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**From Intellectualism to Contextualism to Metaethical Realism:
An Exploration of our Ethical Language-Games
and their Conditions of Intelligibility**

Neal Dalzell

**A Thesis in
the Department of Philosophy**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

March 1999

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ii

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ABSTRACT

**From Intellectualism to Contextualism to Metaethical Realism:
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Intelligibility**

Neal Dalzell

This essay examines the most common interpretations of the phenomenon of ethical difference, and attempts, by undermining these interpretations, to articulate a post-metaphysical ethical essentialism. My argument will begin with an analysis of the not-so-subtle connotations of our everyday language-games, and will proceed to show that, despite their naiveté, these connotations nevertheless have a formative impact on modern academic accounts of moral rationality and ethical deliberation. The thematic focal points of my essay will be intellectualism, the problem of ethnocentrism, the absolutist-relativist dichotomy, and the relevance of human embodiment for conceptions of moral justification. The works of Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger will play a central role in the articulation of this critical narrative.

To Mom and Dad:

For your openness, affection, and unwavering support

– and for taking me to rock concerts before I could stay awake past 10

"I'd rather trust a country-man, than a town-man.
You can judge by his eyes, take a look if you can..."

– Peter Gabriel
"The Chamber of 32 Doors"

Table of Contents

Introduction:

page

Colonialism, Pluralism, and Intellectualism.....	1
The Structure of My Argument	8

Chapter 1:

The Everyday Interpretation of Ethical Difference

Introduction	10
Having Ethical Beliefs	13
(i) Eternalization	15
(ii) Internalization	18
(iii) Atomization	21
Ethnocentrism, Forms of Life, and Limits of Ethical Coherence	25
Conclusion	37

Chapter 2:

A Rationalistic Sense of Life

Introduction	41
The Tip of the Rationalist Iceberg	43
Objectivity Through Contextuality	52
Conclusion	57

Chapter 3:

Perceptive Equilibrium

Introduction	61
Nussbaum's Holistic Ethical Foundations	61
Adam and Maggie's Ethical Achievement	64
Imaginative Perception and the Un-Concealment of Life	69
Conclusion	74

CONCLUSION:

Embodied Literature and Teaching Ethics	80
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INTRODUCTION:

Colonialism, Pluralism, and Intellectualism

He came dancing across the water, with his Galleons and guns
Looking for the new world, and that palace in the sun
On the shore lay Montezuma with his cocoa leaves and pearls
In his halls he often wondered at the secrets of the World
And his subjects gathered around him, like the leaves around a tree
With their clothes of many colors, for the angry gods to see
The women all were beautiful, and the men stood straight and strong
He offered life in sacrifice so that others could go on

Hate was just a legend, and war was never known
People worked together, and they lifted many stones
They carried them to the flatland, and they died along the way
They built up with their bare hands what we still can't build today

He came dancing across the water, Cortez, Cortez
What a killer.

-- Neil Young "Cortez the Killer"¹

When we encountered the white man, he had the Bible, and we had the land.
Then he told us to close our eyes in prayer. When we opened our eyes, he had
the land, and we had the Bible.

-- Innu proverb

It is now widely regarded as a sort of truism in the social sciences that many of the most influential texts in the Western tradition neglect – and in some cases encourage – certain insidious forms of social prejudice (e.g., sexism, racism, ethnocentrism). More generally, it is felt that these texts express and encourage an *absolutist* mindset when it comes to ethical, cultural, and religious differences. In response to these criticisms, there has arisen a

persistent call to correct this colonization of the lifeworld. And although this call is still in its infancy historically speaking, it has already radically altered our ideas on how to teach the social sciences and, in particular, the humanities by giving rise to what we may call the “pluralist approach.”

The pluralist approach is driven by the conviction that we, as educators in the social sciences, should emphasize the tremendous variety of individuals, cultures, and religions in the modern world, and should try to elucidate their different histories, influences, and perspectives on social issues. More narrowly, in the humanities we are encouraged to convey to our children and young adults that there exists a wide variety of perspectives on the basic ethical question of how a human adult ought to live, and that each of these perspectives is, in some sense, legitimate.² Thus, courses like “Men, Women, and Culture” or “Native Ways of Knowing” or “World Views in Science, Myth and Religion” are now virtually the norm in modern educational institutions.³

Despite the enormous controversy the pluralist approach has caused in many conservative circles, I think it is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. Thanks to our newfound openness to a plurality of critical perspectives, we now have classrooms which are much more inclusive and less overtly alienating. Most students now feel free to express their opinions on a wide range of subjects, without fear of being chastised by the establishment for simply going against the social grain. This kind of learning environment, by revealing the tremendous depth and diversity that surrounds

us all in our daily lives, succeeds like no other in promoting the openness to ethical differences that many accurately recognize as a pillar of social stability in modern democratic societies. Furthermore, on a more narrowly *ethical* note, the pluralist environment should be commended for encouraging us to believe that there are many viable contenders on the playing field when it comes to questions of how to live a good life, and that to appreciate and critically assess them we need to adopt a more *context-sensitive* demeanor than has been the traditional norm. As stated, I can see little wrong with these achievements and aspirations of the pluralist approach.

But this does not necessarily mean that all is well in modern day departments of the social sciences. On the contrary, due to the relatively sudden rise of the pluralist approach in education, there have been, and continue to be, serious non-colonialist casualties resulting from our tenacious criticism of our past. Some of these casualties are quite obvious. For example, the pluralist agenda has traditionally been delivered by using as a counter-point the masculine, Caucasian, and Christian paradigm of our colonialist forefathers (and foremothers). In certain cases this has fuelled a fashionable backlash against these groups. This, of course, is perfectly natural. When laying out the advantages of a particular agenda, we always do so in opposition to the limitations of the previous agenda. In a sense, these limitations provide the coherence and direction for whatever position we are trying to articulate. So my goal here is not to defend any particular *cause* or *group* which may have been trampled, intentionally or

unintentionally, in our march towards the tolerance of ethical differences. Rather, the casualties I have in mind are more general, more covert, more philosophical. In the simplest of terms, I am interested in defending what might be called *metaethical realism*.

In modernity, the urge to articulate a form of realism or essentialism in ethics and metaethics has come into serious disrepute in most social scientific milieus. The most vehement opposition to this sort of project has come from those who take such aspirations to be at the core of everything that was dogmatic in the colonialist outlook. For these social critics, being truly modern means that we should forsake dreams of this sort, accepting instead the potential for “essential” differences between religions, cultures, and individuals. Modern pluralism is thus, for these interpreters, not only a political reality, but an *ethical reality* as well, one which requires us to integrate into our personal *ethos* a similar level of ethical non-interference that we have come to expect from our public institutions. My interpretation of the failures of our colonialist ancestors is diametrically opposed to this all-too-popular view.

The basic thrust of my argument is that the personal *ethos* of cultural and religious non-interference gets its cogency from the same “intellectualistic” or “rationalistic”⁴ metaethical outlook which many in colonialist times thought justified their moral paternalism. This metaethical outlook, I will argue, encourages our disengagement from substantive ethical discourse on the grounds that our “world-views” are essentially

incommensurable normative systems or traditions. In this regard, the only significant difference between these allegedly modern pluralists and our absolutist ancestors is that for the latter, this disengagement from substantive ethical discourse was overtly reserved for relatively rare encounters with other cultures and religions, while for the former – being surrounded by these cultures and religions on a daily basis – this disengagement is often promoted as a healthy attitude towards social life in general. My argument is therefore that these (allegedly) modern interpreters of pluralism have simply encouraged us to transfer our metaethical loyalties from inter-cultural absolutism to social relativism, and that in doing so, the task of escaping from this slippery metaethical slope – which I feel is perhaps *the* fundamental challenge of modernity – has been overlooked altogether.

In this way, my essay is not only a critique of contemporary philosophical discourse, but at base it is also a critique of what I have called the colonialist or absolutist ethical outlook (the two being in my view two sides of the same coin). In a sense, I aim to explore what I take to be certain *perennial causes of ethical insensitivity*.

This, of course, is an immensely complicated position to argue. It is never easy – or advisable – to try to undermine a critical outlook that has in whole or in part sustained many of the greatest intellectuals of our time. There is always the risk of biting off more than one can chew. But at the same time, there is something especially urgent and straightforward about this sort of critique. This is linked to the fact that as self-interpreting animals

we are at all times, whether we are engaged in social research or in an everyday conversation, speaking through – and therefore indirectly about – a certain “sense of life.”⁵ This sense of life is carried most explicitly in the *findings* of our social research, but it is also conveyed powerfully by the *methodology* of this research and the narrative *voice* of our discourse. These procedures and voice provide the macroscopic framework for our critical activities, and, in doing so, set our students on the track to merging our insights with their own critical sensibilities. This, I feel, is a basic practical insight that should not be ignored by anyone interested in being a good educator. But there is also a *theoretical* insight connected to this that should be acknowledged as well. Certain realities can only be fittingly expressed in certain forms of language. For instance, I cannot explain to you how to hit a tennis ball using the language of molecular physics. This language, though perfectly accurate for some purposes, does not fit with our understanding of how to move our bodies. As such, any attempt to explain this movement in such terms for the purpose of teaching someone how to do it would not only be unsuccessful, but would in effect make us incapable of expressing the salient features of that movement (e.g., our sense of balance, fluidity, positioning). These terms, in other words, blunt our expressivity. And the problems do not end there. Furthermore, should we remain committed to this form of expression, our ability to understand and even *perceive* other aspects will in all likelihood be damaged as well. Language, in other words, is not only a medium of expression, it is also a medium of perception. It is what we

might call *an ontological medium* for beings such as ourselves.

From the point of view of teaching the humanities, this link between language and perception, or what we might call the *form* and *content* of our critical discourse, is especially important. One of the primary concerns of any humanities course or text is to identify the essential features of human ethical life, and to give us an idea of how, if possible, we can find a point of equilibrium in the midst of ethical diversity. Through these media our students learn how to *engage* the subjects of our inquiries, which aspects of their lives should be *attended* to, and what sort of *demeanor* is appropriate for a perceptive exploration of our social environment. These media, in other words, literally teach us how to *be rational* in these domains. Martha C. Nussbaum, whose works will be discussed extensively beginning in the second chapter of my essay, describes this inescapable link between *form* and *content* in this way:

[F]orm and style are not incidental features. A view of life is *told*. The telling itself – the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life – all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections. Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented* as something. This "as" can, and must, be seen not only in the paraphrasable content, but also in the style, which itself expresses choices and selections, and sets up, in the reader, certain activities and transactions rather than others.⁶

In what follows, I will outline certain specific ways in which certain modern ethical and metaethical traditions have failed to live up to this fundamental responsibility.

The Structure of My Argument

I will begin with an examination of the way our “everyday”⁷ language-games shape our understanding of ethical conflicts. In particular, I will look with a critical eye at the words and phrases which tend to come most readily to mind in everyday life when trying to deal with conflicts over questions of how to live (i.e., ethical conflicts). This will reveal what Charles Taylor calls the “ontologizing procedure” through which we, as citizens engaged in the critical exploration of a plurality of world-views, are encouraged to adopt a “monological” and “disembodied” picture of ethical agency and normativity.⁸ This procedure will be shown to influence the metaethical outlook of not only the everyday citizen (which is perhaps to be expected) but of many contemporary academics as well by leading us all into a wide range of intractable philosophical antinomies, absolutism and relativism being perhaps the most prominent.

To add depth to this characterization of the intellectualist’s “ontologizing procedure,” which can admittedly take on many different (and often seemingly contradictory) forms, in my second chapter I will draw on Martha Nussbaum’s descriptions and criticisms of what might be called a “rationalistic attitude.” The main goal in this chapter will be to show how our everyday disengagement from substantive ethical discourse can be linked with our attraction to a disengaged sense of life in general. Following Nussbaum’s lead, I hope to reveal in progressive detail how our embodied existence (e.g., our physical vulnerabilities, anxieties, fears, attachments,

etc.), far from being incidental to our moral sensibilities, is *in every case constitutive of the phenomenon of coherent ethical discourse*, and that our ignorance of this phenomenological fact can be seen as rooted in our metaphysically-trained urges to transcend our humanity.

Finally, in my final chapter, I hope to reveal how a more ethically responsive and phenomenologically accurate ethical narrative can bring into sharp focus the existential background which plays a constitutive role in shaping the pluralist approach and the many “world-views” it is committed to recognizing. This, I trust, will provide us with the outline of a substantive sense of human life through which will shine the narrative coherence that lies hidden beneath the fragmented landscape of our pluralistic humanities departments, and beneath our social and political landscape in general.

1

The Everyday Interpretation of Ethical Difference

Gabrielle walked into the room and fixed her gaze on the prisoner. She saw before her a disturbed man, one who had strayed far from the well-trodden path of humanity. But she also saw a man at a crossroads, one who had come to terms with his criminal past, and who, according to the testimony of experts, was prepared to return to the free world. For Gabrielle, his clenched fists spoke of his nervous anticipation of the panel's judgment, and his stoic expression reflected the heavy toll this experience had taken on his hopes and dreams. In her eyes he bore all the signs of a person in need of meaningful interaction with friends, family, and community, not of further confinement and isolation.

Alexander walked into the room and fixed his gaze on the convict. Despite the majority opinion of so-called experts, he saw before him a murderer, a dangerous and ultimately disturbed man who 15 years ago permanently altered the lives of so many people. The criminal's clenched fists confirmed Alexander's suspicions that this man could – and likely *would* – kill again. His stoic face bore all the marks of a cold and calculating menace to society. For Alexander there was little doubt what kind of treatment this “man” deserved: life imprisonment, without possibility of parole.

Ethical problems, like how to deal with those who transgress our most basic moral and legal rules, test our powers of *perception* and *imagination* by demanding that we incorporate a wide number of relevant (and often contentious) aspects into a single more-or-less coherent vision. For instance, in the case depicted above, the apparently straightforward question “What does this parole applicant deserve?” opens the door to a multitude of other complex questions like: “If released, what is the likelihood he will

threaten the lives of those around him again? Is he truly “rehabilitated”? If so, is the parole system reliable enough to insure that he does not return to his old ways? And even if he *is* reformed, given his criminal past does he *merit* to be treated like just another member of society? Of what relevance are the wishes of the victim’s family?” And so on...

With even a casual glance at this list of difficult questions (which is admittedly far from exhaustive), the bewildering complexity of ethical issues should be obvious. Furthermore, given this complexity, it should also be obvious that different people are bound to find different ways of coming to terms with them. The responses of Gabrielle and Alexander demonstrate this quite accurately. By all indications, these two individuals reach very different conclusions regarding the criminal’s past, present, and future conduct – and this in spite of the fact that they perceive the same outward characteristics, the same *aspects* of his past life and present demeanor (e.g., his crime, his nervousness, his lack of emotion). The real difference here lies in what they respectively *see this man as*.⁹ Gabrielle sees him as a reformed criminal, who, with the right kind of supervision, could become a responsible member of society; while for Alexander, given this man’s history and given the imperfection of our psychological experts’ analyses, this man is seen as someone we can never really trust.

Because moral and ethical problems push our powers of perception and imagination to their limits in this way, our efforts to span the chasm that lies between divergent views like those of Gabrielle and Alexander seem futile.¹⁰

Of course, in pointing out this apparent intractability we hardly find ourselves out on a philosophical limb. In fact, if there is one thing people generally agree upon with regard to such issues, it is that our efforts to resolve them – or to even address them – are destined to lead to further conflict, and ultimately, to deep *anxiety*. But what is far from obvious – and this is, in a sense, the main concern of this entire essay – is the *significance* of this human experience of persistent anxiety in the face of ethical conflicts. In other words, what does this everyday phenomenon of ethical anxiety *mean*? What does it tell us about the kinds of beings we are? Equivalently, but phrased in a more explicitly practical sense, when faced with two divergent ethical positions is there a “rational” way to bridge the gap between them?, or does its constant presence demonstrate that at this point we have reached the limits of our justificatory capacities, and that beyond this there exists only ineffable moral intuitions and/or blind tradition and prejudice? These same lines of inquiry can also be understood as part and parcel of the traditional philosophical question: what are the limits of rational communication aimed at ethical justification, and, more importantly, what kind of limits are they: *epistemological or social*?

