lewis, 1980, p. 78) "if nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved" (Lewis, 1978, p. 28) and talk of an absolute and immutable good (Lewis, 1980, p. 103) certainly point in that direction. But a more thorough reading has convinced me otherwise.

Deconstructionist arguments aside, it is important to understand that Lewis was reacting against what he saw as the dangers of the modern world's so-called "new moralities," dangers, as I have tried to outline, of truncation where some one finite good was thought worth achieving at all costs. The price, for Lewis, was always too high and, moreover, often masked either sloppy philosophical thinking or was a subversive attempt (sometimes
by totalitarian governments) to create dependence and deprive people of their full humanity. Rejecting traditional values in hopes of substituting a new morality in their place Lewis viewed as impossible. Did he sometimes go too far in his reactions and give the impression that absolute moral truth is readily accessible via correspondence despite a person's culture-bound state? Stout seems to think so.

But consider the following by Lewis (1980):

You will not suspect me of trying to reintroduce in its full Stoical or medieval rigour the doctrine of Natural Law. Still less am I claiming as the source of this substantial ethical agreement anything like Intuition or Innate Ideas...My aim is more timid. It is even negative. I deny that we have any choice to make between clearly differentiated ethical systems. I deny that we have any power to make a new ethical system. I assert that wherever and whenever ethical discussion begins we find already before us an ethical code whose validity has to be assumed before we can even criticize it...I am not...maintaining that it (traditional morality) will provide an answer to every particular moral problem...M. Sartre seems to me to be the victim of a curious misunderstanding when he rejects the conception of general moral rules on the ground that such rules may fail to apply clearly to all concrete problems of conduct. Who could ever have supposed that by accepting a moral code we should be delivered from all questions of casuistry? Obviously it is moral codes that create questions of casuistry, just as the rules of chess create chess problems...Within the framework of general human ethics problems will, of course, arise and will sometimes be solved wrongly. This possibility of error is simply the symptom that we are awake, not asleep, that we are men, not beasts or gods. If I were pressing on you a panacea, if I were recommending traditional ethics as a means to some end, I might be tempted to promise you the infallibility which I actually deny...I hold that you are already there whether you recognize it or not. (pp. 76-79)

This hardly sounds like one who thinks we can leap out of history and culture to gaze directly into the moral law, examining it for points of correspondence or lack thereof. It is the voice of one deeply concerned with radical relativism and yet very aware of cultural embeddedness. That Lewis acknowledged the significance of context is clear from the previous quote concerning any given community's penchant for excessively valuing some one end due to particular circumstances.
I take Lewis to be making much the same point as Wittgenstein (1974) and I hear echoes of Lewis in both Kekes (1993) and Wilson (1993). Let me begin with Wittgenstein. In On Certainty, Wittgenstein (1974) states as necessary our "being content to accept many things," (§344) "specifically," says Lovibond (1983), "to maintain a posture of uncritical acceptance towards a certain core of intellectually authoritative institutions—if we are to be able to think at all, or...to make sense of the world we inhabit."

(p. 121) The reason does not stem from a belief in foundationalism understood as a program of matching sentences with sensory evidence as if there were absolute bedrock upon which to justify such a procedure. Recall from chapter two of this thesis the pervasiveness of language. Sensory input is specified in a language, such language being part of our social practices so that perception is a function of linguistic conventions and not correspondence to "what is really there." Rationality, for Wittgenstein, is grounded in consensus or form of life without which we would have to give up making judgments. Some certainties are necessary as a backdrop of stability against which our uncertainties possess their legitimacy. Questioning too much at once removes the possibility of sound judgment. Questions and doubts, says Wittgenstein, "depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt." (§ 341) It is like a door on hinges. "If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put." (§343)

Concerning ethics, it seems to me that Lewis's traditional morality is Wittgenstein's hinges that must stay put. Lewis's traditional morality is Wittgenstein's consensus or form of life pushed to the point of a "general (if not strictly universal) human tradition." (Lewis, 1980, p. 74) If we criticize Lewis it must not be on the basis of foundationalist accusations but from the standpoint of his having pushed consensus too far. But can we say he has done this?

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8Both were at Oxford and writing at the same time.
I do not think so despite Stout's (1988) assertion that, unlike Lewis, he is impressed (along with Hauerwas) with the differences among moralities. (p. 17) On the level of societal functioning it would strike me as extremely odd if we could not find general if not universal prohibitions of oppression, murder, and treachery as well as exhortations to be kind to the elderly, the young and the crippled as well as injunctions of honesty and impartiality. Cohesion in society demands this. Kekes (1993) states that "it seems reasonable to suppose that some benefits and harms are, under normal circumstances, universally human." (p. 18 italics mine) Calling these primary values, he claims that even what seem to be utterly different systems of values have at their core some primary values all reasonable human beings by virtue of their humanity will prize. (p. 26)

Yet how can this be maintained in the face of what seem to be utterly different systems of value? How can this be reconciled with the differences between societies that seem so obvious? One way to analyze the differences is to rigourously distinguish judgments of value from beliefs about fact. Recall from chapter two my example of human sacrifice in some cultures as evidence of pointless cruelty we could not condone. Closer examination might reveal the belief that only in this way can the gods be appeased and infectious diseases warded off. The differences here, then, are not in judgments of value as first supposed.

This tendency to draw conclusions about what people value or how they feel based on their actions seems to be a natural one but it is fraught with peril. James Wilson (1993) illustrates this point using the example of infanticide. He cites several studies which show that the further back in history we look, the greater the likelihood children were abandoned and left to die; and from this it was concluded that parental affection was a modern phenomenon. But, asks Wilson, granted the data on how often infants were killed, what about the motives and the feelings of those who did it? How often was this done merely as a matter of convenience and how often in anguish and out of necessity stemming from an inability to feed the child or perhaps fear of severe punishment because one was an unwed
mother and the child therefore illegitimate? Before concluding a lack of maternal affection, either the feelings of the parents would have to be examined or one would have to observe what happens when a rise in the standard of living or a change in attitude toward unwed mothers occurred. (pp. 18-23) At any rate, inferring sentiments from actions is extremely problematic.

Given these ways of dealing with moral differences, it still remains to clarify in what sense we can speak of human universals because no amount of explaining can account for all the diversity in human communities. In fact, it is sometimes maintained that no universal moral rules exist in all societies. Wilson, however, claims that this is false and cites the rule against incest as one such example. The only lawful exceptions, he says, occur in those rare circumstances, where, for example, preservation of a royal dynasty can be accomplished in no other way. No one is aware of a society in which incest is approved of or treated with indifference. (pp. 17,18)

Whether or not Wilson is right about the rule against incest, it is still almost certainly the case that we would find distressingly few such universal rules and this is then taken to seriously weaken the case for human universals. But it is perhaps just here that Wilson makes his most important points. The following is essentially his argument.

For starters, the reason we will not find many universal rules is because there are not very many. But why do we insist on looking only for rules as if rules are the only indication of universal conduct and character assessment? The answer is surely because it is easier to look for rules as an explanation for actions than for the sentiments or impulses behind the actions. Explicit statements of rule in a culture's justice system, for example, are easy to see because they are explicit; the sentiments motivating those rules are not so easy to determine because, as we have seen, it is extremely difficult to accurately infer them from actions alone. Concerning human universals, though, Wilson points out that "what

9Something like Charles Taylor's language of perspicuous contrast discussed in chapter two of this thesis would be appropriate but it should be recognized that developing it would be both time-consuming and difficult.
is most likely to be universal are those impulses that, because they are so common, scarcely need to be stated in the form of a rule, and so escape the notice of anyone scanning indexes to ethnographic studies." (p. 18 italics mine) Caring for children is one such impulse and seems to be obeyed despite the enormous effort required to raise children. And where there is a rule to prevent the tiny minority from abandoning their children, it is the behaviour of the people in the majority that explains the rule and not the rule that explains the behaviour. The rule does not cause the behaviour in the same way that the law of gravity does not cause a rock to fall to the earth but only describes its movement after it has been set in motion.

By focussing on impulses, sentiments or dispositions in our analysis of human universals we can also reconcile—what many consider to be the major stumbling block in accepting the notion of universality—the existence of serious moral depravity along with the existence of universal moral impulses. Why is there so much immoral behaviour if there is a universal moral sense? Wilson's response is most enlightening.

A universal moral human nature coexists with other sentiments (wilder rivals Wilson calls them) such as ambition and avarice and, in the struggle among these sentiments, the moral sense does not always prevail. All that a universal human nature will, therefore, provide are a few rules and solutions to the most elemental human problems. The moral sense will provide at best "a set of tests for human action, not a set of hierarchical rules for ordering that action." (p. 219) Indeed, moral dispositions no more cause moral action than beliefs cause actions generally because "behaviour is the product of our senses interacting with our circumstances" (p. 25) and those circumstances can contribute to wrong actions. If, in our circumstances, we felt human sacrifice necessary to produce good crops, fundamental moral sensibilities would be violated. But notice that this example of serious moral depravity is accompanied by some form of justification—i.e., ensuring a good crop by appeasing the gods. The reasons for human sacrifice are based on some other good or
need and not because the practice itself is enjoyed or valued. Furthermore, as better ways of producing good crops are found (i.e., as circumstances change), history shows the reasons for human sacrifice no longer seem valid and the practice is discontinued.

It is precisely this need to justify that seems to be truly universal and is engaged in even when one commits wrong actions for which no punishment will be forthcoming. Commenting on some of the recent riots in Los Angeles, Wilson says that what most forcibly struck him was not the behaviour of the rioters but the fact that they felt the need to justify their behaviour even when they faced no danger of being caught. (p. 230) Rationalizing our behaviour, sometimes publicly and sometimes only to ourselves, seems to be a universal practice designed to legitimize our actions through appeal to appropriate motives and this appeal involves some kind of moral standard.

**Summary and Evaluation**

The preceding discussion, contrasted with associated comments made in chapter one, may, at first glance, seem to suggest two incompatible lines of thought. On the one hand, we have cultural embeddedness which precludes direct access to the Moral Law as a means of justifying moral propositions. Therefore, isolating a few general principles all societies necessarily agree to, or establishing substantive principles as universally acceptable, is difficult because cultural context dictates, to a large degree, what counts as rationally acceptable. As Stout (1988) says, "comparative ethics gives us many examples of cultures whose presuppositions differ from ours in ways that make substantive principles surprisingly unlike ours reasonable in their context." (p. 20) On the other hand, however, we have Lewis's argument for a universal outline of morality and Wilson's argument that there are universal human moral impulses and even, albeit a very small number, some universal rules such as that against incest. Can these two lines of thought be reconciled?

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10This is, of course, just another way of saying we must distinguish judgments of fact from judgments of value as argued above.
They can be if we distinguish between universal rules and universal dispositions. As Wilson puts it: "To find what is universal about human nature, we must look behind the rules and the circumstances that shape them to discover what fundamental dispositions, if any, animate them and to decide whether those dispositions are universal. If such universal dispositions exist, we would expect them to be so obvious that travelers would either take them for granted or overlook them in preference to whatever is novel or exotic." (p. 226) Such dispositions include the need to justify actions (even if only to ourselves through rationalizing) and caring for children despite the effort required in doing so.

It is dispositions like these, not the substantive universal principles Stout attributes to Lewis, that I believe Lewis has in mind when he speaks of a universal outline of morality and the natural law. Remember, Lewis does not want us to think he is reintroducing the doctrine of Natural Law in all of its stoical and medieval rigour nor that a transcultural standard of morality will provide an answer to every particular moral problem. His aim is more timid in that he denies any choice between clearly differentiated ethical systems. Stout has misinterpreted Lewis by focussing too narrowly on only one of Lewis's published works.

It is also not the case that "universalists" like Lewis and Wilson ignore tradition and the significance of cultural context. Lewis readily admits that errors will be made in attempting to solve moral problems because of differences between cultures and particular blindesses in every culture and epoch. He also acknowledges the effects of a community's particular circumstances on what things are valued and viewed to be important. For his part, Wilson, throughout The Moral Sense, reiterates the theme of our social nature. Against Thomas Hobbes he argues that we are not born into a state of nature but into a social compact encompassing nation, tribe and family. And over against John Rawls he questions the value of imagining ourselves in an "original position" behind a "veil of ignorance" because "no human being is ever in such a position and, to the extent that he is human, cannot possibly be ignorant." (p. 235)
Furthermore, Stout—his emphasis on tradition and cultural context notwithstanding—does not deny that pluralistic society shares common ground. "The idea that liberal society lacks any shared conception of the good," he says, "is false." (p. 291) Statements like this in response to MacIntyre's (1984) contention that our moral languages are "an unharmonious melange of ill-assorted fragments" (p. 10) I initially found odd when contrasted with Stout's disagreement with Lewis over the similarities among moralities. The disagreement with Lewis, however, is due to misinterpretation, and, moreover, we can charitably assume Stout has made the distinction between rules and dispositions.

Stout and Lewis, therefore, are not as far apart as Stout seems to think. Between them there is a considerable difference of emphasis but not fundamental disagreement over notions of particular moral traditions and sentiments and dispositions that transcend them and are a part of universal human nature. Both of these notions are critical for an adequate understanding of moral progress on which I now want to focus directly.
Chapter Five

MORAL PROGRESS (PART II)

Introduction

If my analysis of Lewis is correct, then the similarities he sees between moralities function as the background of agreement necessary for the differences that Stout is impressed with to even make sense as differences in morality. Stout and Lewis are agreed on this notion of common ground (recall chapter one); indeed, Stout follows Lewis on this point. Where Stout errs in interpreting Lewis is in attributing to Lewis the belief that there is a set of substantive principles all societies agree upon and to which we can appeal, despite our culture-bound state, through a correspondence relation to resolve moral disagreements.

We have arrived, then, at the same conclusion that we reached in chapter one. But though the destination may be (more or less) the same, the alternate route taken highlights different points of interest particularly relevant to moral progress and amenable to its discussion. So let me begin to take advantage of them.