As I noted in my introduction, my strategy will be to begin by looking to what are generally felt to be the most common sense answers to these metaethical questions. This starting-point is far from arbitrary. It reflects my conviction, stated so well by P.F. Strawson, that “Science is not only the offspring of common sense, it remains its dependant.”¹¹ Thus, I will begin by

exploring how, during the course of our daily lives, we would likely report on this sort of everyday conflict of moral opinion. This strategy can be understood in the same way Ludwig Wittgenstein recommends we understand his analysis in the *Philosophical Investigations*, when he writes:

The language-game of reporting can be given such a turn that a report is not meant to inform the hearer about its subject matter but about the person making the report. It is so when, for instance, a teacher examines a pupil. (You can measure to test the ruler.)¹²

This is precisely the goal of the following analysis: to test the “ruler” of everyday language to see if it accurately measures the depth, complexity, and coherence of our ethical inclinations.

Having Ethical Beliefs

In our daily lives, it is commonplace for us to describe individuals as “believing in” some ethical “position” or another. This happens without hesitation in our day-to-day conversations with our family and friends, and especially in the mass media. It seems that almost every week we are told of “Pro-life” and “Pro-choice” advocates squaring off in bitter, often violent, encounters, and about how they believe in different causes or have different “value systems.” We are also exposed to this social jargon during electoral campaigns. And in spite of the fact that most people now recognize the flaws in thinking that “the stand” our politicians take on certain issues can inform us as to what kind of persons they are (remember the “Oral Office” fiasco?), we still feel comfortable evaluating a person’s character by what he or she says

they “believe in.” These expressions, it seems, are simply our most accessible tools for describing the inner workings of the human mind. In a sense, they “fit” with our everyday picture of the human animal.

Owing to this “fit,” it would be utterly uncontroversial, when faced with the challenge of describing the controversy over the parole applicant cited above, to begin with something like “Gabrielle *believes in* the rehabilitation of criminals,” and “Alexander *believes in* justice for the victims.” This type of description, as a description of their conflict and of the individuals themselves, is so oft-repeated that we may think it is at worst harmless, and at best self-evident. But is it either of these things? I have some serious doubts.

The notion of “believing in” something plays a unique role in the English language. Though at first glance it may appear identical to the everyday expression “believing *that...*”, it would be downright bizarre in most cases to treat the two as interchangeable. Rarely, if ever, do we say “I believe in the Canadiens winning tomorrow night” or “He believes in it raining today.” Rather, this expression is usually reserved for one of two purposes: describing someone’s preferred manner of *being* or *behaving*, as in “She believes in completing her daily tasks ...”, “He believes in being punctual...”, or “They believe in acting responsibly...”, or for describing one’s confidence in, or affiliation with, certain *persons, groups, causes, or concepts*, as in “She believes in her son...”, “He believes in Jesus Christ...”, or “They believe in the right to privacy.” (To this list we could add the initial descriptions of

Gabrielle and Alexander in which they were respectively characterized as believing in “rehabilitation” and “justice.”) These two sets of examples demonstrate clearly that for the most part we reserve the notion of “believing in” for the special task of describing a rational agent’s *normative* beliefs.¹³ In a sense, we use this kind of talk as a shortcut to the delicate and contentious sphere of moral and ethical values. And as a shortcut, it does its job quite well ... perhaps too well.

My criticisms of this manner of speaking can be captured by three ways in which it subtly coerces us to interpret ethical conflicts from what I think is a disengaged perspective.

(i) *Eternalization*

The “eternalization” effect is the most overtly damaging of the three effects I will discuss here, as well as the one most overtly rooted in our colonialist past. When speaking of this effect, what I have in mind is the implication that our ethical inclinations are fixed and unchanging. Looking back at the examples cited above, we can see that each one emits this effect to some extent, though some more obviously than others. The most powerful instances are those where the subject is said to believe in some person, group, cause, or concept (e.g., “He believes in Jesus Christ”). What is remarkable about these examples is the way the referent of the individual’s belief is described as being a kind of inherently normative *entity* to which the individual is in some sense inextricably linked. This, of course, is often not a

bad way of describing in shorthand our unwavering faith in a person or institution. These sorts of entities are agents capable of normative judgment (i.e., they are entities which have intentions and purposes). But in all other instances, this everyday turn of language should beg all kinds of questions.

To appreciate the peculiarity of this maneuver, its dynamics need to be exposed. It works like this: instead of saying “He believes in *being just* towards the victims”, one simply says “He believes in *justice* for the victims.” As stated, the difference probably appears negligible. This, I suspect, is because we are accustomed to such expressions. They have, after all, a venerable history thanks to centuries of ethical writings by theistic thinkers for whom it was important to pay tribute to the role of entities like gods, saints, and spirits in explaining the motivations for their particular form of life. (And at those points in our social history where our ethical inclinations were strictly linked to our mystical affiliations, statements of this sort probably carried some ethical weight – though I doubt they carried as much as was generally thought.) But in modernity, such statements can no longer mean what they may have once meant. To expose (and hopefully dissolve) this colonialist residue, compare the different connotations of examples in which the referent of the individual’s belief is reified to those in which it is not, as with “She believes in completing her daily tasks” and “She believes in daily task completion.” The distorting effect of the latter sentence – which I offer only to mimic and exaggerate the eternalization effect present in the more common examples – should be obvious. By replacing what in normal

circumstances would be an overt reference to human activity and ethical judgment with a reference to a kind of fixed normative entity, this manner of speaking strongly suggests a particular (and peculiar) picture of the individual in question. Specifically, what begins to emerge is a picture of the ethical agent as either an unreflectively devoted theist, or an exceptionally rigid ethical machine, both of which are indistinguishable in situations of ethical conflict. On a theoretical level this picture is obviously problematic. In effect, it takes what is perhaps the most undeveloped sense of morality and portrays it as the norm. This picture also has a remarkable effect on our everyday practical encounters. Such beings, lacking as they clearly do the complexity we expect from full fledged human beings, would in these situations not be worth our breath. As described, they would likely behave in exactly the same way in situations of ethical conflict, adopting a kind of “fight or flight” response to ethical anxiety.¹⁴

This picture of the human agent as an utterly unreflective ethical being, of course, is not a new one for most moderately perceptive people, and I suspect (or hope) that most can sense its intuitive noxiousness. The real problem lies in the fact that this kind of talk, as one of our most time-honored ways of speaking about ethical inclinations, sets the tone and framework for any attempt to get to the bottom of our differences. The question is how deeply it impacts our modern attempts to overcome our colonialist prejudices. The second effect, which I will call the *internalization* effect, suggests that this impact is considerable.

(ii) *Internalization*

The internalization effect is very similar to the previous effect, only it functions by reifying the *location* of our ethical beliefs; in a sense, by focusing our attention on *how* we believe, instead of on *what* we believe. To put it concisely, thanks to the seemingly innocuous word “in,” we are given the impression that our ethical inclinations are essentially matters of *internal conviction*. This insinuation imposes many serious limitations on the critical methods through which we can critically engage our ethical opinions. In a sense, by mapping out the deeply internal location of our ideas on how to live, and by alluding to how these ideas may have been formulated, the internalization effect dictates how we may lure them out into an explanatory space.

Take, for example, the description “She believes in completing her daily tasks.” The connotation here is that this woman has been so utterly impressed by this way of living that she has either internalized it through the exercise of her own rational will, or she has been indoctrinated with this way of living since childhood (or before). Whatever the process of obtaining this conviction, whether by purely rational or non-rational means, the implication, once again, is that she completes her daily tasks with a sense of duty that borders on the unreflective. Owing to this implication, one could easily imagine this woman having nothing to say if asked why she lives in this way. This, it is implied, is simply what she does. It is *who* she is. Of course, this

does not necessarily mean that she is irrational (though that is what it may mean under certain interpretations and in certain circumstances), but rather it suggests that her form of rationality embodies an insular, non-discursive perspective on life.

As ethical agents and social scientists, this state of affairs again raises many problems. What is it, we ask, that so attracts this person to this way of life? Thanks to the internalization effect, which as we saw left the agent speechless, we have only two obvious paths to answering this question: either we can dive in, as it were, into the nucleus of this person's lifestyle, or we can stand back and treat her as we would any other principally non-rational animal. The first possibility, which leads to a form of *subjectivism*, is, of course, fraught with difficulties. Since a form of life is not something you can understand in a purely analytic fashion, we are encouraged to believe that to do it justice we literally have to experience it for ourselves, in its own terms and on its own turf. The implication is that you can't really understand what she thinks and feels without walking a mile in her shoes, and that ultimately, thanks to the virtual impossibility of doing so, she is the only person in a position to make an impact on her life. This often leaves both the individual and her social cohort at a complete loss for how to proceed with ethical deliberation. But this is not entirely justified. After all, in the 20th century a number of ways to access the "essentially subjective" workings of the human mind have been explored. Traditional contenders for such developmental methods range from brainwashing, to developing our will-

power, to prayer, to transcendental meditation, to psychoanalysis. With these methods readily available, we are encouraged to think that the situation is not all that bad from this “subjectivist” perspective, as long as we come to terms with the fact that the process of refining our ethical beliefs requires a reflective method that is unlike anything we are familiar with on an everyday basis (e.g., conversations, works of literature).

The second investigative route left to us by the internalization effect is what may be referred to as an *objectivist* approach to ethical rationality. This approach encourages what amounts to a natural scientific perspective on the ethical agent. This perspective, of course, is much less daunting than the aforementioned subjectivist approach, because it demands only that we stand at a distance from the ethical agent and observe her overt behavior. Historically this sort of method has given rise to the behaviorism of B.F. Skinner and Gilbert Ryle, and to contemporary functionalist theories. In each of its forms, it is held that adopting this sort of third person perspective will give us a clear idea why human beings do what they do.

Despite this split between subjectivist and objectivist interpretations of the internalization effect, it is essential to note that these approaches actually feed into the same general picture of the human agent. By treating our ethical beliefs as private, non-discursive parts of our psyche, both approaches lead us to believe that our ethical inclinations are formed, relative to our everyday self-consciousness, either *internally* or *externally*, and that any method which aims to critically engage them must follow suit.

This internalization maneuver has had the most obvious effects on our mass culture. Most notably, it has garnered immense support for science fiction, pop-psychology, and mysticism. But it has also made its mark on many academic contributions to the social sciences. To drive home this no doubt controversial claim, we need to look closely at the third and final effect of our everyday manner of speaking, which I shall call the *atomization* of our ethical inclinations.

(iii) *Atomization*

The atomization effect is the most powerful of the three effects, and yet it is certainly the most subtle. The key to this subtlety lies not only in its neglect of the eternalization and internalization distortions, but in its ability to substantially broaden the ways in which we can *justify* their neglect.

The power of the atomization effect derives from its suggestion that our ethical inclinations are rooted in certain singular *beliefs* or *clusters of beliefs* we have about the way the world is or should be. As I noted at the outset of this section, this descriptive convention is widespread in our language, and is not merely limited to our descriptions of our ethical inclinations. The phrase “He believes *that...*” also carries the same implications. In effect, this is simply how we tend to describe the mental activities of people in general, including ourselves. So, just as we would explain someone carrying an umbrella by claiming that he or she “believes it may rain,” when we observe a person behaving in a certain way or advocating a certain way to live, we

postulate that this person possesses some particular belief or set of beliefs about the morality of those actions. This, we feel, is a natural deduction. And although Wittgenstein cautions us against it when he remarks “Don’t regard a hesitant assertion as an assertion of hesitancy,”¹⁵ for the most part we disregard this advice.

It should be noted that this tendency to describe human consciousness in terms of beliefs, clusters of beliefs, belief states, or any other such term which portrays the human agent as essentially an aggregate of convictions, is not, in itself, problematic. Thanks to this sort of maneuver, we have learned to explore the many ways in which we are influenced by non-rational or irrational factors like habits, genetic makeup, hormones, climate, social status, and other sub-conscious aspects of our existence. These influences are no doubt essential for understanding why humans do the sorts of things they do. However, notwithstanding the obvious successes of this natural scientific paradigm in the social sciences, there is something very misleading and dangerous about this explanatory procedure. Charles Taylor isolates its threat in this way:

The fateful step [is] not so much [the] formulation [of the empirical method], but rather what I call its ontologizing, that is, the reading of the ideal method into the very constitution of the mind. It [is] one thing to call on us to break down our beliefs into their possibly separable components [as Descartes and his empiricist followers most notably did], another to think that the primitive information which enters the mind must do so in atomic bits. The “simple ideas” of Locke are a classical example of such a reification of procedure, pouring it as it were in theoretical concrete and building it into the constitution of the mind itself.¹⁶

Here, in the “ontologizing procedure” of Descartes and the British Empiricists like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, we have a fully rationalized form of the

disengaged perspective which I have been claiming is built into our everyday language-games.¹⁷ In a sense, the novelty of this atomizing maneuver is that it places our everyday conventions for describing our ethical inclinations within a context from which they appear to give us a “properly scientific” explanation of what these inclinations are made of, or more accurately, what they are *constituted by*. These explanations, by focusing on our alleged beliefs, ideas, or psychophysical states, only lead us into deeper and more intractable interpretations of the dichotomies which plague our everyday mindset. In other words, this atomization of ethical inclination again leaves us with the divisions between subjectivism and objectivism left to us by the internalization maneuver, though in this context this dichotomy is expanded into a remarkable variety of forms.

Roughly speaking, by focusing principally on the agent’s alleged beliefs, we are given the following options: either our ethical outlooks are rooted in disparities in our purely normative beliefs (i.e., what we call “values”) which supervene on our sensory perceptions, directing our ideas about how the world should be, or these outlooks are rooted in a causal manner to differences in empirical judgment or logical reasoning, faculties which are responsible for telling us about the way the world is (i.e., what we call “facts”). The former, more narrowly *dualistic* view, is the more intuitively attractive of the two because, as was the case in the initial description of the differences between Gabrielle and Alexander, we often have the impression that people with different ethical positions perceive exactly the same aspects

of a given situation, and that they form different opinions on it thanks to basic differences in their normative beliefs. Moral values, from this dualist perspective, *supervene* on our empirical judgments, determining our responses.¹⁸ Historically, this dualistic standpoint has been rightly linked to a kind of naïve or direct realism. The second, more narrowly *naturalistic* interpretation, does not make this same elementary mistake (at least not in its contemporary formulations), and to this extent it seems more plausible to those involved in social scientific research. The basic meta-normative presupposition of most naturalistic approaches is that our talk of values can be explained, *salva veritate*, within the positivistic framework of the natural sciences. The most common interpretations of this approach lead to the view that people with divergent ethical opinions somehow *reason* differently, as would two people using different logical conventions or systems of reference, and/or they *perceive* things differently, as would two people who differ over what color a flower is, or whether or not an object is hot or cold.

So how, one might ask, does the atomization of ethical inclination (and the dualistic and naturalistic options which accompany it) encourage and embody a disengaged stance towards ethical reflection? If anything, one might argue, by narrowing down the field of analysis to the most basic elements of human cognition, be they perceptual, logical, normative, or some combination thereof, this maneuver has helped us pinpoint the proper perspective from which to understand our different views on how to live. Thanks to these insights, we know where and how to begin to make sense of

human behavior. All that remains, it is argued, is to perform an examination of our sensory organs and the “psychophysical states” which bear on them, an analysis of the *grammar and logic* of normative utterances, and/or a critical assessment of our *normative principles* that proceeds from the mind of the subject to the world upon which it imposes its value-system. This, it seems to the everyday observer as well as to innumerable academics in the social sciences, concisely outlines the most plausible ways of understanding the phenomenon of ethical inclination, and thus of ethical difference.