First off, let me dispense very quickly with any notion that moral progress ever involves starting from scratch in any Cartesian sense. In the same way that there cannot be contextless doubts, there cannot be contextless values either. Culturally embedded we all are, adherents (consciously or not) of a particular tradition with attendant assumptions and precedents which provide us with an inescapable starting point. Our intuitions and inclinations are shaped by the language and moral vocabulary we use. In this sense, C.S. Lewis (1980) is quite right when he says "new moralities can only be contractions or expansions of something already given." (p. 76) It is the fact of having a moral starting point that must be recognized if we are to understand moral progress.

But there is more to our moral starting point than cultural context alone. What is transcultural or universal, if you will, are certain sentiments, dispositions, impulses and values—not always specific rules—that seem to exist in all cultures. The maternal sentiment
is one example. Another is the value attached to human life. Murder defined as unjustifiable homicide is universally denounced and even if justification varies radically from one society to another, the fact that justification is offered at all is a sign of the value of human life. Indeed, it would be odd to assume that we could find the same rules everywhere since "almost all rules reflect the indeterminate intersection of sentiment and circumstance." (Wilson, 1993, p. 225)

Ironically, human universals do not necessarily provide an absolute endpoint to which we can approximate, thereby making moral progress measurement a relatively straightforward exercise; rather, human nature, in some sense innate, and in another, forged initially in the crucible of the parent/child relationship and later by broader societal conventions, is part of our moral starting point. Disagreements there may be over what is natural, but the fact remains that we have a nature in the form of inherited characteristics and inclinations that suggest limits on our actions and provide some guidance for what we should do.

This conception of human universals, common ground, transcultural natural law, or what Lewis calls the Tao, traditional morality and universal outline of accepted value immediately raises the question of how moral progress can occur. Are we bound to an unchanging entity given once for all? And, outline though there may be of universally accepted value, what about the undeniable differences and contradictions in detail that exist between different traditions? Not all of them will be explained by distinguishing judgments of value from beliefs about fact. Learning the moral language of another culture may not render certain actions excusable by showing them to be justified in a particular epistemic circumstance. Our negative judgment may result from faulty reasoning or obstinate unwillingness to engage in critical reflection by members of another tradition.

That differences, contradictions and even absurdities exist between moralities need not cause undue alarm for those believing in human universals. If, as I have emphasized, it is sentiments and dispositions combining to form an outline of universally accepted value
rather than a set of particular rules independent of contextual considerations that is what we
mean by universality, we can admit to both contradictions and absurdities. Clear,
unambiguous articulation of a sense of commonality is also not required because, as Pang
(1994) notes, "our understanding of our commonality is itself changeable and open to
deepening." (p. 141) We can, therefore, admit to differences, invite criticism and advocate
moral development. The *Tao* is not a static, unchanging moral code given once for all. But
the moral progress we allow must occur from "within" rather than from "without." This
contrast between "within" and "without" is central to the concept of moral improvement.

**Progress from "Within"**

In order to get some idea of what the "within/without" contrast is, consider the
following analogy by C.S. Lewis (1978):

A theorist about language may approach his native tongue,
as it were from outside, regarding its genius as a thing that
has no claim on him and advocating wholesale alterations of
its idiom and spelling in the interests of commercial
convenience or scientific accuracy. That is one thing. A
great poet, who has 'loved, and been well nurtured in, his
mother tongue', may also make great alterations in it, but his
changes of the language are made in the spirit of the
language itself: he works from within. The language which
suffers, has also inspired the changes. That is a different
thing—as different as the works of Shakespeare are from
Basic English. It is the difference between alteration from
within and alteration from without: between the organic and
the surgical. In the same way, the *Tao* admits development
from within. Those who understand its spirit can modify it
in directions which that spirit itself demands. Only they can
know what those directions are. The outsider knows
nothing about the matter. (p. 30)

There is, of course, nothing earth shattering about the notion that legitimate criticism
requires knowledge of subject matter. Criticizing involves considering the merits and
demerits of something and judging accordingly. Evaluation is a key component and the
better one knows the subject matter, the better the position one is in to evaluate accurately
and suggest courses of action leading to improvement.

But we must be very careful not to water down what Lewis is saying about
understanding the spirit of the *Tao* and alteration from within with nebulous phrases like
"knowledge of subject matter" unless we are careful to spell out what such knowledge entails.

In another context, Lewis (1970) distinguishes between "looking at" versus "looking along" using the illustration of a sunbeam in a dark toolshed. Looking at the beam and the specks of dust floating in it is to see the most striking thing in the otherwise dark shed. Looking along the beam (i.e., letting the beam fall on one's eyes) is to radically alter the picture so that one now sees, through the cranny by which the beam enters the shed, leaves on a tree outside and the sun high in the sky. We get two very different experiences of something depending on whether we look at it or look along it.

Now, looking at something is equivalent to describing it from the "outside" while looking along it is to describe it from the "inside." One of the best examples I can think of comes from Martin Buber's classic work, I and Thou (1970). In contemplating a tree, he says, we can approach it from a purely objective standpoint (the I-It relation), classifying it according to species, observing it as an expression of physical and biological laws and thus externalizing it. But, says Buber, "it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me." (p. 58) In other words, there is another kind of relation, the I-Thou relation, in which the Romantic notion of subjective experience plays a significant role. This is akin to Lewis's looking from the "inside."

Both experiences are important, but the modern focus on the efficacy of objectivity has relegated the "looking along" experience to the fringes. Thus, for example, Lewis (1970) points out that "it has been assumed without discussion that if you want the true account of religion you must go, not to religious people, but to anthropologists." (p. 213) Granted, we can be deceived by subjective experience. Extremes of both heat and cold produce a burning sensation that, in the absence of senses other than touch, make it difficult to

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1This illustration comes from "Meditation in a Toolshed," in God in the Dock (1970).
pinpoint the source. The fertility rituals of pagan society do not really cause the crops to grow.

But to discount all subjective experience on this basis would be a mistake. Describing pain only as some kind of neural occurrence as a result of examining nerve fibres, through a microscope, subjected to violent stimulus is not to really know pain. For that, one needs to experience pain from the "inside." Since all of us have felt pain, this may not be the best example. But it is possible to describe religion and even morality by means of external account only, thereby, in an important sense, not knowing what they really are.

None of this is meant to deny the importance of the "looking at" procedure so effectively used by science—if the benefits of medical technology, for example, are any indication. My point is that the "looking along" experience or knowledge from within is significant and must be acknowledged. In this I am following Alfred North Whitehead who emphasizes that we do have subjective experiences, whether we attach any significance to them or not, and since we experience things subjectively just as we experience things objectively like the size and shape of rocks, why do we judge one experience more real than the other?2 Both "looking at" and "looking along" are important—though, in particular cases, one may be more appropriate than the other—and both must be employed.

This idea of knowledge from within is, of course, neither original to C. S. Lewis nor is he the only contemporary to hold it. Aristotle notes: "anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just...must have been brought up in good habits." (1095b) The starting point for ethical study can only be recognized by the well brought up individual. Those not well brought up may try to be critical but their criticism lacks substance because they do not know what is being discussed. Maclntyre's (1988) reading of Aristotle is the same. He comments: "It follows that for those who have not yet been educated into the virtues the life of the virtues will necessarily seem to lack rational

justification; the rational justification of the life of virtue within the community of the *polis* is available only to those who already participate more or less fully in that life." (p. 110)

From a Christian perspective, the Apostle Paul says "the man without the Spirit (i.e., the Holy Spirit) does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2:14) The Apostle John claims: "We know that we have come to know him (i.e., God) if we obey his commands," (I John 2:3 italics mine) while the psalmist David encourages us to "taste and see that the Lord is good." (Ps. 34:8) The Christian doctrine states that our abstract conceptions of God supplied only by reason (the "looking at" perspective) need to be corrected and tempered by the experience of obedience to God's will (the "looking along" perspective). It is only those who do the will of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit in the "inner man," who will truly understand and know God.

Centuries after the ancient Greeks and early Christians we have Jeffrey Stout (1988) saying that "to find oneself in a cultural tradition is the beginning, not the end, of critical thought" (p. 73) and Pang (1994) quite correctly arguing that "moral education should seek to initiate people into moral life, so they may be critical participants of their moral community." (p. 74) In both statements we see acknowledgement of the necessity of working from within a context. The Pang quote in particular suggests that initiation into moral life (the idea of working from "within") is an unavoidable prerequisite for meaningful participation in the moral community.

It would also be very remiss on our part if we did not recognize shades of the "within/without" contrast in Charles Taylor's (1981) work discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Though the terminology is different, he is making much the same point. His language of perspicuous contrast, which closely approximates Gadamer's conception of the "fusion of horizons," is designed to point out differences in two forms of life as "alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both." (p. 205
It might be pushing Taylor too far to interpret these human constants as human universals in the way described earlier, but he seems to have some such notion in mind.

Contrasted to this fusion perspective is his separation perspective, one used with spectacular results since the seventeenth-century revolution in science to understand the natural world in the sense of understanding its physical laws and extracting from it the materials necessary for our technological and medical success. This is one example where the "looking at" perspective is more appropriate than the "looking along" perspective. It may be that our medical success, coming often as a result of "cutting the vocal cords"\(^3\) of the earth as we dissect animals in the laboratory, prevents the integration with our world that environmentalists find so important, but, as Taylor points out, "this is something which the language of contrast should help us to assess more clear-headedly...because we can see how the modern scientific perspective is a historic achievement and not the perennial human mode of thought." (pp. 209, 210)

This "within/without" conception in all of its different forms--looking at versus looking along, internal versus external experience, fusion versus separation perspectives--is pivotal to our understanding of moral improvement. I now want to tease out the implications of the "within/without" distinction and develop some of its nuances for our topic of moral improvement.

Earlier I stated that the moral progress we allow must occur from "within" rather than from "without" and on the basis of the preceding elaboration of this distinction, this might seem obvious. But I suspect that for many of us, thinking about improving our morality is accompanied by vague notions of improvement in other arenas such as the political. Election campaigns are often rife with references to new approaches, fresh starts, and the vision, creativity and dynamism of particular party leaders, all designed to garner our votes

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\(^3\)See Evernden, 1993, pp. 14-18.
by promising improvements in how we are governed. But moral improvement cannot be viewed in this way, as if all that were required were a fresh new start.

When Lewis talks about development from within, he is saying that some connection with the "general, if not strictly universal" tradition of human morality must be made if improvement as opposed to innovation is to occur. Clearly he has a context in mind—cultural in its particularity yet universal in outline—from which a foothold in the realization that the change being advocated is moral change can be established. This is how moral improvement is distinguished from moral innovation, the latter providing no such foothold.

This distinction is illustrated with the following example. On the one hand, movement from the Confucian "do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you" to the Christian "do as you would be done by" is a real advance because the Christian maxim is an extension of the Confucian one and anyone who accepted the Confucian maxim would immediately recognize the Christian one as an extension. On the other hand, Lewis (1980) criticizes the morality of Nietzsche as a mere innovation precisely because it makes no such connection with the Tao. "It is the difference," he says, "between a man who says to us: 'You like your vegetables moderately fresh; why not grow your own and have them perfectly fresh?' and a man who says, 'Throw away that loaf and try eating bricks and centipedes instead.'" (pp. 103, 104)

Legitimate moral progress, then, does not result from jettisoning prevailing judgments of value in their entirety and starting anew. For one, abandoning our moral context is as impossible as Descartes's project of radical doubt and, for another, the dangers of doing so are great, as this affords evil intentions their opportunity to flourish. What moral progress does involve is internal criticism by which different precepts, habits and courses of action which come into question are analyzed in terms of how fundamental (not foundational) they are and whether or not they really contribute to the values they are intended to support. It is not accomplished by direct frontal attacks on our moral context. Recall Wittgenstein's contention that "if (we) want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put."
The implications of internal criticism are significant. Such criticism presupposes intimate knowledge of our moral context and such knowledge from within, in turn, presupposes active involvement and participation in our moral tradition. The nature of this involvement and participation bears some scrutiny.

The British philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, viewed the moral life as a habit of affection and behaviour rather than reflective application of moral criteria. This is, of course, at odds with the influential philosophical tradition viewing morality as the product of intellectual analysis giving rise to rules which are then used to govern behaviour. But moral conduct, says Oakeshott (1962), is no more a translation into action of a state of mind than poetry is the verbal expression of prior thought. "What the poet says and what he wants to say are not two things...they are the same thing; he does not know what he wants to say until he has said it." (p. 72) Similarly, "the capital of moral ideals... has always been accumulated by a morality of habitual behaviour, and appears in the form of abstract ideas only because... it has been transformed by reflective thought into a currency of ideas." (p. 73) Just as metre, rhyme and metaphor are used to analyze poetry but are not poetry themselves, utilitarian and deontological theories of ethics, interesting explanations of moral behaviour though they may be, are not morality.

Oakeshott's understanding of habitual behaviour is also that of Aristotle. Becoming virtuous requires exercising the virtues in the same way that we become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre. "So too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts." (1103b) The earlier we start in our youth, the better and it seems that human nature readily accepts training through habituation. "Neither by nature...nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit." (1103a)

Abstract reasoning in Oakeshott's form of a currency of ideas will not lead to marked moral improvement, as I think criticism of Kohlberg's orientation toward universal ethical principles has suggested. Furthermore, abstract reasoning justifying the virtues will not
make us virtuous. As C.S. Lewis (1978) writes: "I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite sceptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat', than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharers." (p. 19)

What follows is that moral progress will not take place by intellectual sniping from the sidelines. Indeed, would not abstract reasoning suggest that, in order to understand morality more fully or to become more virtuous, we must try experience? This is Aristotle's contention that education in the virtues is necessary for one to gainfully study ethics. It is the Christian contention that there is no substitute for obedience to God's will in order to understand Him. It is Pang's contention that moral education initiate people into moral life before they can be critical participants of their moral community.