To reveal the inaccuracies underlying the atomization of ethical inclination, much more substance needs to be added to my claim that the critical approaches it encourages distort the phenomenon of ethical coherence, and are as such “disengaged.” There are a number of ways of doing this. The most obvious is to prove that these research paradigms, in each of their innumerable forms, lead us astray. This piecemeal rebuttal, while possible, is far beyond the means of this essay. But another, more feasible way to undermine the hegemony of these paradigms is to show that they indirectly promote ethical disengagement by leading us back time and again to the philosophical dead-ends which shaped our everyday interpretation of human life. In what follows this is precisely what I will try to demonstrate.

Ethnocentrism, Forms of Life, and the Limits of Ethical Coherence

I have already alluded to how our everyday manner of speaking about

ethical differences, if taken to heart, leads us directly to the terrain demarcated by the slippery slopes between science and religion, objectivism and subjectivism, facts and values. To show how our perpetual – though seemingly innocent – talk of ethical beliefs leads us down this same path, I would now like to add one more antinomy to this pile.

Anyone with even the slightest familiarity with social philosophy has no doubt rubbed up against the prickly dichotomy between moral absolutism and moral relativism. There are probably no two terms in our philosophical heritage which have been employed more consistently than these two in the interest of launching *ad hominem* attacks on those whose ideas we oppose. Owing to this ever-present propensity for misuse, many astute thinkers have suggested we junk these notions altogether and move onto more interesting philosophical problems. For the most part I agree with this sentiment. But I do not think we can simply push these notions aside. To truly get rid of them, we must ask ourselves why so many have felt incapable of escaping the confines of their slippery slope.

So what it is about our particular form of critical discourse that brings us back to the tired old battles between the Gods and Men, certainty and fallibility, knowledge and belief? Some would suggest that our attraction to them is simply a sign of the inherent combativeness of philosophers. This may be partly true. (Nothing irks a free-thinker more than being labeled as a card-carrying member of either the absolutist or relativist camp, or of any

group for that matter). But I think there is more to the coherence of this dichotomy than just that. Specifically, I think the ubiquitous threat of absolutism and relativism can be seen as feeding off of our urgent desire in modernity to explore the ethical domain in a way that enables us to appreciate the depth and dynamism of a variety of life-forms while simultaneously maintaining a robust sense of critical judgment. In a nutshell, the philosophical problem is this: if we are to understand what makes these life-forms coherent to those immersed in them, it seems as though we are obliged to become fully immersed in them ourselves; but in order for this immersion to be successful, we must avoid, for fear of being too ethnocentric, the temptation to interpret and judge their activities through our particular normative world-view. In plain English, we are confounded by the demand that we get *scientifically* involved, but not too *socially* involved.

The social impact of this (putative) problem cannot be understated. It has led us to believe that *if* there is such a thing as genuine ethical agreement in a pluralist context, it will be obtainable if and only if there is somehow a symmetry between two parties' moral beliefs, principles, and/or value systems. Without this symmetry, the implication is that we are literally worlds apart, left to ponder the paradox of how to justifiably prefer one rationally incommensurable form of life over another. This has led many in modernity to despair of our potential for arriving at a rational agreement on ethical issues between religions, cultures, and individuals – agreement that is not the result of manipulation or coercion.

Since the 19th century, social philosophers have spent much of their energy thinking about these widespread feelings of despair aroused by the absolutism-relativism dichotomy. And significant progress has been made as a result of these reflections. For example, it has been convincingly argued that much of our modern moral anxiety is simply, to use Nietzsche's famous phrase, a reaction to the "death of God," to our realization that our belief in the moral privilege of Christian societies is untenable. From this critical perspective, which constitutes one of the unifying features of the writings of pragmatists and existentialists in the 20th century, our despair needs to be seen for what it really is – a yearning for metaphysical support, for the moral certainty we thought was guaranteed to us as the children of God. Once this demise of metaphysical certainty is accepted, we will see that the only solid support we humans have to stand on is embedded in our social "forms of life."¹⁹ And while many academics hostile to this secularization have taken it to imply a wholesale loss of normative authority, many social philosophers like John Dewey and Jean-Paul Sartre have been quick to point out that these forms of life draw their normative coherence from their own history, language, and culture, and that within this context there still exists the potential for a robust sense of ethical rationality and responsibility. So goes the mainstream meta-rational narrative in modernity.

But how, we might ask, have these attempts to articulate a non-metaphysical sense of human rationality affected our concerns over moral absolutism and relativism? I think it is safe to say that in certain regards this

project has quelled these worries, and in others it has openly (though courageously) exacerbated them. First, it has quelled them by maintaining that in most everyday social circumstances there usually exists a substantial overlap in different belief systems, and that therefore genuine ethical agreement is still as possible as it ever was. In fact, this sort of agreement could rightly be said to be more likely than ever thanks to our rejection of metaphysics, which, as I demonstrated above in my discussion of the *eternalization* effect, tended to short-circuit the open exchange of ethical beliefs from the outset. So, for many modern thinkers, this new conception of ethical rationality as rooted in our forms of life provides us with *all we need* to attain an ethical consensus (where consensus is possible). In fact, since there never existed a metaphysical moral reality to correspond to, this kind of overlap in belief is *all we have ever had at our disposal* when trying to reach a *modus vivendi* between people with divergent ethical inclinations. Rational agreement has never been *anything but* an overlap in beliefs or their “coherence” with one another. In other words, the rationality of our form of life *is* its coherence, nothing more.

This account of the human condition has certainly gone a long way to explaining how our moral rationality doesn't work. By removing the metaphysical, or more specifically, *representational* commitments from this account, it also suggests a way to reconcile our scientific (or non-metaphysical) insights with our social identities. But, as I noted above, this account, while certainly appearing to dispel much of the confusion around

ethical conflicts between similar life-forms, does not completely resolve our worries about absolutism and relativism. In fact, it seems to continue to encourage these worries when pushed to its limits. For instance, it by no means puts to rest questions of how to reach substantive agreement on ethical issues *across different forms of life*; when, for example, contributing to Third World development, or perhaps when simply dealing with people with different religious views within our liberal democratic society. In other words, even after we shed our metaphysical despair we are still at a loss for what Nietzsche meant when speaking of the *übermensch*, still unclear about the legitimacy of our aspirations to overcome protracted ethical conflicts between different forms of life. Are these aspirations to unfettered social solidarity themselves throwbacks to our metaphysical upbringing which need to be put into historical perspective along with our belief in moral foundationalism? Are there certain forms of life that are not only pragmatically incommensurable, but epistemologically divided as well? Is our rationality precisely what guarantees our *irrationality* in these circumstances, what ensures that our will-to-truth become a will-to-power?

In light of these questions, which are in essence the ones which have been driving the analysis of this entire chapter, it should be clear that our modern meta-rational narrative is sorely incomplete. To fill in these gaps, we desperately need to explain what, if anything, *makes* a “form of life” coherent to those raised within it. We need to articulate what Taylor calls the “conditions of intelligibility”²⁰ of our ethical inclinations. Once again, we can

turn to the popular account I have been outlining since it has some answers which it feels are appropriate.

Perhaps the most popular answer to this question about the criteria for ethical coherence is one which, following the lead of the atomization effect, interprets our form of life as consisting of clusters of beliefs we have about the way the world is or the way it should be (or a mixture of both). These beliefs, as atomistic convictions, “stick together” only because they are supported by the other beliefs that make up our “belief system.” Coherence is thus not itself a rational or logical phenomenon, it is rather the context in which a sense of rationality is *created*. To support this interpretation, many in the late 20th century have turned to Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, and in particular remarks like the following:

“How am I able to obey a rule?” – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” [...] When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly.²¹

Contrary to appearances, this use of Wittgenstein’s remarks is, in my opinion, utterly misguided.

Commenting on this very passage, Charles Taylor, in his essay “To Follow a Rule,” writes:

There are two broad schools of interpretation of what Wittgenstein is saying here, which correspond to two ways of understanding the phenomenon of the unarticulated background. The first would interpret the claim that I act without reasons as involving the view that no reasons can be given here; no demand for reasons can arise. That’s because the connections that form our background are just *de facto* links, not susceptible of any justification. For instance, they are simply imposed by our society; we are conditioned to make them. They become “automatic,” and so the question never arises. [...] Or else they can perhaps be considered as “wired in.” It’s just a fact about us that we react this way, as it is that we blink when something

approaches our eyes, and no justification is in order.²²

To fully appreciate the second interpretation Taylor has in mind (which I think is the most sensible of the two), it is essential to look closely at the first one. According to this popular interpretation, our beliefs or belief-systems *constitute* our traditions, and any attempt to get “behind” them, to appreciate what sort of reality they gain their coherence from, is doomed to fail. This is because, according to this “coherentist” account, there is no non-belief-determined referential context that shapes the correctness of our beliefs. Our beliefs do not *refer* to pre-theorized aspects of the world, rather they refer to other beliefs which have gained our unreflective consent through history. Thus, on this non-realist or anti-realist account, the “validity” of our beliefs is based purely on their ability to “hang together” with the entire system of beliefs. The phenomenon of the “unarticulated background” is thus taken as a kind of *monad* whose rationality is not only inarticulate, but largely *un-articulatable*.

This, according to Taylor, is the “dominant” view of human rationality in the modern age, a view which is ultimately “monological,” and which finds its roots in the rationalism of Descartes, as well as in the empiricism of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. For Taylor, this view has provided the meta-rational framework for the neo-Nietzschean theories of Foucault and Deleuze, as well as for much of the work being done in cognitive science. Thus,

In speaking of the “dominant” view I am not only thinking of the theories which have been predominant in modern philosophy, but also of an outlook which has to some extent colonized the common sense of our civilization. This offers us the picture of agents who in perceiving the world take in “bits” of information from their surroundings, and then “process” them in some

fashion, in order to emerge with the "picture" of the world they have; who then act on the basis of this picture to fulfill their goals, through a "calculus" of means and ends.²³

What is most remarkable (and troubling) about this monological conception of the limits of ethical justification is that it in addition to explicitly shaping the meta-narratives of Neo-Nietzscheans and cognitive scientists, it has also shaped the views of certain "contextualists" who see themselves as working beyond this scientific account of human consciousness.

Take, for example, Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism. For Rorty, the rationality of our beliefs is measured against their ability to help us "cope" with our surroundings. As social beings engaged in certain social practices, the only way for us to judge the accuracy of our beliefs is to ask ourselves whether or not they help us do the sorts of things we want to do. Thus, he writes:

It is useless to ask whether one vocabulary rather than another is closer to reality. For different vocabularies serve different purposes, and there is no such thing as a purpose [or interest] that is closer to reality than another purpose [or interest]. In particular, there is no purpose [or interest] that is simply "finding out how things are" as opposed to finding out how to predict their motion, explain their behavior, and so on.²⁴

This is what leads Rorty to reject a "correspondence theory of truth." And as *stated*, I think he is dead right. But it is amazing to note that Rorty time and again reverts back to a monadic conception of human rationality when commenting on the conditions that make our practices intelligible. In doing so, he betrays what Taylor calls his dependence on the epistemological tradition. Take for instance the following passage from the introduction to *The Consequences of Pragmatism* where Rorty characterizes the purposes

and interests he insists always shape what we mean by the rationality of our beliefs:

[All] criteria [are] no more than temporary resting places, constructed by a community to facilitate its inquiries ... [T]here is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.²⁵

Rorty's description of our interests, purposes, social practices, standards of rationality, and forms of argumentation as "conventions" we have "created" to "facilitate our inquiries" captures precisely what I have been referring to as the everyday distortion of the phenomenon of ethical coherence. In essence, in this passage (and in many others like it), Rorty seems to be advocating a resolutely *intra-theoretical* stance towards rational coherence. This stance is, in my opinion, purely an outgrowth of the metaphysical traditions which Rorty claims to have transcended.

The implication of this stance on normative criteria is that our everyday needs, purposes, and interests are *theoretical commitments* which are built into our language-games, and which float, as it were, without substantive connection to our common human existence. This stance is precisely what Taylor has in mind when speaking of the "disembodied" conception of contextuality and rationality.

This very same disembodied, de-contextual, non-rational, and monological stance on ethical rationality can also be seen as having found its way into the meta-rational narrative of Cora Diamond, another philosopher

who has fought for the cause of contextualism. For instance, in the conclusion to her essay “Having a Rough Idea About What Moral Philosophy Is”²⁶ – an essay which ironically makes some powerful arguments against the form of intellectualism I have begun to undermine here – Diamond distances her project from Martha Nussbaum’s (which I will discuss below) by writing:

[Any] attempt to take as a starting point a widely agreed and inclusive notion of the aim of moral philosophy is pretty much doomed. No one knows what the subject is; most widely agreed accounts of it depend on suppositions that are not obvious and that reflect particular evaluations and views of the world, of human nature, and of what it is to speak, think, write, or read about the world. The more inclusive an account is, the more likely it will include what many philosophers would not dream of counting as part of their subject.²⁷

Here, Diamond echoes precisely what Rorty is saying about our rationality being purely conventional, and what those with relativist or skeptical inclinations have been saying all along: that our ethical backgrounds are essentially insular, and as such they not only preclude us from making infallible judgments in ethical matters, but *they prevent us from even knowing what the subject matter of our discussions really is*. At best, she implies, we have a conglomeration of ideas, the rationality of which is judged merely in relation to other ideas in our belief system. Our ethical and metaethical beliefs are thus “system-relative,” and as such there is not even a semblance of a rational *authority* in these domains to arbitrate between conflicting forms of life. In other words, because ‘mere prejudice’ cannot give us the foundations we need to secure an unshakable confidence in our normative judgments, whether moral, scientific, or otherwise, and because no amount of interpretation, qualification, and contextualization will take us closer to a

common background for human rationality which will enable us to make sense of the plurality of life forms on our planet, we can *at best* have a “realistic spirit” when thinking about ethical differences. But ultimately, when pushed to their limits, our cultural backgrounds are prisons that hold day trips to other institutions. This is the relativism that I have been arguing underlies our everyday paradigms of social interpretation.

My dispute with this popular conception of our ethical rationality therefore can be seen as arising at its limits, where it is prepared to treat world-views as incommensurable on both practical and epistemological grounds, and where it implies that ethical agreements between individuals are more *circumstantial* than rational, more a question of grace or luck than an open exchange in which our ethical opinions are expressed and refined. In a sense, my objections to this entire framework can be traced to its assumption that the criteria for ethical coherence are wholly determined by supra-rational forces or non-rational forces (i.e., God, Nature, blind tradition, social indoctrination, cultural circumstances, genes, etc.). I oppose, in other words, the implication that the standard for what makes sense *within* the context of moral deliberation is something that shapes our sense of life either from *outside of our embodied and discursive daily existence* (e.g., based on a pure normative rationality for the absolutist, or based on purely unjustified normative conventions for the relativist), or from *within the narrow confines of this existence* (e.g., based on the degree to which these conventions form an internally coherent lump of normative notions, which for all we know may

either be absolutely rational, relatively rational, or not rational at all).

To break free of this entire range of monological interpretations of ethical coherence, we now need to explore the second interpretation of the phenomenon of the unarticulated background which Taylor advocates in "To Follow a Rule." He writes:

The second interpretation takes the background as really incorporating understanding; that is, as a grasp on things which although quite unarticulated may allow us to formulate reasons and explanations when challenged. In this case the links would not simply be *de facto*, but would make a kind of sense, which is precisely what we would try to spell out on the articulation. On the first view, then, the "bedrock" our explicit explanations rest on is made up of brute connections; on the second, it is a mode of understanding and thus makes a kind of unarticulated sense of things.²⁸

In what follows I will defend this interpretation of this phenomenon.

Specifically, I will try to show that rational coherence in the ethical domain is determined *without exception* with reference (explicit or implicit) to our embodiment and our communal existence, and that these references *in every case* reflect a certain manner of understanding these facets of our lives.

But before I do so, some concluding remarks are needed to bring us back to the practical issues with which this chapter began.