But just what do we mean when we talk about gainfully studying ethics or participating critically in moral community. And how can this aid moral progress? Well it is the Apostle Paul "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:5, 6) who recognizes where the Judaic law, in its focus on salvation by works, is deficient. Likewise it is those thoroughly versed in their own moral language(s)--not only from an abstract analytic point of view, but from Aristotle's experiential, habituated and trained emotion point of view; from Lewis's "looking along" perspective; from Buber's I-Thou situation; and from Pang's immersion in moral community notion--who can recognize legitimate deficiencies.

Recognizing deficiencies is an essential initial step in bringing about improvement. To illustrate, recall the Confucian maxim: "do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you." The actions implied here are negative ones reminiscent of Decalogue prohibitions like those against giving false testimony about a neighbour or coveting his possessions or wife. But this is only one side of the coin. The other side is all the positive actions implied in the Golden Rule "do as you would be done by." "Give to the one who
Asks you," says Christ, "and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (Matt. 5:42)

What the Christian principle does is to take the Confucian maxim and extend it to include positive actions, to be proactive if you will. In so doing, it recognizes a deficiency, but, far from beginning anew, the Christian maxim retains all of the Confucian principle and adds more besides. A deficiency is, after all, a shortcoming and not evidence that something is rotten to the core.

There will, of course, be times when alterations, and not merely additions, are required. Stout (1988) likens our rich fabric of social practices and institutions to a motley. (pp. 291, 292) Our moral languages, embedded in a rich cultural context of religious, political, economic and many other types of practices and institutions, are like a coat of many colours needing mending, patching, recutting and restyling. Our morality is not a building needing new foundations. But the mending and recutting process must include legitimate internal criticism (the "looking along" experience) in addition to abstract reasoning and objective analysis and such knowledge from within is part of the function of moral language learning. Learning moral languages puts one in a position to facilitate moral growth from within and to modify moral perceptions in directions which the "spirit of morality" itself demands.

**Synthesizing Universalism and Cultural Embeddedness**

If moral education is to be effective in achieving its aims, it will be, in part, because we pay attention to philosophical concerns in framing those aims. Some of these aims include helping students to become members of a moral community participating critically in its creation and aiding them to see from a moral point of view, achieve moral excellence and enhance moral perception. What these and almost all other formulations of such aims have in common, I think, is what Pang describes as "the notion of progress toward an ineffable good which is the very root of the moral spirit." (p. 62) This is as fine an encapsulation of the idea of moral progress as we are likely to find.
The philosophical concerns we have dealt with are both complex and important and because of their complexity I want to allay any possible criticism that I have been too ambivalent to further our understanding of moral progress. I may be viewed as having affirmed cultural embeddedness at one moment while subscribing to universalism the next. I may seem to have promoted culture at the expense of human nature at some points, especially in chapter one, and then done the reverse in this chapter. One might think I am rather confused in trying to combine what may seem incompatible lines of thought. But this appearance of ambivalence is misleading and I would like to weave the various threads together and then comment on prospects for progress in pluralistic society.

One reason for the appearance of ambivalence is the analytical penchant for distilling theoretical options into distinct categories. Either we are universalists or contextualists, "looking at" or "looking along," coming from the I-thou perspective or the I-it. The very process of analysis involves separation of theoretical possibilities into determinate categories in an effort to remove the silt from the muddied waters. In the biological sciences, analytical understanding kills what it sees in the dissecting room (thereby hoping to really "see") and labels the various parts as instances of their kind. What cannot be thus separated is an anomaly or impurity.

But what is often blurred over in the process are the relationships between the constituent parts which binds the whole together. It is not so much on the relationships that I want to focus but on the necessity of keeping cultural embeddedness and universality, tradition and human nature, "looking at" and "looking along" in focus at the same time. This is reminiscent of Stout's stereoscopic social criticism in which he attempts to bring internal and external goods into focus at the same time, and which, in turn, owes much to Taylor's language of perspicuous contrast. I want to resist the process of separation and truncated inquiry.

In discussing the preceding particular conception of universality, I have tried to do what Iris Murdoch suggests when she writes: "Human nature has certain discoverable attributes,
and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality."⁴ But far from leading us to a foundational moral criterion from which all nonfoundational moral knowledge derives or to correspondence theory, that which is fundamentally moral and universally shared is like, in Stout's words, "a highly general moral belief that sums up the spirit of one's morality, perhaps one you would be especially reluctant to give up; something you could know to be true and acceptable only by acquiring experience in a moral tradition and by knowing a lot about a lot of different things, including the moral truth about various specific cases." (p. 301 italics mine)

If we focus too much on cultural tradition, we might forget that it is only our starting point and fail to move on from there. The unavoidability of our starting point at a particular site and historical position together with extant moral languages currently in use need not mean we must stay put. The fact that we must begin "at home" does not condemn us to staying there. Indeed, it ought not to. Even if we cannot see from the perspective of eternity, broadening our horizons is still a good worth pursuing.

It is also the case that recognizing an outline of universal value can help us overcome the shortcomings of moral truncation and impoverishment. Why, for example, should the principle of keeping promises be restricted to the tribe, class or family as it is in some cultures? Granted, there are reasons for this. Our moral sense, arising initially out of our natural sociability with others very familiar to us, tends to value the familiar and the immediate over the strange and the distant. Furthermore, it was once thought by some European colonialists that the native people they encountered were subhuman and possessed a lesser nature. Therefore they could be enslaved without justification.

Yet are these good reasons? Does a person's skin colour or language count as a morally relevant reason for treating them in ways we do not want to be treated ourselves? History, of course, shows that the majority answer is no and the expansion of moral boundaries

⁴Quoted in Kekes (1993), p. 139.
over time encompassed the heathens and infidels to where, in the present day, the non-human environment is sometimes included.

My contention, though, is that, if the colonial drive for cheap labour thought necessary to exploit the riches of the New World were not such an issue at the time, something like Charles Taylor's language of perspicuous contrast formulating different ways of life as "alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both" could have been applied to thwart some of the unfortunate results of slavery by denying that there were morally relevant reasons for condoning it. But this requires a firm belief in "human constants" (or universality in the sense I have described it), firm enough to withstand other motives like greed or superiority.

Such a firm belief in human constants, combined with non-hubris comparative ethics and moral language learning, implies there is a richness to morality that can be tapped. How so? One way is through reading old documents left by past civilizations; another is by immersion into a foreign culture to conduct ethnographic research; and a third is through what Stout calls flights of artistic imagination. We may broaden our horizons by discovering new relations of family resemblance between moral languages. The possible variety of these relations is great as is the possibility of distortion and inadequacy. Assessing how distorted or inadequate another moral language is will be a job for moral inquiry, inquiry that takes place within a moral language. The more perspicuous the contrasts and comparisons the moral language within which we operate makes possible, the more progress we will make.

If it is the case that universality must remain in our line of vision, the last point hints at why we must also keep tradition in that same line of vision. It would, of course, make things easier if we could rise to the vantage point of omniscience, of universal reason, and

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5In all fairness, arguments against according subhuman status to members of different races were made at that time.
thus resolve moral dilemmas, enhance moral perception and achieve moral excellence. But
that is not my position.

Moral inquiry begins in a cultural tradition employing some moral language or
languages. As Stout (1988) says, "our starting point is not so much arbitrary as
inescapable." (p. 120) But it is only a starting point. Culture is not something static or
even necessarily uniform. Mary Midgely calls Western culture a "fertile confused jungle of
sources" and a "debating-ground" where "half the business...has been self-criticism." Learning our own moral language is not simply a matter of acquiring a set vocabulary, way
of thinking, or outlook and then passing this on to our children. Moral reasoning cannot be
divorced from the inheritance of a cultural tradition as Kant had hoped, and it is because
cultures are not static but evolving entities that moral reasoning has something to do and
somewhere to lead us (moral progress). As our social practices and institutions respond to
change, moral reasoning will, from a particular starting point, move out from there by
questioning existing assumptions and precedents to see if they still apply. Some things
will need to be preserved, others jettisoned, and still others reformulated.

Since moral reasoning (like any other kind of reasoning) is embodied in a linguistic
medium, mastery of the moral language(s) that form an integral part of our starting point
must figure prominently. If the "within/without" contrast discussed earlier is valid, such
mastery will involve experience and habituation. We cannot simply clarify our values as if
they could be organized on a shelf and appropriately labelled. In an important sense, we
must live them.

Pang (1994) seems to argue for achieving moral excellence on a similar tack when she
talks of "concept teaching...helping students to acquire their concepts with depth and to
allow this deep understanding to prevail as the orientation enlivening their perceptions" (p.
118). Concepts must be taught "not as mere ideas, but as real possibilities." (p. 118) We

\[6\text{Quoted in Stout (1988), p. 73.}\]
cannot merely be "involved in passing on abstract conceptual resources...students...must be taught embedded in the living practices and ways of life of the community...Morality...is not to be merely studied as an aside from one's daily life." (pp. 119, 120)

Having said this, it should also be recognized that it may well take all we can muster simply to master the moral language we learn at home, much less all possible moral languages. Teaching concepts as real possibilities, particularly when cloaked in the foreign moral language of another culture as it often is in comparative ethics, may be difficult.

Some deference to authority, therefore, seems in order. Is it not reasonable to consult the opinions of the wise? Aristotle quotes Hesiod: "Far best is he who knows all things himself; Good, he that hearkens when men counsel right; But he who neither knows, nor lays to heart [a]nother's wisdom, is a useless wight." (1095b)

But this listening to authority should not be entirely passive. If we have really learned our own moral language well, can we not expect to feel (I hesitate to say it because of problems associated with intuition) an innate sense of fitness? Perhaps it might more aptly be described as detecting a thread of commonality, a resonance with what one currently knows, or even a sense of Taylor's human constants. At any rate, if our perspective is stereoscopic, if we can keep cultural embeddedness and universality in focus at the same time, some deference to authority need not be seen as irrational.

The Context of Pluralism

It was, of course, an underlying motive of the Enlightenment to free us from blind obedience to the authority of tradition in the form of revealed religion or ancient custom and in this way to define progress. Prior to a reliance on one's own reason, the insights of the mystics, philosophers and sages filtered down to the common people in the form of myth and ritual. In rebelling against authority and tradition, excusable though it may have been because of the corruptions of those in power, a new set of problems has arisen in the form of pluralism.
At the heart of pluralism is a prima facie right to difference. Presupposed in this core idea is the belief that one can construct a good life out of the available plural possibilities. A commitment to pluralism entails accepting variable conceptions of the good life, variable because of the plurality of values though not in the sense of a plurality of ways in reaching the one good life for all of us, but plural in the sense of a rich variety of reasonably worthy conceptions. Because of the number of possibilities, we cannot "try" them all, and even if we could, unavoidable conflicts would arise. Valuing both justice and friendship, for example, raises difficulties since the first depends, at least to some extent, on impartiality, while the second eschews it.

Our commitment to pluralism is a commitment to an ideal, the realization of which involves a tremendous amount of maturity and insight on the part of the "masses." Constructing our own "good" lives out of the available plural possibilities is a difficult task: first, because making choices between equally good but conflicting alternatives is itself a hard thing to do; second, because unavoidable conflicts will arise and have to be resolved; and third, because impingement on the freedom of others to construct their own visions of "good lives" is a very real possibility. Commitment to pluralism and its enshrinement of difference involves risking societal stability and ultimately its existence. On the other hand, it also provides exceptional opportunity for moral improvement. C.S. Lewis (1947) puts it this way:

If we are content to go back and become humble plain men obeying a tradition, well. If we are ready to climb and struggle on till we become sages ourselves, better still. But the man who will neither obey wisdom in others nor adventure for her himself is fatal. A society where the simple many obey the few seers can live: a society where all were seers could live even more fully. But a society where the mass is still simple and the seers are no longer attended to can achieve only superficiality, baseness, ugliness, and in the end extinction. (pp. 46, 47)

What pluralism does through its enshrinement of difference is to acknowledge the complex and multi-faceted nature of "the good." As such, it may provide the best opportunity for us all to become sages and to move toward "that ineffable good which is at
the very root of the moral spirit." It may also lead to the fragmentation and ultimate extinction of society.

**Conclusion**

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre develops the argument that modern society lacks the conventions necessary for serious conversation with each other and that there is no rational agreement on a conception of the good or our ultimate telos. In *Ethics After Babel*, Stout argues that the multiplicity of moral standpoints does not threaten coherent moral discourse and that a thinner conception of the good or provisional telos focusing on the highest good achievable under current circumstances provides agreement enough from which to work. A once and for all conception based on philosophical analysis of the human essence is neither possible nor necessary.

Regardless of which way we lean on the question of society's current state of health, we need not stumble over our ultimate telos as though there were a contextually free, definitive, and fixed goal of ultimate purpose for human existence toward which we should aim. Not even Christians are committed to this. I find it curious when writers like John Kekes (1993) say that moral progress does not consist in approximating an ideal like the imitation of Christ, (p. 140) as though Christians viewed this as a detailed blueprint to apply systematically to particular cases. If it were, we could expect all Christians to willingly sacrifice their lives as Christ did through crucifixion so that others could benefit. To be sure, some have, but why not all? Fear of the ultimate sacrifice of giving one's life might explain part of it. But the real reason is that Christians view Christ's ministry, crucifixion and resurrection as occurring in a particular place at a particular time ("But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son...Gal. 4:4) to accomplish a particular mission only he could accomplish (i.e., redemption for all mankind) through God the Father's

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7There need really be no contradiction between plural possibilities (emphasis on the plural) and ineffable good (emphasis on the singular). If "the good" is not perceived as complex and multi-faceted enough to admit (infinite) variety, we are probably missing the point.
divine empowerment. The imitation of Christ, therefore, is not a definitive goal of fixed purpose but a habit of mind typically described as losing oneself for the gospel and Christ which will have different outworkings given changing and variable contexts.