Conclusion

The claims I have been making, taken in the context of the case of the parole applicant discussed at the outset of this chapter, suggest that unless Gabrielle and Alexander are entirely unreflective people (which is implausible given that, by all appearances, they are quite perceptive), then the popular characterization of their differences in terms of the atomistic contents

(beliefs, principles, etc.) of their respective senses of life cannot withstand critical scrutiny. As I imagine them, both of these individuals *believe in* “the rehabilitation of criminals” and in “justice for the victims.” Rather, what truly divides them is whether or not they think the release of the convicted criminal in this particular case would be, on the whole, a fair, safe, and reasonable way of dealing with these circumstances. They differ, in other words, over their *interpretation* or *application* of these moral truisms.

But it is at precisely this point that the intellectualist in us all begins to squirm. When ethical conflicts are described in this way, the general feeling is that we are immediately thrown into the unbearable tension between the notion that moral rules or “rights” claims are rational and the suggestion that they involve *qualification*. If they involve qualification, we tend to reason, then we lose all hope of maintaining a robust sense of rationality. It all becomes hopelessly contextual from this perspective, without a solid rational grounding in cases where forms of life collide. Hence, contextualism and ethical realism (or essentialism) are deemed to be contradictory by many contemporary thinkers. But this is precisely the fallacy that continues to condemn these social commentators to work within the confines of their intellectualist forerunners.

This fallacious opposition of contextualism to realism begins with the assumption that, *for the agent impressed by them*, moral principles are rationally opaque and yet none the less constitutive of our rationality. This misunderstanding, far from being unique to what I have called “the everyday

ethical agent,” has also plagued our Western philosophical tradition. Take as an example what is perhaps the most famous moral principle: Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative that we ought to treat others as ends in themselves and not simply as means to an end. This moral slogan has for decades been one of the focal points of Western moral theory. And this is not surprising. It succinctly and accurately captures many of our strongest intuitions regarding the sanctity and dignity of human life. However, it is important to note Kant’s categorical imperative does not help us bring people with different moral inclinations closer together. *Why? Because without a perceptive and sensitive conception of what a rational person is, what he/she deserves, and what he/she needs, the notion of treating someone as “an end in themselves” can only at best initiate the task of ethical deliberation.* Kant’s moral principles (and any others like them) can at best set the stage for exploring the underlying details of our sense of life; they can never explain in themselves why we have the ethical inclinations we have, nor can they indicate in a substantive way *why we are justified in having them.* Moral principles are, in this sense, place-holders for a wide range of ethical options – some of which may turn out upon reflection to be quite immoral.

So again, why are contextualism and ethical realism perennially deemed to be in tension? Why are we so determined to see the rational, ethical, and existential backgrounds of our reflective activities as closed to each other? Why, in other words, are the activities of interpretation and qualification so problematic from the perspective of our everyday conception

of the rational agent? I have already indicated what I think is the main reason for this: because we tend to see agents as the loci of atomistic convictions. But why the attraction to understanding human life in this way? There are several possible ways to explain this. In many cases, it may simply be that these are the terms provided by our social traditions, shaped as they are by the conflicts between science and religion. In others, it may be that there is pressure to get immediate results which can be calculated, tabulated, and reduced to a statistical uniformity. These are admittedly powerful reasons. But in addition to the basic usefulness of this way of interpreting what is on all accounts a complex subject, I believe there is another, more fittingly discursive and embodied explanation for this attraction to cognitive atomism.

The explanation I have in mind is what may be called the “self-fulfilling prophesy of intellectualism” – the prophesy by which we deny the rationality of the contextual background of ethical interpretation, and thereby separate human lives or cultures into self-sufficient pods. In the following chapter, the motivations underlying this self-fulfilling prophesy, which Martha Nussbaum calls the rationalist’s “refusal of vision,”²⁹ will be spelled out in detail.

2

A Rationalistic Sense of Life

I'm counting out time
Got the whole thing down by numbers
All those numbers
Give me guidance
Oh Lord I need that now
The day of judgment's come
And you can bet that I've been resting
For this testing
Digesting
Every word the experts say

Erogenous zones I love you!
Without you what would a poor boy do?

Found a girl I wanted to date
Thought I'd better get it straight
Went to buy a book before its too late
Don't leave nothing to fate!
I've studied every line, every page in the book
Now I've got the real thing here, I'm going to take a look...

I'm counting out time, hoping it goes like I planned it
Cuz I understand it – look I've found the hot-spots, figures 1 to 9
Still counting out time
I've got my finger on the button
Don't say nuthin'
Just lie there still and I'll get you turned on just fine

Erogenous zones I love you!
Without you what would a poor boy do?

Touch and go with 1 to 6
Big trouble is on number 7
Gotta remember all of my tricks:
Steady the hand on number 11
Crucial responses with dilations of the pupils
Honey get hip
It's time to unzip
to unzip-a-zip-a-zip-a-zip-a-zip ... whoopee!

Move over Casanova.

-- Peter Gabriel "Counting Out Time"³⁰

The task of undermining the allure of the everyday intellectualistic conception of human reason I have been describing can be seen as beginning with these poignantly anti-Cartesian questions from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*: "Does it make sense to ask 'How do you know that you believe?' – and is the answer: 'I know it by introspection?'"³¹ The critical perspective I wish to articulate here concurs with Wittgenstein's response that: "In *some* cases it will be possible to say some such thing, but in most cases not."³² This same anti-Cartesian perspective also provides the critical framework for another of the great deconstructors of the epistemological tradition, Martin Heidegger. He explains his approach to the analysis of "Dasein" – his term for human life and/or the phenomenon of person-ality³³ – in the following way:

The question arises whether giving the "I" in the way [our everyday discourse does] discloses Dasein in its everydayness, if it discloses Dasein at all. Is it [...] obvious *a priori* that access to Dasein must be gained only by mere reflective awareness of the "I" of actions? What if this kind of 'giving itself' [...] should lead our existential analytic astray [...]? Perhaps when Dasein addresses itself in the way which is closest to itself, it always says "I am this entity," and in the long run says this loudest when it is 'not' this entity. [... Thus the] word 'I' is to be understood only in the sense of a non-committal *formal indicator*, indicating something which may perhaps reveal itself as its 'opposite' in some particular phenomenal context of Being. In that case, the 'not-I' is by no means tantamount to an entity which essentially lacks 'I-hood', but is rather a definite kind of Being which the 'I' itself possesses, such as having lost itself.³⁴

These deeply anti-Cartesian sentiments on the part of Wittgenstein and Heidegger all point to substantial weaknesses in our everyday form of discourse (and in the traditions which follow it) in which the solitary human agent is assumed to be the center of the universe of meaning. For both these thinkers, the rational life of human beings cannot be accurately

depicted as being driven by convictions which shape their understanding of their surroundings. Rather, for both it is principally shaped by our *hopes*, *desires*, and *interests*, all of which are intricately tied together with our daily *concern* for our family, community, and our worldly surroundings. From this perspective, our beliefs must be interpreted as outgrowths of our *embodied existential engagement*. Thus Wittgenstein insists:

believing is not thinking. (A grammatical remark.) The concepts of believing, expecting, hoping are less distantly related to one another than they are to the concept of thinking.³⁵

For Wittgenstein, our perpetual talk of ‘beliefs’ aims less at reporting some internal knowledge, than it aims at expressing – though simultaneously masking – what Wittgenstein calls our “constant struggle to renew an attitude.”³⁶ This link between our everyday focus on ‘beliefs’ and the desire to renew an attitude prepares the ground for revealing the *hopes* and *expectations* which drive our everyday intellectualistic conception of human agency. In other words, it prepares us to isolate what Heidegger characterizes as the anonymous author of our everyday discourse, the “who” that provides shelter and sustenance to our everyday style of reflection.³⁷ In her essays collected in *Love’s Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum can be seen as taking up this very same task.

The Tip of the Rationalist Iceberg

Nussbaum’s picture of the rationalistic moral character begins, as I began above, by claiming that our everyday ethical approach, and along with

it our traditional moral theories, encourage us to remain within the confines of a conception of the ethical agent in which atomistic normative, cognitive, or non-cognitive entities dictate our perceptions and judgments. For Nussbaum, this attraction to axiomatic rational foundations overshadows the task of developing the particularity and sensitivity of our perceptions, and fosters a moral outlook in which certain ethically relevant details are habitually and, in a sense, *intentionally* ignored. This outlook is portrayed as being part and parcel of a metaethical narrative in which the philosophical ideals of *generality*, *universality*, and *certainty* are woven together in a particular, and often peculiar, fashion to create an overly robust – and in many ways impoverished – sense of human rationality and dignity.

Nussbaum's critique of moral intellectualism or rationalism makes extensive use of the insights contained in the novels of Henry James. In particular, she frequently draws on James' descriptions of certain rationalistic characters. Mrs. Newsome, from James' novel *The Ambassadors*,³⁸ is precisely this sort of character. Her role in this novel is to form the background against which the moral development of Lambert Strether, the protagonist in the novel, is painted. Hence: "Present vividly in her absence, she articulates, by contrast, Strether's moral movement."³⁹ She plays much the same role in Nussbaum's critique.

The most obvious feature of Mrs. Newsome's character is her moralizing gaze – a gaze which reduces everything she encounters into an object of rigid, almost axiomatic, moral discrimination.⁴⁰ Interspersing James'

descriptions with her own insights, Nussbaum writes:

We notice first and most obviously her moralism, her preoccupation with questions of moral right and wrong, with criticism of offense, with judgment upon vice. "Essentially all moral pressure" (II.198)...⁴¹

This moralizing gaze is something that *precedes* Mrs. Newsome, coloring in a cold light every observation she makes. Quite literally, this reductive vision establishes her sense of life, ensuring that she perceives only what can be dealt with. Thus:

[She] come[s] to a situation determined that it should not touch [her], holding [her] general and rather abstract principles fixed and firm. These principles, the last court of appeal in practical reason, even govern what [she] may see and consider relevant in the new.⁴²

There are two aspects to Mrs. Newsome's fondness of moral principles which need to be noted if we are to get to the bottom of her sense of life. The first is the *procedure* within which these principles are put to use. Nussbaum describes it like this:

To her obsession with the priority of moral right, which fills, it seems, the entirety of her exalted consciousness (the presence of moral pressure is "almost identical with her own presence" [II.198]), we may add rigorism in her conception of principles. Everything in her world must be "straight" (Strether later calls her "the whole moral and intellectual being or block"); and her rules of right admit no softening in the light of the present circumstance, the individual case. "She was the only woman he had ever known, even at Woolett, as to whom his conviction was positive that to lie was beyond her art": she "refused to human commerce that mitigation of rigor" (I.95). Strether links his thought of her with the idea of an exceptionless justice that dwells outside "in the hard light" (II.5). This moral rigorism, together with the ubiquity of moral assessment, permits her two attitudes only⁴³ when confronted with a new occurrence: approval or disapproval.

This captures, I think, the sense of *how* she applies her principles to the circumstances that confront her. But this approach could be taken with virtually any sort of principle. To understand *why* she feels compelled to take this approach, we need to appreciate in detail *which* particular principles she

holds dear.

Mrs. Newsome's reflective ideals, which "fit" in perfectly with the aforementioned exceptionless procedure, are quite complex. But they are also, as Nussbaum noted above, essentially "general and rather abstract." But this does not mean that these principles are entirely devoid of substantive content. (On the contrary, they demonstrate a very robust sense of life albeit an impoverished one). Rather, it means that they draw their sense of coherence to a large extent from what they are not, from what Nussbaum claims they "refuse" to accept as appropriate for rational animals such as ourselves. As such, instead of describing Mrs. Newsome's sense of life in an overtly positive manner (i.e., in terms of what it values), I will instead focus on identifying that from which it feels compelled to gain critical distance.

The greatest obstacles for Mrs. Newsome, as it was for the anonymous author of our everyday discourse, are related to the subtle internal workings of the human mind and the innumerable contingencies of everyday life. Strether himself admits that he is drawn to her reductive vision of human life precisely because it allows him to escape from the challenge of thinking, in Nietzsche's phrase, beyond good and evil:

[S]he motivates his own obsession with discipline and punishment, his determination "always, where Lambert Strether was concerned, to know the worst" [II.69]. Indeed he is attracted to her, perhaps, just because of "his old tradition, the one he had been brought up on and which even so many years of life had but little worn away; the notion that the state of the wrongdoer, or at least this person's happiness, presented some special difficulty" [II.272].⁴⁴

To truly appreciate the hidden motivations for Mrs. Newsome's reductive

sense of life, we need to understand why the state of the wrongdoer, and in particular his or her *emotional* state, puts an unbearable strain on her moralizing outlook.

Firstly, Mrs. Newsome is bewildered by the fact that the emotional state of an individual inevitably complicates any moral judgment of his or her actions. Quite simply, it stymies the application of her rigid procedure. But there is a deeper reason for this bewilderment. Mrs. Newsome simply refuses to accept certain basic insights into the human condition, insights which most people would recognize as constitutive of a well-balanced moral sensibilities. Foremost on this list of insights is the importance of one's *intentions* for judging one's actions. Quite simply, we recognize that what someone intends to do must factor into any judgment of that person's behavior. This is so much of a psychological truism that it has been built into our legal system, in some cases providing reason for absolving the person of criminal responsibility even when certain harmful consequences have resulted directly from that person's actions. This is but one of the many insights into the human psyche which we feel mitigate any moral judgment of their behavior. There are others which are valid, but yet which figure less prominently in our courts of law, perhaps because of their subtlety. These, however, often figure justifiably in our day to day moral judgments. For instance, many people are now quite sensitized to the fact that an individual's *disposition* shapes her interpretation of her circumstances. The impact of this insight is arguably just as significant as the insight into the importance of

intentions. In fact, our dispositions often help create the context from out of which we form our intentional stances. This may sound complicated, but it is not. In our day to day lives we frequently acknowledge that one's *mood* – the way one is *attuned* to one's surroundings – can strongly influence what aspects of the world one perceives and how one interprets these aspects (e.g., as threatening, as distracting, as interesting, etc.). Furthermore we recognize that these moods are not simply created in our heads, as it were, of our own volition. They are often carried in an atmosphere, as in a stressful work environment, or in an abusive household. These sorts of factors, our society is now starting to realize, have an enormous impact on both our perceptions and our actions. It is precisely this sort of insight that forms the basis for what has been called “battered women’s syndrome” – something which Mrs. Newsome would likely have little sympathy for.⁴⁵

We could, of course, go on at length about the subtle aspects of human life that shape our behavior. But we needn't explore those depths in order to establish the basic interdependence of action and intention, perception and disposition, and to point out that these links trouble the intellectualistic character to the bone. The problem for characters like Mrs. Newsome is that once these internal links are established, the moral waters are substantially muddied, which forces the intellectualist to proceed with extreme delicacy when engaging in moral judgment and prescription, pausing at least long enough to consider the individual's intentions and disposition. These complications of moral judgment, running as they so clearly do against the

grain of the intellectualist's ethical procedure, are enough to encourage Mrs. Newsome's suspicion towards the state of the wrongdoer. But, as I noted above, it is important to delve further by asking ourselves *why* Mrs. Newsome feels obliged to apply moral principles in a rigid manner. Again, I am not looking for the problems these insights cause for the application of her rigid moral procedure. These are I suspect plainly obvious – i.e., they stop it in its tracks. But, I am suggesting we look for a more *embodied* explanation, one that is rooted in the way Mrs. Newsome approaches interaction with other people, the way she feels comfortable *carrying herself* in the presence of others.

Perhaps the most discerning aspect of Mrs. Newsome's character is that she doesn't even bother to learn the names of the people with which she interacts. Hence:

Chad is therefore "the youth," Mme. de Vionnet "the Person"; it is already clear beforehand what principles will govern Woollett's dealings with them. Any more personal encounter is made impossible by the nature of the view itself.⁴⁶

This same refusal to get into the details of people's lives is brought out in Nussbaum's discussion of another intellectualistic character, Mr. Gradgrind from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. She writes:

Instead of Louisa, Tom, Stephen, Rachael, in all of their qualitative diversity, their historical particularity, we have simply so-and-so-many quantifiable "parcels of human nature." This effacement of qualitative difference is accomplished, we see, by a process of abstraction from all in people that is not easily funneled into mathematical formulae; so this mind, in order to measure what it measures, attends only to an abstract and highly general version of the human being [...] We see this abstracting mathematical mind at work in the Gradgrind school's treatment of its students, called by number ("Girl number twenty") rather than by name, and seen as an "inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim." We see it

at work in the treatment of the workers of Coketown as so-an-so-many "hands and stomachs," as "teeming myriads" whose destinies can be reckoned on a slate, their qualitative differences as irrelevant as those of "ants and beetles" "passing to and from their nests."⁴⁷

For figures like Mrs. Newsome and Mr. Gradgrind, a person's name is merely a formal indicator of what can basically be reduced to the subjects place in certain pre-established social categories, or to their existence as "parcels of human nature." Such a character feels obliged to resist the fact that, beyond these categories and monolithic conceptions of human nature, there lie individuals with particular intentions and dispositions, perceptions and feelings. Why this reluctance to see into the depths of the other's life? The problem, as Nussbaum concisely puts it, is that "Particularity of vision brings surprise, surprise passivity and a loss of moral control."

In this critical light, what appeared to be a lifestyle driven by a coherent conception of the human agent turns out to be an expression of a deep-seated *fear* of emotional attachment and involvement. The problem for Mrs. Newsome is that being engaged with the world, and being in tune with people's dispositions requires that she sacrifice her self-sufficiency (and theirs as well). It requires that she deliver herself over to the twists and turns of worldly circumstance, allowing whatever may appear to make an impression, and allowing whatever may happen to refine her sense of how to respond. Her life as a social animal demands that she be *receptive* – not however in the sense of being unconscious and uncritical, but in the sense of being "finely aware" and discerning. And in the face of this demand Mrs. Newsome emerges as nothing short of belligerent. By inflating her sense of

human dignity beyond reasonable limits, she only proves that her axiomatic sense of rationality is at base a flight from the world, a flight from engagement, and a flight from the anxiety that inevitably accompanies any full-fledged encounter with others.

To fully appreciate the extent to which this fear of life entrenches Mrs. Newsome within her rationalistic ethos, consider how she finds a way to interpret sensitivity, flexibility, and passivity as vices and not as virtues. For Mrs. Newsome, these qualities are purely irrational and childish, their presence reflects an openness to the world that has no place in a properly rational understanding of a the well-ordered universe. For her, and for the citizens of Woollett, volition, decision, and action are the essential keys to our rationality and dignity. They are, in a sense, the embodiment of the creative forces of the world we live in. They are, quite literally, *God's virtues*. Hence, commenting again on James, Nussbaum notes:

“Woollett isn't sure it ought to enjoy. If it were, it would” (1.16). The first half of this remark is frequently quoted by critics; the second is, I think, even more significant. For it informs us that Woollett conceives of everything valuable in life as activity that can be morally willed. If it *were* sure that enjoyment was its duty, it would set itself to that duty, it would simply will itself to enjoy.⁴⁸

Herein lies the danger of reductionistic conceptions of rationality: by literally removing any opportunity to see through their façade, these conceptions not only shape our world, but they shape what I have been calling *the conditions of intelligibility* of our life-experiences. Life, death, emotional attachments, moods, and vulnerabilities are, within the confines of this sense of life, not only deemed irrelevant or irrational, but they are for the most part not even

recognized as playing a role in human affairs (or at least not in the *rational* aspects of these affairs). This hallowed position is reserved for reason conceived as an essentially atomistic, axiomatic, and often mathematical system which runs on its own power, irregardless of the worldly context in which it stands. Such systems, Nussbaum argues, include the approaches dominating cognitive sciences, as well as in many respects the Kantian and Utilitarian moral theories which our students are often told present the two most viable options for accessing the normative touchstones of ethical discourse.

Each of these features of the intellectualist's sense of life, taken as a whole, are what lead James's most perceptive characters to make the following observation with regard to Mrs. Newsome:

"That's just her difficulty – that she doesn't admit surprises. It's a fact that, I think, describes and represents her; and falls in with what I tell you – that she's all, as I've called it, fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she has done that, you see, there's no room left; no margin, as it were, for any alteration. She's filled as full, packed as tight, as she'll hold, and if you wish to get anything more or different out or in – "

"You've got to make over altogether the woman herself?"

"What it comes to," said Strether, "is that you've got morally and intellectually to get rid of her." (II.239)

My argument here takes much of the same attitude towards intellectualism as Strether takes towards Mrs. Newsome: to overcome it, we have to, morally and intellectually, get rid of it.

Objectivity Through Contextuality

The most damaging aspect of Mrs. Newsome's intellectualistic sense of

life is not only that the *relevance* of ethical detail or context-dependency is downplayed, but rather that its very *existence* is excluded from the outset.

Thus,

[Mrs. Newsome's] emotional coldness is seen [...] as an aspect of her larger impassivity, her resistance to any modification by worldly circumstance. This is why her being all "fine cold thought" "falls in" so well with her resistance to surprises. Solid and purely active as she is (essentially all *pressure* without response), life cannot leave a mark on her. It is not *permitted* to enter in, or to pull anything out. She is [...] the sort of meal that can be "served cold" (represented by an ambassador) "without its really losing anything" of its essential flavor – so little does its character consist in responsiveness to what is at hand.⁴⁹

In this way, the intellectualistic character does not, and cannot, respond to "what is at hand" because she only perceives those details which could be the creation of an underlying or supervening system. She is, in other words, committed from the outset to undercutting the perceptual foundations of everyday life in an effort to reveal what it is *really* all about, to establish what can only be called a *rationalistic ontology*.

We see this rationalistic ontology at work in the way that certain scientists encourage us to believe that our world is not anything like what we perceive. This undercutting of our faculties of perception began with Plato, was given a new formulation during the Scientific Revolution, and has continued unabated ever since. In modernity this attitude emerges when we are encouraged to admit that the terms in which sub-atomic physics or genetics describe human life are the *real* terms – the ones that speak of our activities in terms of their constitutive parts. This, we are told, gives us a properly "objective" grounding for understanding what is going on in the social world. In his essay "Lichtung or Lebensform," Taylor elaborates on

this very point:

Our thinking is [said to be] objective when it escapes the distortions and parochial perspectives of our kind of subjectivity, and grasps the world as it is. Seventeenth-century thinkers were impressed with the way our embodied experience, and our ordinary way of being in the world (to use contemporary language), could mislead us. Descartes pointed out how the way we take our everyday experience leads us to attribute, say, the color to the object or to situate the pain in the tooth. These localizations were fine for Aristotelian theory, but the new mechanism showed that they were illusory. Only "primary" properties were really "in" the objects; "secondary" properties, such as color, were effects of our peculiar constitution as a substantial union of soul and body. What comes to be called objectivity requires an escape from this. [...] Sometimes the common appearance "regestalted" under the impact of the discovery: before Galileo people "saw" that cannonballs shot straight forward and then dropped to the ground. After, it was "obvious" that their trajectory was curved. But in very many cases, we still can't help seeing things in the old way. The development of science since then has only entrenched this sense of strangeness, of the distance between underlying truth and our ordinary ways of seeing.⁵⁰

This kind of non-realist ontological sensibility can be seen as a full-scale abandonment of our particular form of life in an effort to secure what it takes to be genuinely objective knowledge.

As I noted in my previous chapter, this attitude is the breeding ground for absolutism and relativism and all the other dogmatic dichotomies which sustain it (e.g., objectivism and subjectivism, fundamentalism and skepticism, etc.). For the former, the heavens hold certain basic truths which shape our form of life from the outside (e.g., Plato, Descartes), while for the latter, the failure of the essentialist's project leaves us face to face with a void in which human rationality is ultimately left in a free-floating condition (e.g., aspects of Foucault, Derrida, Rorty and MacIntyre)⁵¹. In this regard the writings of these thinkers express a kind of latent obsession with the super-human narrowly construed – either with its discovery or its demise. Both polarities, partly in virtue of their persistent opposition to each other, unwittingly imply that

without the presence of certain *externally determinative* or *extra-rational* factors we are free of secure epistemological footholds and, in certain cases, free of stringent moral responsibility.

In direct opposition to these inclinations, Nussbaum wants to show that we can make secure ethical judgments and have a strong sense of responsibility precisely *because* we can be fully engaged within a certain specific context or language-game. In an essay defending her "Aristotelian essentialism," Nussbaum identifies and undermines the common metaphysical link between absolutism and relativism in the following way:

[T]he collapse into extreme relativism or subjectivism seems to me to betray a deep attachment to metaphysical realism itself. For it is only to one who has pinned everything to that hope that its collapse will seem to entail the collapse of all evaluation – just as it is only to a deeply believing religious person, as Nietzsche saw, that the news of the death of God brings the threat of nihilism. What we see here, I think, is a reaction of *shame* – a turning away of the eyes from our poor humanity, which looks so mean and bare – by contrast to a dream of another sort. What do we have here, these critics seem to say? Only our poor human conversations, our human bodies that interpret things so imperfectly? Well, if that is all there is, we do not really want to study it too closely, to look into the distinctions it exhibits. We will just say that they are all alike, for, really, they do look pretty similar when compared to the heavenly standard we were seeking.⁵²

Nussbaum, as I have begun to show, opposes this shameful attitude to our humanity at every turn.

Placing herself firmly within the Aristotelian tradition, she invites us to turn our moral gaze resolutely towards the limitations of our form of life, specifically towards the reflective space in which we are always already inescapably immersed in reflections about how to best care for ourselves and our world. These reflections, far from being something we on occasion choose to engage in, are seen as constituting our *pre-engagement* with

substantive questions of value and virtue. From this perspective, our limitations (e.g., our needs, desires, interests, practices) do not appear as things we must go beyond or do away if we are to make reliable ethical judgments. Rather, these limits are literally what provide the conditions of intelligibility for our recognition of ethical excellence. I will explain.

Nussbaum's respect for our limitations and vulnerabilities does not imply that we should complacently accept our faults by dwelling on our frailties. Rather, she wants to point out that these aspects of human life constitute the rational background of our ethical reflections – they are the aspects of our lives which, if we are to make genuine ethical progress, must be first and foremost taken into account. Thus, one of Nussbaum's primary goals is to distinguish between challenging ourselves to be better people, and trying to overcome our finitude; between making sense of our existential situation, and trying to find another paradigm of rationality by which to explain its intricacies. The latter approach, she thinks, overshadows the genuine progress we can – and do – make within the context of human life, and thus amounts to what she calls an attempt to “transcend our humanity.”⁵³

To explain her counter-intuitive claim that our finitude imposes a fully rational standard on ethical reflection, Nussbaum draws an analogy between ethical excellence and athletic excellence. She writes:

Young people are urged to cultivate [athletic excellence], and praised when they achieve it. But clearly such an achievement has point and value only relatively to the context of the human body, which imposes certain species-specific limits and creates certain possibilities of movement rather than others. To excel is to use those abilities especially fully, to struggle against those limits especially successfully. [...] On the other hand, there is in every sport in every age, from Homer to Pindar on to our own time, a notion of the

unfair or “unnatural” competitive edge – exemplified most clearly today in the controversies surrounding the use of anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. There are certain ways athletes have of removing limits, certain ways of getting past the body’s boundaries that seem to us to remove the whole point of the activity, to make the achievement no longer an achievement.⁵⁴

Thus, for Nussbaum there is a very particular reason why our finitude is more than just a pragmatic necessity: quite simply, without it our efforts to make normative judgments would lose their only points of reference. This is not, as it may sound, a complicated philosophical theory. In fact, we all implicitly recognize this phenomenological insight every time we are moved to admire the accomplishments of our youngsters and of those who are mentally and physically challenged. Quite simply, for an 8 year-old or for an adult with a disability, running a 100-meter dash in less than 20 seconds is an incredible show of excellence. In the same light, we recognize that a picture drawn by our 10 year-old can be more moving than a Monet. These insights into the interplay between excellence and finitude are also captured in the everyday expression “champions show their greatness only in defeat.” In effect, they capture an integral part of what excellence *means*, what constitutes our recognition of excellence, and thus, in a realist’s vein, what the spirit of excellence *is*.

Conclusion

Keeping these conditions of phenomenological intelligibility in mind, we can hopefully begin to comprehend the harm caused by viewing our limitations as simply things to be overcome or ignored. Extending this insight

directly to ethics, we should now be able to see clearly how our intellectualistic obsession with disembodied, super-human knowledge causes us to systematically overlook the genuine beauty, excellence, and value in the world, phenomena which, as Nussbaum has shown, give substantive meaning and orientation to our sense of ethical rationality.

To drive this point home, Nussbaum, echoing an attitude she claims is visible in many works of the ancient Greeks, encourages us to see that the gods are not entities we ought to emulate. Rather, she encourages us to see them as beings who are essentially alienated from human life. Thus she writes:

The human world is held together by pity and fellow-feeling. Human beings are in a sense worse off than the gods because they suffer; but they also know how to deal with suffering, and their morality is a response to the fact of suffering. The gods are better because they *can* simply overlook, look over, the sufferings of human beings, without involvement or response. But precisely because they are better in this way, they simply don't fully see what is going on in our lives, they lack compassion, an essential ingredient of any human justice. If, from our viewpoint, we prize compassion, we have to say that *in their dealings in our realm*, the gods are not just different, they are worse.⁵⁵

The gods, along with those who covertly aspire to be all-knowing and invulnerable via the absolutist or relativist routes, not only have *no need* for wisdom (i.e., ethics or philosophy), but they *cannot be* wise. This is because wisdom is knowing what it is important to know given that we are not omniscient. It is, in other words, knowing what matters to us *as finite beings*, knowing what we need to know in order to live a good life. The gods, as

beings who lack our vulnerabilities to hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and disease, beings who don't need to educate their children, to raise an army, to arrange for the fair distribution of life-supporting property and other goods...⁵⁶

simply do not, and cannot, engage in ethical reflection.⁵⁷

In offering this scathing critique of the divine self-image and of the metaethical commitments which accompany it, Nussbaum gives us a critical purchase from which to interpret some of the greatest philosophers of our time. As I noted in the conclusion to my first chapter, Immanuel Kant is perhaps our best example of a thinker who articulated our deepest moral ideals, but whose formalism came with a price. Despite being one of the most influential figures in the history of moral philosophy, Kant demonstrated a virtually systematic blindness to the complexities of living up to these ideals in our daily lives. One need only recall his stance on the question of lying to the “inquiring assassin” to see the awkwardness of his intellectualism when faced with a concrete (though, in this case, far-fetched) situation.⁵⁸ In a way, the true failure of Kant’s moral vision resides in his straightforward preference for the letter of the moral law over its spirit. As Nussbaum has shown, the spirit of our ethical rationality is not imposed on us from outside of, or perhaps before, our involvement with worldly things – from what Thomas Nagel famously called “a view from nowhere.”⁵⁹ Rather, only because we appreciate that objects can break, that people can be harmed, and that our perceptivity may be blunted, do we feel motivated to care for our possessions, for others, and for ourselves. In this regard, our duty to *care* for our world is perhaps the only categorical imperative at the root of reflective impulses. As Heidegger puts it:

The phenomenon of care in its totality is essentially something that cannot be torn asunder; so any attempts to trace it back to special acts or drives like willing and wishing or urge and addiction, or to construct it out of these, will

be unsuccessful. Willing and wishing are rooted with ontological necessity in Dasein as care; they are not just ontologically undifferentiated Experiences occurring in a 'stream' which is completely indefinite with regard to the meaning of its Being. [...] Hence, to any willing there belongs something willed, which has already made itself definite in terms of a "for-the-sake-of-which".⁶⁰

This "for-the-sake-of-which" is our sense of *what we are caring for*. It is what I have been calling, following Nussbaum, our sense of life.

3

Perceptive Equilibrium

Everyone here knows how to cry.
But it's a long way down to the place where we started from.