A stereoscopic view of moral improvement will keep two things in focus. One is what can variously be described as universal aspects of human nature, deep conventions, primary values, or, perhaps most aptly, "the good" in the sense of not being independent of moral languages yet transcending the particularities of any single moral language. The other is our inescapable starting point in tradition.

It is within a tradition that we develop Oakeshott's habit of affection and behaviour and exercise the virtues as Aristotle argues we need to in order to become virtuous. Initiation into a tradition takes the form, first of imitating others, usually one's parents. Later, and with increased understanding of the rules and customs one has learned from "within," there can follow reflection, analysis, and critical questions about the efficacy of, and direction taken by, these conventions. This implies a conception of the good life and our telos that transcends the particularities of the moral language we speak. Moral progress then results from revising our understanding of the good in light of our experience. Our conception of the good and the habit of right judgment and action are developed in tandem, each being corrected in the light of the other as we move dialectically between them.
Chapter Six

CONCLUSION

Summary

In this thesis I have sought to develop an orientation toward moral development sensitive to the contemporary context of pluralism. Along the way I have had my say on absolute moral law considerations, universal principles, relativistic concerns, cultural embeddedness, moral languages and on how these ideas relate to moral progress.

In chapter one, I expressed doubts over the possibility of achieving a culture-transcendent view suggested by a focus on universal principles, as though we could rise to the vantage point of universal reason from which point the troubling aspects of tradition--like superstition and prejudice--could conveniently be set aside. Comforting, no doubt, in that moral disputes could most fairly be adjudicated and moral dilemmas most easily resolved, such a project fails. The moment we describe the Moral Law in our own terms, as we must if we are to appeal to it, we forfeit our access to the "thing-in-itself," our appeals really being to beliefs we hold about the truth of the matter in question. Try as we might to filter out the impurities of tradition or make tradition completely inessential to ethical thought, there is no escaping the particularities of one's historical moment. We cannot start from scratch in moral reasoning any more than Descartes could succeed in "beginning afresh from the foundations." "Our starting point," says Stout, "is not so much arbitrary as inescapable." (p. 121)

From this, however, it does not follow that the hard work involved in critical thought is for nought. We are not inextricably mired in a kind of starting point quicksand or a uniform and static tradition. Beginning at home, in a particular place, as we must, does not mean we have to stay there. "Breadth of vision remains a good to be pursued, even if our perspective can never be eternity." (Stout, 1988, p. 73) Progress, moral and otherwise, is both possible and desirable.
Furthermore, traditions, far from being static, are evolving entities. Granted, the relationship between an individual or group of individuals and a tradition may be one of unquestioning allegiance; but the relationship can also involve attempts to tinker with, amend, and redirect the tradition or even to oppose its central contentions. For example, one problem facing pluralist democracies—where individuals pursue a variety of goods none of which can claim overriding status—is the good of pluralism itself. "If," claims MacIntyre (1988), "the good of the pluralist democratic polity rather than the goods of its constituent parts, is to be achieved, it will have to be able to claim an overriding and even a coerced allegiance. Or, to put the problem in another way, what good reasons could an individual find for placing him or herself at the service of the public good rather than of other goods?" (p. 347) Solutions to this problem there may be, but this is not the place to delve into them. I mention the problem here simply to illustrate how a tradition's central contentions might be questioned.

One of the major conclusions of chapter one—namely, our inability to escape the complexities and contingencies of tradition and hence the difficulty of articulating universal principles independent of social and cultural particularities—still leaves the question of the role of principles unanswered. At the time I emphasized the location of principles in ultimate foundations as the point at issue, not the existence or necessary abstractness of principle themselves, and left it at that. More might have been said.

To remain consistent with the contentions of chapter one, principles, particularly those labeled fundamental or universal, cannot be foundations upon which to build up the details of morality nor the essence of morality once we scrape away the problematic details like superstition and prejudice. "Moral 'principles'," says Oakeshott (1962), "are abridgments of traditional manners of behaviour." (p. 135) As such, they do not come from "outside" a

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1Kekes (1993) and Stout (1988) both address this issue.
particular tradition but are derived from the tradition. Moral principles are abstractions from already widely accepted ways of behaving.

Two things of significance follow from this. First, it is not the case that principles have no use. On the view that they do not precede the traditions they abridge, they cannot, obviously, be foundational in the sense of articles from which to derive traditional manners of behaviour. In abstraction, then, from the traditions they are supposed to summarize, principles, admittedly, have limited or no use. But when derived from intimate knowledge of the details of a tradition they can serve as reference points about which to organize our beliefs in particular instances and explain the rules that arise from these specific cases. Stout comments: "General principles help us to recognize, and to teach others to recognize, those features of cases that count for us as morally relevant." (p. 135) In one sense, they are like general statements summing up the spirit of our morality.

Second, saying that principles are derived from a tradition rather than vice versa is to elevate the details of a tradition to a position of prime importance. Oakeshott (1962) puts it this way: "since a tradition of behaviour is not susceptible of the distinction between essence and accident, knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail: to know only the gist is to know nothing. What has to be learned is not an abstract idea, or a set of tricks, not even a ritual, but a concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricateness." (pp. 128, 129) This should sound familiar. In the discussion of Charles Taylor in chapter three of this thesis, we looked at the notion of religious practices contributing to social integration as an example of a principle used to account for the religious and magical practices in primitive societies. There we concluded that the principle did not account for particularities of form or style and that this failure could result in not only missing nuances of meaning but, if they exist, core values themselves. "Most of what we want to explain...," Taylor (1981) notes, "may lie outside the scope of the explanation." (pp. 195, 196)
This very brief foray into the nature of principles does not, of course, do justice either to the classical conception of first principles I am criticizing or to explicating the "new" role of principles superseding them. The conclusion of a thesis is not the place to do this. I have touched on them in order to avoid possible misunderstandings due to my relative silence on the topic in chapter one, a silence I do not want misinterpreted as a rejection of moral principles, and to indicate a further area of research particularly relevant to this thesis.

Also, what has just been discussed, brief as it is, does lead nicely into a review of chapters two and three on moral languages since moral languages are, in large part, concerned with the details of tradition and understanding the particularities of our historical moment.

In these chapters I related language to knowledge, thought and action and concluded that it is very apt to characterize language as a form of life. Moral languages not only provide the framework for expressing moral concerns but significantly determine our (moral) form of life. It is also the case that the existence of different moral languages helps explain the nature of moral diversity. In addition to the type of disagreement exhibited when different sides are taken on issues all sides agree are moral in the first place, diversity also occurs, courtesy of different forms of discourse, over what counts as a moral issue in the first place. Different languages will contribute different possibilities for what counts as a moral issue. The potential for moving out from our starting point and achieving breadth of perspective through moral language study is great and figures prominently in the discussion of moral progress covered in chapters four and five.

The major thrust here was to wed a carefully delineated conception of universalism with cultural embeddedness and to develop the notion of moral progress from "within."