— Sarah McLaughlin⁶¹

Thus far we have followed the outlines of Nussbaum's picture of moral philosophy which has it that our rationalistic style of moral reflection literally blinds us to certain constitutive aspects of our lives. This has hopefully given us a general idea of how *not* to think critically about human life, either as social scientists or as ethical agents. With this in mind, we are now prepared to articulate the positive vision that drives Nussbaum's critique. Of particular importance is her essay "“Finely Aware and Richly Responsible”: Literature and the Moral Imagination.”⁶²

Nussbaum's Holistic Ethical Foundations

Initially, much like Søren Kierkegaard did in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Nussbaum seeks to make our ethical decisions more difficult. She thinks, as did Kierkegaard, that our popular moral picture is too clumsy, that it makes insensitive, heavy-handed, and impractical attitudes appear to be moral ones, and that it therefore *levels-down*⁶³ the complexity of the ethical world. To counteract the intuitive allure of these decision-oriented

attitudes, Nussbaum argues that the central challenge of ethical reflection is to learn to be morally *perceptive, responsive, and/or attentive*. One of the first obstacles in meeting this challenge is to shift our reflective focus from the simple authority of our moral rules and principles, to the question of *the kind of person we ought to be* if we are to understand the significance of these rules and principles in the context of our lives. This stance on the role of rules and general principles in her project is qualified in the following way:

This does not mean that there are no criteria and anything goes. But it does mean that the standard will ultimately be nothing harder or clearer than the conformity of this choice or description to those of agents on whom we can rely for competent judgment – just as, in Aristotle's very similar view, the norm of good perception is the judgment of a certain type of person, the person of practical wisdom.⁶⁴

The ethical activity of such a “person of practical wisdom” is described as an attempt to find “perceptive equilibrium.”⁶⁵ This goal, she claims, is attained only once we have found a way to “make our concrete perceptions ‘hang beautifully together’ both with one another and with [our] general principles...”⁶⁶ All of this needs to be explained in greater detail if we are to understand the sense of life Nussbaum feels we must learn to cultivate.

The first step in understanding what Nussbaum means by “perceptive equilibrium” is to appreciate what sort of “procedure” she has in mind. She describes it like this:

Individuals simply ask what looks *deepest*, what they can least live without – guided by their sense of life, and by their standing interest in *consistency* and in *community*. That is, they want to arrive at a view that is *shared* and *sharable*.⁶⁷

As stated, Nussbaum’s moral ideals, like Kant’s, gesture at a universally acceptable set of normative touchstones which can help guide us through our

daily ethical circumstances. But there is a serious difference between the two which must not be overlooked. Note that Nussbaum gestures at a universal standard of morality without the intellectualistic implication that her moral ideals are, *as stated*, simple and self-evident, or that they reveal a hidden *logic* that human beings intuitively employ when engaging in ethical reflection. Instead, she phrases them in such a way that they explicitly lead us to explore the richest details of our lives. Through her unabashed use of strongly evaluative words like *depth* and *sense of life*, Nussbaum encourages us to ignore our intellectualistic inclinations and to confront our heartfelt moral dilemmas head-on with sensitivity and imagination. Thus, based on her conviction that the background of our lives can be made more intelligible, and that in doing so we can learn to see ourselves with greater clarity, Nussbaum's moral ideals lead us to be *responsive* instead of to be *active* narrowly construed. In this way she pushes aside the traditional challenges of *applying moral rules* or acting in *accordance with certain duties*, to make room for the more pertinent question of how the widest possible range of morally relevant aspects can be brought together to make the world we live in a more beautiful, more honest, more coherent place.

But Nussbaum also does not want this to come off as a flighty affair. She sees this activity as being both imaginative and firmly grounded. Paradoxically, the exercise in imagination she has in mind is one which aims principally at *seeing what is always already taking place*. Thus, she writes:

It seems that we should see whether we can find an account of the methods, subject matter, and questions of moral philosophy (ethical inquiry) that is

more inclusive. And here, it must be stressed, what we really want is an account of ethical inquiry that will capture what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical questions. For the activity of comparison I describe is a real practical activity, one that we undertake in countless ways when we ask ourselves how to live, what to be; one that we perform together with others, in search of ways of living together in a community, country, or planet.⁶⁸

In this way Nussbaum's project bears a striking resemblance to Heidegger's existential phenomenology,⁶⁹ in which the primary task "is to prevent the splitting of the phenomenon – in other words, to hold its positive phenomenal content secure."⁷⁰ Thus, far from simply stating the obvious and far from wandering off into utopian flights of fancy, Nussbaum seeks to reveal the ways in which, though the use of our imagination, we make ethical progress beyond the confines of our atomistic, non-discursive, and ultimately disembodied theories of rationality.

As a case study for her account of perceptive equilibrium, Nussbaum discusses the interaction that takes place between Maggie and Adam Verver in James' *The Golden Bowl* – an interaction which can only be described as an illustration of unmitigated altruism.⁷¹

Adam and Maggie's Ethical Achievement

The conflict between Adam and Maggie Verver can be simplistically described as a conflict of interest. Maggie has reached a point in her life at which she would like to leave Adam (her father) to live with her new husband. Knowing that their separation will force Adam to live the rest of life in relative loneliness, or at least without the one he loves most, Maggie's decision causes them both to feel intense anxiety. However, after a very brief

conversation in which Adam gives her a hug and his blessings, her decision is made, and they each go on living their respective lives under new circumstances.

This description, as an introduction for those unfamiliar with their conflict, will suffice. But note that if we end our description here, as we may be tempted to do in our more intellectualistic moods, our stance would remain that of a disinterested observer of their plight. For Nussbaum, contenting ourselves with such a description would literally leave out the entirety of the ethical achievement that takes place. In this form, what we are describing could, upon further examination, turn out to be a disastrous turn of events, an ethical failure of the greatest proportions. To truly capture the salient aspects of the subtle interaction that takes place, Nussbaum insists we must do much more than merely identify Maggie's overt actions (i.e., her decision to live with her husband) and reveal the principles that underlie them (e.g., her *right* to do so based on her personal autonomy and dignity). Instead, she encourages us to focus on the remarkable way in which *Adam* responds to Maggie's wishes, and the way that Maggie facilitates this response. For Nussbaum, *here* is where genuine ethical progress is made, in their "responsive interaction."⁷² Thus, in what may appear to be a paradoxical way of seeing their plight, Nussbaum wants to show us that "he carries and nurtures [this achievement]; she assists in the delivery,"⁷³ not vice versa, as we are likely wont to expect.

To even begin to understand Nussbaum's admiration of their interaction

and, specifically, of Adam's sacrifice, we must be able to see, and hopefully *feel*, the momentousness of this conflict. Without this empathy, Nussbaum's claims about which aspects are ethically salient will fall on deaf ears.

Fortunately, thanks to the following description in which James' descriptions are woven together with Nussbaum's commentary, the detailed emotional aspects that are in play are brilliantly exposed. From Maggie's perspective the situation is experienced in this way:

Could it be anything but a matter of the most serious pain, and guilt, for her to give up, even for a man whom she loves passionately, this father who has raised her, protected her, loved her, enveloped her, who really does love only her and who depends on her for help of future happiness? In these circumstances she cannot love her husband except by banishing her father. But if she banishes her father he will live unhappy and die alone. (And won't she, as well, have to see him as a failure, his life as debased, as well as empty?) It is no wonder, then, that Maggie finds herself wishing "to keep him with her for remounting the stream of time and dipping again, for the softness of the water, into the contracted basin of the past" (II.258). To dare to be and do what she passionately desires appears, and is, too monstrous, a cruel refusal of loyalty. And what has her whole world been built on, if not on loyalty and the keen image of his greatness? It is no wonder that the feeling of desire for her husband is, in this crisis, felt as a numbing chill, and she accuses it: "I'm at this very moment ... frozen stiff with selfishness" (II.265)" This is moral anguish, not simply girlish fear.⁷⁴

To appreciate their interaction, we first need to understand why, despite being the one making the only overt decision in this conflict, Maggie describes herself as being "frozen stiff." The answer to this question is provided in the above passage: she *dreads* the consequences of her decisions for her father's future life, she *wonders* whether she is being selfish, and she sees only two options, to leave or to stay. Standing, as she does, in the cross-hairs of the ethical decision, both options, although living, forced, and momentous,⁷⁵ seem ironically dead. Why? Because, in a very real sense, Maggie is not responsible for making this ethical decision into the

right decision (though of course she plays a pivotal role). That challenge falls squarely onto Adam's lap.

Nussbaum goes out of her way to emphasize, in direct contrast to the inherent decisionism of our everydayness, that Adam's challenge is the more essential. In his perceptive passivity, Adam struggles furiously with the genuine ethical task of seeing and feeling his way through their plight in a way that will make sense for both of them. He struggles, in other words, with what we characterized above as the central challenge of finding perceptive equilibrium: how to place into balance "what [he] can least live without – guided by [his] sense of life."⁷⁶ This task, as Nussbaum describes it, is fraught with complexity:

For [Adam's response] to become a solution it has to be offered in the right way at the right time in the right tone, in such a way that she can take it; offered without pressing any of the hidden springs of guilt and loyalty in her that he knows so clearly how to press; offered so that he gives her up with greatness, with beauty, in a way that she can love and find wonderful. To give her up he must, then, really give her up; he must wholeheartedly *wish* to give her up, so that she sees that he *has* "read his way so into her best possibility."⁷⁷

To the jaded philosopher, it may seem that Nussbaum has established an impossibly altruistic standard for Adam to live up to, and that his living up to it merely shows that this encounter and Adam's sacrifice, as James and Nussbaum have described it, are unrealistic. But Nussbaum vehemently denies both of these charges, insisting instead that there remains, despite the bewildering complexity (and in a strong sense because of it), a genuinely moral path for Adam to follow. This path is one in which his *perceptions* and *feelings* are corrected, and in which he finds a way to express them in just the

right way. Nussbaum goes even further. She claims that for his achievement to be authentic, Adam must truly *want* Maggie to live with her husband. Only in this way, says Nussbaum, can Adam truly appreciate that she *deserves* to live with him. But again, this will sound impossibly altruistic, especially the parts about having the “correct” moral perceptions and feelings. From an intellectualist perspective, perceptions and feelings are themselves not subject to being affected through any form of guided reflection. Our perceptions, these thinkers insist, are rooted in things like our beliefs, or in the way our eyes are designed, and our emotions are inextricably linked to our raw impulses or to our hormones (or to any other non-rational source of motivation). At best, the intellectualist argues, we can fight or guard our perceptions and emotions; we cannot however engage them in rational dialogue. In other words, it is precisely because of the essentially unfettered nature of these two human faculties that we *have* moral imperatives in the first place!

All of this, Nussbaum feels, is the purest outgrowth of the intellectualistic attitude as it was described above. To counteract its almost universal allure, the dynamic of Adam’s achievement must first be exposed in greater detail. Nussbaum describes it in the following way:

Adam acknowledges, in an image of delicate beauty and lyricism, his daughter’s sexuality and free maturity. More: he wishes that she be free, that the suggestion of passion in her voice be translated into, fulfilled in a life of sparkling playfulness. He assents to her pleasure and wishes to be its approving spectator, not its impediment. He renounces, at the same time, his own personal gain – renounces even the putting of the question as to what he might or might not gain. (For even the presence of a jealous or anxious question would produce a sinking otherwise than in play.) The significance of his image resonates the more for us if we recall that he used

to see Maggie (and wish her to be) like "some slight, slim draped 'antique' of Vatican or Capitoline hills, late and refined, rare as a note and immortal as a link, [...] keeping still the quality, the perfect felicity, of the statue". That image denied (with her evident collusion) her active womanliness; it also denied her status as a separate, autonomous center of choice. It expressed the wish to collect and keep her always, keep her far from the dangers so often expressed, in the thought of these characters, by the imagery of water and its motion. Now he wishes her moving and alive, swimming freely in the sea – not even confined to his boat, or to the past's "contracted basin." Not "frozen stiff" with guilt, either.⁷⁸

There is an immense significance to this characterization of Adam's achievement. What is particularly important is the way in which he manages to situate himself *beside* Maggie in her adventure, how he manages to live *with* her by resolving to live without her.

Imaginative Perception and the Un-Concealment of Life

To fully appreciate this achievement of interpersonal attunement, we need, as was noted above, to steer clear of the long queue of explanations which force themselves upon us. Firstly, Adam does not simply keep his mouth shut, letting Maggie make her decision. Since, as Nussbaum pointed out, Maggie will not leave him unless she feels his full *participation* in, and *assent* to, her decision, saying nothing or very little could not lead him to accomplish what he allegedly accomplishes. For this same reason, his response to their conflict could not result from his own feelings of guilt, from his awareness of the grief she would feel should he make her departure difficult, nor from his desire to make Maggie happy. In other words, his response could not have emerged as the result of a sort of Utilitarian calculus, even one which took into account all the feelings and emotions in

play.⁷⁹ Furthermore, his participation in Maggie's decision could not have emerged from what we may call a Kantian perspective. Though it is consistent with Kantian principles (on certain interpretations), Adam's achievement does not take the form of a recognition that his daughter is an individual with a basic human dignity, and that as such she is free to make her own decisions. In fact, to summarize all of these points, in the manner in which James describes his response, Adam seems to ignore altogether the immense range of questions linked to issues of how to *act* or what consequences to produce. Nussbaum is adamant about this, repeating several times that if Adam's reflections were to take a different route, then Maggie's departure would necessarily have taken on an entirely different significance. It would, in Nussbaum's view, not have given rise to the unshakable foundation it produces for their future relationship with each other, with themselves, and with those around them. Adam's challenge, she argues, is simply too complicated for these sorts of reflective procedures.⁸⁰ In this regard, for Nussbaum, Adam's options are extremely limited. So how, under these constraints, does Adam meet this seemingly impossible challenge of finding the *right* way of seeing, feeling, and speaking? Nussbaum's answer is this: Adam bridges the distance between himself and Maggie in one giant leap, by flying, as it were, directly in the face of Zeno's rationalistic paradoxes.

By claiming that Adam's achievement bears a stronger resemblance to a lightning strike than it does to a calculated conclusion, we risk giving the

impression that his sense of morality is purely intuitive and thus unexplainable. To avoid this impression, we need to look closely at what Adam sees and feels, and to ask ourselves what sort of sensibilities enable him to adopt this form of response. Having said this, however, we must still proceed very carefully, because there is a tremendous risk of dissecting what cannot be put back together. Fortunately, James and Nussbaum both provide us with the subtle terms with which to accomplish this delicate task.

Nussbaum claims that for Adam to do what he does, he must arrive at a detailed vision of their world and of their identities – of what Heidegger calls their *being-in-the-world*⁸¹ – which places both of their lives, in all of their past, present, and future forms, into a finely detailed, yet solid balance. This complex *temporal* or *narrative* vision must, in accordance with the normative criteria for perceptive equilibrium outlined above, be oriented towards finding their best possibilities, and can only be authenticated when the widest array of the most salient details are held in balance. For Adam, this point of equilibrium is consummated in the image of Maggie as a person who is “moving and alive, swimming freely in the sea.”

The significance of this image, which Nussbaum characterizes as an “act of imaginative interpretation,”⁸² needs to be appreciated. According to Nussbaum, contained within this beautifully simple image is a new holistic vision of their best possibilities (Maggie’s as well as Adam’s). This vision is clearly a remarkable exercise of imagination. This is straightforward enough. But it is also, according to Nussbaum, an act of imagination which gets down

to what is *real*. In other words, in addition to the overtly *projective* element of Adam's vision, there is also an element which *corrects* his pre-understanding of their lives. To appreciate this realistic sense of imagination, recall that Adam was initially inclined to perceive Maggie as a "statue," or as a personal possession. This image colored his picture of their lives, leading him to feel as though they were adrift at sea in a boat together, surrounded by danger on all sides. This initial image of their father-daughter relationship is what, in effect, constitutes the background against which his new vision of her as a sea creature gains its coherence. Thus, by capturing all at once his acceptance of Maggie's autonomy, his fear of leaving her to face the perils of life, and his anxiety over being left alone in the boat with no one left to protect, this striking image reveals in a single movement Adam's habitual distortion of their lives – what was referred to above as *a refusal of vision*. The imaginative power of this image, in other words, lies in its ability to unconceal⁶³ Adam's refusal to accept Maggie's involvement in an adventure separate from (but still intimately linked to) his own. Through this image, Adam succeeds in completely uprooting his inclination to read her past, present, and future as having meaning only in strict reference to the terms of his own existence.

This captures what Nussbaum thinks is so special about the richly lyrical imagery through which Maggie and Adam's relationship is reconceived. Via this imagery, Adam grasps the re-shaping of their world which their conflict of interest *forces* upon them. In this way, this image does

not strike Adam as some detached vision of sublimity. Rather, it is admitted openly along with all of its immensely tragic consequences. For Nussbaum, Adam's appreciation of Maggie's future simultaneously forces him to confront his own fragility (e.g., his selfish desire to keep her), and, in the bigger picture, to face his own death. In other words, Adam's fullest sense of Maggie's life is permitted to flourish only through an awakening of his sense of their respective finitude and frailty, and through a confrontation with his own deepest anxieties about death. For Nussbaum, this *sense of life* that is also a tragic *sense of death* defines their inner movements:

her acceptance of the death of her own childhood and an all-enveloping love (her movement out of Eden into the place of birth and death); his acceptance of a life that will be from now on, without her, a place of death. She, bearing the guilt that her birth as a woman has killed him; he, "offering himself, pressing himself upon her, as a sacrifice..." (II.269)⁸⁴

It is this resolutely tragic (i.e., not stoic) dimension of Adam's sacrifice which enables Maggie – and us with her – to recognize the authenticity of his achievement. Thanks to the overt effects of Adam's holistic vision on his entire demeanor and manner of expression, Maggie is able to make her decision with the knowledge that he has faced up to the deepest of truths, and that he has fully internalized (though not without substantial fear and trembling) his need to cope with them.

James' description of Adam and Maggie's ethical achievement thus captures both the *creative* nature of ethical reflection, as well as its *perceptive* and *responsive* aspects. And while for many critical thinkers these two sets of qualities may still appear as contrasts, this is resolutely not

the case for Nussbaum and James. For them, when Adam exercises his imagination in picturing Maggie as a “sea creature,” he is not merely daydreaming, he is instead capturing as best he can the widest number of the most important aspects of their lives. Thus:

To perceive her as a sea creature, in just this way, is precisely, to know her, to know their situation, not to miss anything in it – to be, in short, “a person on whom *nothing is lost*.” Moral knowledge, James suggests, is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. *It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.* To know Maggie is to see and feel her separateness, her felicity; to recognize all this is to miss least of all. If he had grasped the same general facts without these responses and these images, in all their specificity, he would not really have known her.⁸⁵

In this passage we have before us, at last, the explicit phenomenological and ethical links which, through Nussbaum’s writings, I have been trying to establish between objectivity and contextuality, ethical knowledge and existential embodiment, and perception and imagination. We are now in a position to fully refine them.

Conclusion

To complete the reversal of our everyday rationalistic ontology, which has been the primary goal of this essay and which I suspect may still appear to be counter-intuitive to many, we need to get a better grip on why Nussbaum calls the goal of her ethical approach “perceptive” equilibrium. Could she not, one may ask, have simply modified John Rawls’ notion of “reflective” equilibrium, calling it instead “wide” or “extended” reflective equilibrium as some have suggested?⁸⁶ Or if these terms are not startling

enough, could she not have contented herself with “discursive” equilibrium, or perhaps “narrative” equilibrium instead?

My response to these suggestions, as I imagine Nussbaum’s would be as well, is unequivocally “no.” To appreciate why this is so, some of the confusion needs to be dispelled surrounding *what exactly* is being brought into equilibrium. Nussbaum’s description of what happens toward the conclusion of Adam’s conversation with Maggie can help in this regard:

We see them drawing close in understanding by seeing where they come to share the same pictures. When we hear of “the act of their crossing the bar” and their “having had to beat against the wind”, we discover all at once that we cannot say whose image for their situation this is. We can only say that it belongs to both of them: each inhabits, from his or her own point of view, the world of the same picture. “It was as if she had gotten over first and were pausing for her consort to follow.” The paragraph melds their two consciousnesses and two viewpoints – not by confounding their separateness, for they see each other, within the picture, as distinct individuals, but by showing the extent to which fine attention to another can make two separate people inhabit the same created world – until, at the end, they even share descriptive language: [Thus James writes] “At the end of another minute, he found their word.”⁸⁷

As I see it, there are two ways of interpreting this passage. I will begin with what I take to be the more narrowly inter-subjective interpretation.

There is a strong sense in which the balance involved in gaining perceptive equilibrium is a discursive balance, a balance between perspectives, opinions, or ethical beliefs. On this interpretation, the opinions of Adam and Maggie are balanced by finding a third position which both can agree upon. The equilibrium is, in this case, a balance between understandings in which there is no need for epistemic conditions to be met. There are only pragmatic considerations at stake, which, once resolved, bring us to what Nussbaum has been calling the point of perceptive

equilibrium. The equilibrium here is essentially a sort of synthesis of two viewpoints which, at base, takes place within a specific language-game. Thus, drawing on the final lines of Nussbaum's description, this interpretation would hold that the attunement of perceptive equilibrium is first and foremost an attunement of language and understanding.

It should be granted that at certain times Nussbaum appears encourage this interpretation. This is especially evident when she acknowledges, in response to Hilary Putnam's objections⁸⁸, that at base our perceptions "perch on the heads of our standing terms, they do not displace them,"⁸⁹ or when she draws an analogy between jazz improvisation and moral improvisation⁹⁰, or when she admits that

In seeing and hearing we are, I believe, seeing not the world as it is in itself, apart from human beings and human conceptual schemes, but a world already interpreted and humanized by our faculties and our concepts.⁹¹

These passages indeed appear to support the former interpretation.

But the problem with this interpretation is that the "perceptive" element of perceptive equilibrium is described as solely a *consequence* of the said attunement, as opposed to a primary *cause* of it. In other words, on this view, this balance is characterized as 'perceptive' only in the sense that by reaching the subjects in question are altered deeply, changing even what they perceive. This reading, while certainly accommodating one of Nussbaum's fundamental claims, does not do justice to the depth of her account. In particular, it ignores the depth of her critique of rationalism.

To appreciate these depths, consider how Nussbaum qualifies her

stance on rules and conventions:

Perception is still, however, prior. [...] The "basis" [of perceptive equilibrium] itself is not a rule but a concrete way of seeing a concrete case. [...] Perception seems to be prior even in time; it motivates and sustains the whole enterprise of living by a shared general picture.⁹²

In shifting our reflective focus from "rules" or "beliefs" to "pictures," Nussbaum is clearly encouraging a more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon of interpersonal attunement, one which takes the "perceptive" aspect of the achievement very seriously. Based on Nussbaum's description, Adam's discovery of a common picture is what *gives rise* to the discovery of common language, not vice versa. Thus, for Nussbaum the achievement of perceptive equilibrium is less of an interpersonal and dialogical affair than it is a *self-reflective* one. In other words, this achievement is a critical activity taken up by Adam in the context of his own inner life, in critical dialogue with his feelings and with his rationalizations through which these feelings were distorted. The attunement Nussbaum describes is thus the outcome of Adam's realization that his *refusal* to let Maggie live the life she deserved to live was essentially a refusal to see the beauty in her past, present, and future life – a life which, deep down, *as her caretaker*, he actually wanted her to live. Perceptive equilibrium is, in this way, as much reflection *about* our language-games as it is reflection *through* them.

With this in mind, we can hopefully understand why Nussbaum's decision to modify Rawls' terminology is by no means simply a question of rhetorical effect. By doing so, Nussbaum shifts the reflective ground from under our feet, taking the critical focus away from our overt beliefs, and

turning it loose on our intentions, dispositions, emotions, and descriptive conventions in an effort to reveal (or un-conceal) the manner in which these distinctly human phenomena shape, for better or worse, the detailed perception of life. Ethical reflection is thus, for Nussbaum, an attempt to grasp that which makes our ethical language-games coherent. It is an attempt to reveal what I have, following Taylor, called the *conditions of the intelligibility* of these language-games, to reveal the embodied “pre-understanding” within which they are deemed to make sense, and to hold it up against the facts of the matter.

In this way, Nussbaum and Taylor do not want to do away with the entire Enlightenment tradition. Like Descartes, they want to retain the notion that behind our beliefs there works a certain logic. But against Descartes, they do not want to portray this logic as either a purely mental or physical affair. Rather, they want to show us that behind our beliefs there resides an *embodied logic*, an *ontology*, or what we have been calling a *sense of life*. And because our ethical language-games claim to guide us to the most salient aspects of our lives, they can be measured for honesty and accuracy against the phenomenological and existential facts of human existence. This measuring of honesty and accuracy is simultaneously an ethical and phenomenological affair in which there remains, because of its specificity, a robust sense of objectivity. Thus Nussbaum writes:

This ideal [of perceptive equilibrium] makes room, then, for a norm or norms of rightness and for a substantial account of ethical objectivity. The objectivity in question is “internal” and human. It does not even attempt to approach the world as it might be in itself, uninterpreted, unhumanized. Its

raw material is the history of human social experience, which is already an interpretation and a measure. But it is objectivity all the same.⁹³

CONCLUSION:

Embodied Literature and Teaching Ethics

At the outset of my essay my arguments were framed as a critique of the relativism implicit in popular interpretations of the pluralist approach in the humanities. Now that the outlines have been drawn for a post-metaphysical brand of ethical realism, something should be said about the immediate impact this perspective can make on how we sensitize our children and young adults to the good life.

Throughout the essays in *Love's Knowledge*, and in her later book *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum urges us to acknowledge the invaluable contribution made by narrative literature in the exploration of the nature, limits, and proper "methods" of critical social discourse. In particular, she encourages us to turn to works like James' *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors*, and Dickens' *Hard Times* for guidance at both the ethical and metaethical levels. As I see it, her reasons for drawing these conclusions can be captured by three insights, each focusing in greater depth on the role which these works of literature can play in our humanities courses.

The first distinguishing mark of the novel lies in the patience and attention it demands of the reader. To read well, one must have a certain demeanor and focus. In a sense, this is not so much a feature that distinguishes the novel from other forms of literature (i.e., everything from newspaper articles to poetry), but rather what distinguishes it from other

media of communication like television or film. The latter media, at least in their most popular forms, barely break the surface of our already visually oriented sense of life. In a sense, they feed the most impressionable of our five senses, the one most susceptible to level down qualitative differences. But the activity of reading, even in its minimally complex forms, always demands a certain kind of attention to discourse, an attention which in itself seems to prime us for the challenge of becoming attuned to our everydayness.

But beyond this first, very general claim about the importance of reading, Nussbaum also wants us to appreciate that above all forms of literature, the novel demands a *special kind of attention*, one which is not only analogous to moral attention, but which is in many ways *identical* to it. This alleged ability of the novel to *elicit* moral attention is, for Nussbaum, grounded in the very structure of the novel. Firstly, novels are stories with human characters and a plot which takes them on a journey from one point to another, transforming them – and often us with them – along the way. Novels are, in this way, built on the holistic aspects of everyday life, and on the presupposition that people change over time and through a variety of experiences. They are committed to treating people, for the most part, as *people* – not as the faceless units of the rationalist's reductive imagination, but as social animals involved in interpersonal, perceptual, and emotional struggles. In Nussbaum's words:

[The] story puts before us characters – men and women in some ways like ourselves. It represents these characters as very distinct one from another,

endowing them with physical and moral attributes that make it possible for us to distinguish every one from every other. We are made to attend to their ways of moving and talking, the shapes of their bodies, the expressions on their faces, the sentiments of their hearts. The inner life of each is displayed as having psychological depth and complexity. We see that as humans they share certain common problems and common hopes – and yet, as well, that each confronts these in his or her own way, in his or her concrete circumstances with the resources of his or her history. Even the [utilitarian characters in Dickens' *Hard Times*] are completely human figures, for their abstract philosophy emerges from an inner world with which it is not always – as we have begun to see – in harmony. We see the novel's abstract deliberations, then, as issuing in each case from a concrete human life, and as expressing only a part of that life's inner richness.⁹⁴

And although we tend to take for granted these holistic features of the novel, our ability to attend to them in all their depth and complexity is nothing short of remarkable. Given the infinite array of linguistic maneuvers all in play, without warning, in the text, one may wonder how is it possible for us to follow such a complex series of markings. To an alien life form (or to the atomistic empiricist) this activity must appear as a sort of miracle. But it isn't. Although infinitely complex and open-ended, the discourse found in the novel is, in fact, something with which we, as socialized human beings, are already fully in tune with, something with which are accustomed to *dwelling in*.

Novels literally speak the language of everyday human life. In James' words, the terms of the novel are "at all times the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought."⁹⁵ Or equivalently, in Heidegger's famous words, "We do not speak language, language speaks us." This is why novels can so often draw us under their spell, luring us again and again into their narrative web (often leaving us unable to escape). Novels set-up and set-forth worlds as *worlds* – not as mere constructs.⁹⁶ They are thus simultaneously *imaginative* and *responsive*.

These insights into the inner dynamic of the novel are what lead Nussbaum to push the link between moral and aesthetic attention beyond the level of analogy. Commenting on passages from James' *The Art of the Novel*⁹⁷, she writes:

"Participators by a fond attention" (AN 62) in the lives and dilemmas of [the narrative's] participants, we engage with them in a loving scrutiny of appearances. We actively care for their particularity, and we strain to be people on whom none of their subtleties are lost, in intellect and feeling. So if James is right about what moral attention is, then he can fairly claim that a novel such as this one not only shows it better than an abstract treatise, it also elicits it. It calls forth our "active sense of life," which is our moral faculty. The characters' "emotions, their stirred intelligence, their moral consciousness, become thus, by sufficiently charmed perusal, our own very adventure" (AN 70). By identifying with them and allowing ourselves to be surprised (an attitude of mind that storytelling fosters and develops), we become more responsive to our own life's adventure, more willing to see and to be touched by life.⁹⁸

The third and final feature of Nussbaum's defense of the novel is related to her praise of not only novels in general, but of the works of James and Dickens in particular. To appreciate this no doubt contentious claim, consider the following objection to which Nussbaum responds in "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible":

But surely, we object, a person who is obtuse in life will also be an obtuse reader of [novels]. How can literature show us or train us in anything, when, as we have said, the very moral abilities that make for good reading are the ones that are allegedly in need of development?⁹⁹

Nussbaum responds to this question by emphasizing that the novel affords these immoderate individuals just the right amount of detachment needed to immerse themselves within its embodied narrative. Thus,

A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life. We find here love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic.¹⁰⁰

This is perhaps the quickest way to dispel the concerns expressed by the

objection. But despite the efficacy of this response, I think Nussbaum here misses a golden opportunity to explain the special power of the works of James and Dickens.

In my opinion, what truly distinguishes the novels of James and Dickens from most other novels is the way their narratives are explicitly oriented towards questions of how to be more perceptive as readers of novels and as readers of life. We have already witnessed this perennial feature of their narratives in the way the moral development of their protagonists is painted against the background of intellectualistic characters like Mrs. Newsome and Mr. Gradgrind. This same sort of antagonist also emerges preeminently in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, where from the outset of the novel we witness David's affectionate and naturally inquisitive demeanor being nearly destroyed by his step-father Mr. Murdstone and his wicked sister (both of whom are ultimately responsible for the death of David's mother and her newborn). We see how David's keen willingness and ability to read and learn are slowly dulled by the relentless pressure of these figures on him to absorb the knowledge they feed him. This slow death is especially glaring in David's descriptions of the examinations he is forced to endure day after day:

I hand the book to my mother. Perhaps it is grammar, perhaps a history, or geography. I take a last dawning look at the page as I give it into her hand, and start off aloud at a racing pace while I have got it fresh. I trip over a word. Mr. Murdstone looks up. I trip over another word. Miss Murdstone looks up. I redden, tumble over half a dozen words, and stop. I think my mother would show me the book if she dared, but she does not dare, and she says softly:
'Oh Davy, Davy!'
'Now, Clara,' says Mr. Murdstone, 'be firm with the boy. Don't say "Oh, Davy, Davy!" That's childish. He knows his lesson, or he does not know it.'
'He does *not* know it,' Miss Murdstone interposes awfully.