Rejecting the postulation of substantive principles all societies agree upon and can appeal to through a correspondence relation despite culture embeddedness factors does not mean there is no universal human nature in the form of dispositions, sentiments or impulses. Caring for children, nuclear disarmament, and not torturing innocent people for fun are just
some of the things on which we could find wide-ranging agreement.\footnote{To be sure we could find examples where agreement were not total. Some of the atrocities committed in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, for example, seem to suggest torture was sometimes carried out merely as a form of amusement. But this does not lessen the significance of the agreement that such practices are wrong. People who engage in this kind of behaviour are recognized by the community at large as morally deficient.} I suggest there are a whole host of platitudes garnering wide-spread assent. If this were not the case, we would not have the background of agreement necessary (recall chapter one) to make moral disagreement intelligible. Granted, this agreement does not extend so far as to eliminate all disagreements on matters of moral importance. How serious this is I will address later. For the moment, I want to emphasize what Stout calls "the vast regions of moral terrain in which we carry on perfectly well." (p. 213) Why is it that we have trouble noticing moral agreement? If it is so obvious that we must have it even to make disagreement intelligible, is it not incredible that it should so easily be forgotten? By way of response, notice the following.

Sometimes that which is the most obvious is the most easily forgotten precisely because it is so near and obvious. We are not usually aware, for example, that when we talk we are using language and grammar. Few of us think about tense or subject/verb agreement when we speak—unless, of course, we are trying to speak a foreign language—the reason being that we are initiated from birth into a grammatical consensus that usually makes us sufficiently expert to let us forget we are using grammar at all. I suspect the same happens with moral agreement. Initiated into moral consensus as young children, we are free to focus on moral differences as we get older because of our moral expertness, often forgetting the many matters on which we do agree.

I also think that Enlightenment philosophy, conducted during the early stages of modern science, followed the emerging "scientific" habit of mind and turned "outward," using specialized inquiry, to try to find a rational basis for morality in universal principles like Kant's respect for persons or Bentham's utilitarianism. The disagreements over what universal principles to accept have, I would argue, turned attention away from the
substantial common moral ground that has always existed. Continual focus on the moral fringes where controversy thrives has elevated one part to the position of the whole.

Whether or not these speculations about why we are prone to forget moral agreement are accurate or not, it is incumbent on us not to lose sight of the fact that our disagreements cannot be total. Complete disagreement disappears by becoming merely verbal, leaving us without the background of agreement required for disagreement to make sense.

In juxtaposing my particular conception of universalism with cultural embeddedness, I have tried to find the middle way between the philosopher's wish to escape the complexities and contingencies of tradition altogether with the unthinking traditionalist's desire to dispense with the hard work of critical thought. The one focuses too narrowly on substantive universal principles thought to transcend local custom; the other wrongly acquiesces in inertia.

Whatever else moral progress might entail, it must take account of both a starting point within tradition and sentiments, dispositions and desires that transcend any one tradition. If the contentions of chapters four and five are correct, initiation into and recognition of a moral context that is universal in outline yet cultural in its particularity must figure prominently in any discussion of moral progress. Such initiation into and recognition of our moral context is one of the functions of the improvement from "within" idea developed in chapter five and one of the primary vehicles through which it is accomplished is the learning of moral languages, both our own and others.

Intimate knowledge of our moral context presupposes active involvement and participation in our moral tradition, not just abstract reasoning in Oakeshott's form of a currency of ideas. Developing a habit of affection and behaviour requires exercising the virtues, not just studying them analytically. C.S. Lewis (1978) talks of "emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments" and claims that "a persevering devotion to truth, a nice sense of intellectual honour, cannot be long maintained without the aid of a
sentiment." (p. 19) This echoes Aristotle's experiential, habituated and trained emotion point of view.

But alongside exercise of particular virtues and development of habitual behaviour are general principles helping us to recognize features of cases that count for us as morally relevant. The importance of a stereoscopic outlook should not be minimized. Exercising the virtue of keeping promises, for example, but doing so only with others of the same skin colour, needs to be juxtaposed with the principle that relevant reasons are required for treating others in ways we do not want to be treated ourselves.\(^3\) It should also be recognized that this process of developing our conception of the good and the habit of right judgment and action by moving dialectically between them will often be a time-consuming process. The abolition of slavery and granting the franchise to women are just two examples.

**Final Comments**

Pluralism, through its enshrinement of difference and acknowledgment of the complex and multi-faceted nature of "the good," may provide the best opportunity for us to move toward "that ineffable good which is at the very root of the moral spirit." It may also lead to the fragmentation and ultimate extinction of society as we know it. Regardless, I do not think there would be any willing mass return to a societal structure of a few seers and the many simple. It is too late for that. Having once grasped the potential for constructing meaningful lives provided for in pluralism, we are unlikely to willingly give it up.

I have argued in this thesis that some common ground must exist for us to recognize that the differences that could lead to the destruction of society are even differences about morality or the good. Often hidden from view because they are so near and obvious are a host of common assumptions, platitudes, dispositions, sentiments, common ends and shared beliefs that require periodic review even as we rightly focus attention on the moral

\(^3\) Skin colour is, of course, not accepted as a relevant reason.
fringes where controversy thrives. Programs of moral education will need to address this. It is just this common ground that MacIntyre in *After Virtue* perhaps does not sufficiently heed when he develops the argument that modern society lacks the conventions necessary for serious conversation with each other and that there is no rational agreement on a conception of the good or our ultimate telos. Religious and political strife, both in the past and present, highlight the tragic consequences of violence and bloodshed when one conception of the good conflicts with another but is, nevertheless, imposed by force.

The provisional consensus on the good that we do have seems preferable to other alternatives. In fact, pluralism, with its acceptance of diversity, provides an avenue of moral enrichment through diversity and the subsequent possibilities of hermeneutically enriching our moral languages. Furthermore, being provisional, our conception of the good can be altered in the light of experience, an experience informed by virtues like practical wisdom and charity as well as by principles—understood as general statements summing up the spirit of our morality—like having morally relevant reasons for treating others in ways we do not want to be treated ourselves. This conception of principles allows moral educators to escape the either/or scenario emerging from the virtues/principles debate.

And yet, even if moral education were to target all of these areas—common ground, a provisional *telos*, principles defined as abridgements of tradition, hermeneutical enrichment of our moral languages, a stereoscopic view of moral progress and dialectical interplay between a conception of the good and the habit of right judgment and action—MacIntyre may be right after all. At the end of chapter one I acknowledged that, despite recognition of sufficient agreement to support rational moral discourse, we may lack the willpower and discipline necessary to make hard decisions and sacrifices in order to criticize and transform our society. We may all agree on deficit reduction and paying down the national debt, but are we willing to sacrifice even a part of our high standard of living to do so?
Few have stated the problem better than the Apostle Paul in Romans 7: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do." While it may be true that we are not on an inexorable headlong rush toward ruin, moral education, once recognition of sufficient agreement on the good is attained, may have to focus much of its energy on developing the will and discipline required to act on our desires to achieve goods which require sacrifice. More work needs to be done especially here.
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