'I am really afraid he does not,' says my mother.
'Then you see, Clara,' returns Miss Murdstone, 'you should just give him the book back, and make him know it.'
'Yes, certainly,' says my mother; 'this is what I intend to do, my dear Jane. Now, Davy, try once more, and don't be stupid.'
I obey the first clause of the injunction by trying once more, but am not so successful with the second, for I am very stupid.¹⁰¹

This same account of the simultaneous extinction of our perceptive and literary abilities emerges frequently in James' short stories. In *The Author of Beltraffio* we read about how the puritanical wife of the protagonist kills their only son out of an unrelenting fear of the impact her husband's literary sensibilities may have on him. This theme also emerges in *The Beast in the Jungle*¹⁰². Written in the same period as *The Ambassadors*, in this short novel we witness how the protagonist's deeply held conviction in some source of meaning beyond the immediate context of his life literally blinds him to the immense meaning his life already contained, leading ultimately to his mental and emotional devastation.

Each of these stories in their own way reveal with remarkable clarity the nihilistic and self-fulfilling prophecies of the rationalistic, mystical, and non-discursive senses of life, prophecies which lead to our inability to perceive the details that constitute our most robust accounts of human potential. So, in response to the objection considered above, we should say that the remarkable power of these works lies in their ability to teach us how to be more attentive to the details which constitute our *embodied narratives*, both actual and fictional. We should say that reading these novels is *in itself* an exercise in self-reflection. We should say that our encounters with novels are as close as we can get to actual encounters with other people and

cultures. And in saying all this, we should conclude that if we are to teach properly in the humanities, these works (and others which seek to highlight the significance of our *being-in-the-world*¹⁰³) must constitute the central texts in our courses, instead of simply adornments to the theoretical treatises of Mill and Kant.¹⁰⁴

[NOTES]

¹ From Neil Young's *Decade*, Warner Bros. Records, 1977. Song published by Silver Fiddle – BMI. Note that as presented the lyrics are not complete.

² I say “in some sense legitimate” because I think this is precisely where the call to de-colonize the lifeworld has lost much of its focus. I will spell this out further in what follows.

³ These examples are from the Winter 1999 course schedule of the Humanities Department of Dawson College in Montreal, Quebec.

⁴ I will use these two terms interchangeably throughout my essay. It is imperative to note from the outset that the critique of “intellectualism” or “rationalism” I will offer here does not encourage anything like a *mystical, irrational or non-rational* interpretation of the phenomenon of moral justification. Quite the contrary, my argument is that these rationalistic conceptions of ethical justification distort the salient features of rational ethical discourse, thus leading to what can only be ironically called an irrational sense of moral coherence.

⁵ This phrase is borrowed from Martha Nussbaum, who uses it throughout her essays in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. This notion will play a pivotal role in my essay as well.

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.5. Nussbaum refers to more contemporary discussions of this topic in her footnote to this passage.

⁷ Throughout this essay I will refer to our “everyday” manner of speaking, behaving, perceiving, etc. This expression, which means just what it says, is borrowed from Martin Heidegger's existential analytic in *Being and Time*, and is the translator's word for the German word *alltäglich*. At times, I will also refer to our “everydayness” (*alltäglichkeit*). This is also borrowed from Heidegger's text.

⁸ These notions are all discussed at length in Taylor's essays “Lichtung and Lebensform”, “To Follow a Rule”, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments,” and “Overcoming Epistemology” in *Philosophical Arguments*.

⁹ The seemingly innocent expression “seeing as” is one which will be lurking in the background of this entire essay. It captures the interdependence of perception and imagination that needs to be recognized if we are to shed the atomistic, positivistic, and scientific impulses which have, in my opinion, so strongly corrupted our popular understanding of what human opinions are. For a foundational discussion of this notion, see Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, pp.193-208.

¹⁰ In what follows I will focus mainly on differences of ethical judgment. This however, should not detract from the fact that the critique I will offer applies to all questions of judgment. I have chosen to focus on questions of ethical judgment because they supply us with paradigm cases of protracted differences of opinion. I could, however, have chosen to use political or even aesthetic differences of opinion to demonstrate many of the points I will make here.

¹¹ P.F. Strawson, “Perception and Its Objects,” *Perception and Identity; Essays presented to A.J. Ayer and his replies*, p.59.

¹² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp.190-191.

¹³ There are, of course, some exceptions to the conventions I have laid out. For example, it is not unusual to speak of someone “believing in the possibility of rain” or “believing in the luck of the draw.” Note, however, that even these exceptions retain the notion that the phrase “believing in...” should be reserved for referring to the class of essentially speculative matters within which normative questions are typically considered a founding member.

¹⁴ This “fight or flight” response captures the only notable difference between absolutism and relativism. It is interesting to note at this point that these two types of responses to

threatening stimuli are central to behavioristic theories in psychology and cognitive science. With this in mind, we can hopefully see how behaviorism in all of its forms shares the assumptions of our everyday approach to ethical conflict.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, IIx, p.192e.

¹⁶ From Taylor's essay "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein" in his *Philosophical Arguments*, p.64.

¹⁷ My inclusion of Hume in this group may trigger some opposition, given that Hume was instrumental in creating a space for ethical reflection beyond empiricism and the skepticism that he recognized it leading to. I do so because his moral sense theory still bears most if not all of the marks that I will spell out as definitive of the intellectualistic attitude, in particular the implication that reason and emotion are essentially different faculties.

¹⁸ This distinction between facts and values is what led G.E. Moore to describe "good" as a "non-natural property" and what led him to formulate a kind of moral intuitionism. It is also what has encouraged those who refuted the coherence of such notions to develop their naturalistic accounts.

¹⁹ Although I have already used this expression "form of life" several times in my essay, from this point forward my usage and references to it will have in mind the term popularized by Wittgenstein.

²⁰ See Taylor's essays "Lichtung and Lebensform", "To Follow a Rule", and "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments." in *Philosophical Arguments*. In the latter essay, Taylor offers an especially insightful account of how conditions of intelligibility have been interpreted from Descartes onwards.

²¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, remarks #217 and 219, p.85e.

²² Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, p.167-8.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.63.

²⁴ In "Pragmatism as Anti-Representationalism" from *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson*, p.3.

²⁵ Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, p.xlii.

²⁶ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, p.367-381.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.380.

²⁸ Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, p.168.

²⁹ From "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible": Literature and the Moral Imagination" in Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.148.

³⁰ From the Genesis album *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, Hit & Run Music (Publishing) Ltd. (PRS), adm. by WB MusicCorp., ASCAP, 1974.

³¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, remark #587, p.154e.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ I have hyphenated this term to distance it from our popular interpretations of the phenomenon of personality, but also to emphasize that at its root our accounts of personality necessarily include an account of what persons are (not just what they appear to be). This strategy of hyphenating words, which is apparent throughout Heidegger's works, serves the purpose of revealing the ontological commitments implicit in our words and in our discourse as a whole. This also demonstrates and partially explains Heidegger's affinity for etymological analyses.

³⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.151-2.

³⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, remark #575, p.152e.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, remark #574, p.152e.

³⁷ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division 1, Chapter 4, especially section 27. This chapter describes many powerful aspects of the author of our everyday discourse which Nussbaum's descriptions do not capture, and vice versa. The reason for this difference is mainly due to the fact that Heidegger does not limit himself to ethical discourse. There is, however, reason to believe that given the importance of "being-with Others" for Heidegger, that he would be very sympathetic to Nussbaum's narrower ethical focus as a starting-point for coming to terms with the pitfalls of human reflection. For Heidegger's discussion of

Being-with Others see *Ibid.*, pp.154-156.

³⁸ For the complete discussion of Mrs. Newsome see Nussbaum's "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory" in *Love's Knowledge*, pp.176-179.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.176

⁴⁰ This connection between a moralizing and mathematizing gaze is brought out in Nussbaum's discussion of another intellectualistic character, Mr. Gradgrind from Dicken's *Hard Times*. See chapter 2 of Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*.

⁴¹ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp.176-7. The references to James' *The Ambassadors* are from the New York Edition, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907-9, Vol. I.50. All of Nussbaum's page references are to this two volume edition.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.177.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.176.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that these very same basic psychological insights run headlong into opposition from those who defend the application of the death penalty regardless of the state of the wrongdoer prior, during, or after the crime. Justice is, for these people, in every respect *timeless*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.177-178.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, p.20-21.

⁴⁸ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 177.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.177.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, p.65.

⁵¹ I say aspects of Foucault, Derrida, MacIntyre, and Rorty because I do not want to paint either side with brush strokes that are too broad. What is important is that there are many occasions when these thinkers speak in this way. Of course, they also often say things that prove to run against this intellectualistic tendency. However, I think they do so without realizing the contradiction between what they say and the meta-narrative they weave to articulate the wider implications of their writing. Of course, refinements on both sides help in tempering the effects of these intellectualistic or skeptical tendencies. However, there is evidence that this intellectualistic picture of the knowing agent still holds some sway. For example, see Charles Taylor's essays "Sense-Data Revisited" in *Perception and Identity: Essays Presented to A.J. Ayer and his Replies*, and his "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition" in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) where Taylor argues that the Cartesian conception of knowledge still has a formative influence on the efforts of modernists to overcome metaphysics.

⁵² From "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," in *Political Theory*, Vol.20 No.2,(May 1992), p.213.

⁵³ "Transcending Humanity" is an essay included in *Love's Knowledge*.

⁵⁴ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.372.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p.365.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.373.

⁵⁷ The only exception to the ethical disengagement of the gods arises when they become attached to human beings, as they so often did.

⁵⁸ See Kant's essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Reasons"

⁵⁹ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York, 1985).

⁶⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.238-9.

⁶¹ From "Ice Cream" on Sarah McLaughlin's album *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* (Network Productions, 1993).

⁶² Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp.148-167.

⁶³ This is an expression used by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* to describe the detrimental effects of public modes of discourse on our ability to acknowledge and discuss intimately contextual and embodied concerns. See his discussions of "the they" [*das Man*] in Division 1, chapter 4.

⁶⁴ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.182.

⁶⁵ Nussbaum's characterization of the goal of moral reasoning as "perceptive equilibrium" is intended to contrast with John Rawls's account of "reflective equilibrium" in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1971). While she notes that Rawls's account professes a strong affinity to an Aristotelian approach, Nussbaum argues that his conception of rational judgment is still colored by an intellectualist attitude. In particular, she highlights Rawls's mistrust of judgments "made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence" and "those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain one way or another..." Above all, Nussbaum disputes the claim that by excluding these judgments, we will obtain the conditions "in which our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion." These passages are quoted by Nussbaum from *A Theory of Justice*, pp.47-48. Her commentary on these passages is on pp.172-176 in *Love's Knowledge*.

⁶⁶ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.183.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.174, my italics.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁶⁹ This project is also occasionally referred to as a "fundamental ontology." This description, whose use no doubt scandalizes Heidegger's entire project for many, is I believe an accurate one if we recognize that it is not itself a reifying conception. Rather, it claims to be 'fundamental' in so far as it lays bare the existential and phenomenal background for our reifying activities.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.170.

⁷¹ Nussbaum discusses this situation extensively in "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible". The textual references to James's work are taken from the New York edition (New York, 1909). From the outset some may be tempted to dismiss Nussbaum's example as too extreme. In her defense (and mine), it should be noted that it is useful because it describes an interaction which would be completely distorted within the limits of our traditional ethical perspective. In fact, in the way she describes it, this interaction would likely be dismissed by most traditional moral theories as virtually impossible. For Nussbaum, because of its specificity, it is a paradigmatic example of a genuine ethical achievement.

⁷² Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.153

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁷⁵ From William James' essay "The Will to Believe."

⁷⁶ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.174.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.151.

⁷⁹ This anti-utilitarian stance emerges most forcefully in Nussbaum's discussions of the "noncommensurability" of human values. She writes: "For the agent for whom "nothing will ever come to the same thing as anything else," there are few easy trade-offs, and many choices will have a tragic dimension. The choice between \$50 and \$200, when one cannot have both, is not terribly wrenching: what one forgoes is simply a different quantity of what one also gets. The choice between two qualitatively different actions or commitments, when on account of circumstances one cannot pursue both, is or can be tragic – in part because the item forgone is not the same as the item attained." (*Ibid.*, p.37) On this subject see "Discernment" and "Plato on Commensurability" in *Love's Knowledge*.

⁸⁰ Note that Nussbaum does not hesitate to grant that "duties" and other "standing obligations" can play a part in this dynamic. But, in contrast to the traditional paradigm, she conceives them as tools we use to orient ourselves towards our pre-engagement with life. These duties and obligations do not, in other words, constitute our sense of life.

⁸¹ This notion is used throughout Heidegger's works. In particular, it is the primary subject of his existential analysis of Dasein in Division 1 of *Being and Time*.

⁸² Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.152.

⁸³ This notion of "un-concealment" is central to Heidegger's conception of truth as *aletheia*.

For Heidegger, truth is essentially a clearing [Lichtung] in which the distortions of our surroundings are uncovered. See especially pp.262-273 of *Being and Time*, and his essays "The Origin of the Work of Art" (esp. pp.175-182) and "The Essence of Truth" in his *Basic Writings*, ed., David Farrell Krell (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.: 1993).

⁸⁴ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.149.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.152, my italics.

⁸⁶ For instance Norman Daniels, Kai Nielsen, and Henry Richardson. I am grateful to Prof. Nielsen for suggesting that I explore this line of inquiry.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.153.

⁸⁸ Hilary Putnam, "Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum," *New Literary History* 15 (1983), pp.193-200.

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.155.

⁹⁰ See *Ibid.*, pp.155-156. The power of this analogy is to emphasize that the jazz musician, like the moral agent, plays without a detailed score and without a conductor on which to focus. Her point is that both individuals must focus instead on responding with sensitivity to their fellow cohorts and to the conditions of intelligibility which constitute the background of their interaction. To do this they must respond to concrete realities, both actual and possible. Thus, bringing us back to the objectivity she believes is possible in the aesthetic and moral spheres, she writes: "artists, as James sees it, are not free simply to create anything they like. Their obligation is to render reality, precisely and faithfully; in this task they are very much assisted by general principles and by the habits and attachments that are their internalization." I think this analogy is good for some purposes (e.g., for emphasizing sensitivity, responsiveness to the other, creativity) but that it is poor for others (e.g., for emphasizing the challenge of clearing away perceptual distortions).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.164.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.160.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.164.

⁹⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, pp.27-28.

⁹⁵ Nussbaum quotes this passage from p.49 of vol.II of James' *The Ambassadors* in "Perceptive Equilibrium" from *Love's Knowledge*, p.168.

⁹⁶ This notion of the work of art setting-up and setting-forth a world is borrowed from Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," esp. pp.170-172 in his *Basic Writings*.

⁹⁷ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York, 1907).

⁹⁸ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p.162. The references in brackets are to James' work.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p.48.

¹⁰² Both of these short novels can be found in Philip Rahv, *The Great Short Novels of Henry James*. Rahv also contributes an excellent introduction to this collection.

¹⁰³ In this group I have in mind the texts of Taylor, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein which I have cited throughout my essay – texts which may be categorized as *phenomenological texts*.

These texts would no doubt be especially useful in philosophy courses, but they could also add significantly to courses in other disciplines (as indeed they already have).

¹⁰⁴ I am indebted to Kai Nielsen for his comments on previous versions of this paper.

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