CHAPTER 8

Knowledge, Science, Convergence

So far I have not said much about objectivity, though earlier chapters have had a good deal to do with it. If an Archimedean point could be found and practical reason, or human interests, could be shown to involve a determinate ethical outlook, then ethical thought would be objective, in the sense that it would have been given an objective foundation. Those are possibilities—or they might have turned out to be possibilities—within the perspective of practical reason. Very often, however, discussions of objectivity come into moral philosophy from a different starting point, from an interest in comparing ethical beliefs with knowledge and claims to truth of other kinds, for instance with scientific beliefs. Here a rather different conception of objectivity is involved. It is naturally associated with such questions as what can make ethical beliefs true, and whether there is any ethical knowledge. It is in this field of comparisons that various distinctions between fact and value are located.

Discussions of objectivity often start from considerations about disagreement. This makes it seem as if disagreement were surprising, but there is no reason why that should be so (the earliest thinkers in the Western tradition found conflict at least as obvious a feature of the world as concord). The interest in disagreement comes about, rather, because neither agreement nor disagreement is

universal. It is not that disagreement needs explanation and agreement does not, but that in different contexts disagreement requires different sorts of explanation, and so does agreement.

The way in which we understand a given kind of disagreement, and explain it, has important practical effects. It can modify our attitude to others and our understanding of our own outlook. In relation to other people, we need a view of what is to be opposed, rejected, and so forth, and in what spirit; for ourselves, disagreement can raise a warning that we may be wrong, and if truth of correctness is what we are after, we may need to reform our strategies.

Disagreement does not necessarily have to be overcome. It may remain an important and constitutive feature of our relations to others, and also be seen as something that is merely to be expected in the light of the best explanations we have of how such disagreement arises. There can be tension involved here, if we at once feel that the disagreement is about very important matters and that there is a good explanation of why the disagreement is only to be expected. The tension is specially acute when the disagreement is not only important but expresses itself in judgments that seem to demand assent from others. (As we shall see in the next chapter, there is a special problem for relativism, of trying to understand our outlook in a way that will accommodate both sides of the tension.)

Among types of disagreement, and the lessons that can be learned from them, there is a well-known polarity. At one extreme there is the situation of two children wanting one bun or two heroes wanting one slave girl. The disagreement is practical, and its explanation is not going to cast much doubt on the cognitive powers of the people involved. It may be said that this kind of case is so primitively practical that it hardly even introduces any judgment over which there is disagreement. Even at the most primitive level, of course, there is disagreement about *what is to be done*, but this is so near to desire and action that no one is going to think that the disagreement shows any failure of knowledge or understanding. It is simply that two people want incompatible things. But the conflict may well not remain as blank as that, and if the parties want to settle it by ordered speech rather than by violence, they will invoke

more substantive judgments, usually of justice, and the children will talk about fairness or the heroes about precedence.

In their most basic form, at least, these disagreements need not make anyone think that someone has failed to recognize or understand something, or that they cannot speak the language. At the opposite pole of the traditional contrast are disagreements that do make one think this. What these typically are depends on the theory of knowledge favored by the commentator, but they often involve the observation under standard conditions of what the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin used to called "middle-sized dry goods." An important feature of these examples is that the parties are assumed to share the same concepts and to be trained in the recognition of furniture, pens, pennies, or whatever.

Around these paradigms there have been formed various oppositions: between practical and theoretical, or value and fact, or *ought* and *is*. Each of these has been thought to represent a fundamental difference in what disagreement means, and they are often taken to suggest contrasting hopes for resolving it. But it is a mistake to suppose that these oppositions are different ways of representing just one distinction. Indeed, the two examples I have mentioned significantly fail to correspond to the two ends of any one of these contrasts. The quarrel about the allocation of a good is certainly an example of the practical, but until one gets to the stage of taking seriously the claims of justice, it is not yet a disagreement about value. A disagreement in the perception of furniture is without doubt a disagreement about a matter of fact, but is not yet a disagreement about what is most often contrasted with the practical, namely the theoretical. To assemble these kinds of example into some one contrast requires more work. It has been done, characteristically, by reducing the evaluative to the practical and extending the factual to the theoretical. Both these maneuvers are of positivist inspiration, and they are both suspect. It is not surprising that some philosophers now doubt whether there is any basic distinction at all that can be constructed to the traditional pattern.[1]

I accept that there is no one distinction in question here. I also accept that the more positivistic formulations that have gone into defining each side of such a distinction are misguided. Still I be-

live that in relation to ethics there is a genuine and profound difference to be found, and also—it is a further point—that the difference is enough to motivate some version of the feeling (itself recurrent, if not exactly traditional) that science has some chance of being more or less what it seems, a systematized theoretical account of how the world really is, while ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems. The tradition is right, moreover, not only in thinking that there is such a distinction, but also in thinking that we can come to understand what it is through understanding disagreement. However, it is not a question of how much disagreement there is, or even of what methods we have to settle disagreement, though that of course provides many relevant considerations. The basic difference lies rather in our reflective understanding of the best hopes we could coherently entertain for eliminating disagreement in the two areas. It is a matter of what, under the most favorable conditions, would be the best explanation of the end of disagreement: the explanation—as I shall say from now on—of convergence.

The fundamental difference lies between the ethical and the scientific. I hope to explain why one end of the contrast should be labeled "the scientific" rather than, say, "the factual." The other end is labeled "the ethical" because the ethical is what we are considering, and it would require a good deal of discussion either to extend the field or to narrow it. It is not called "the evaluative" because that additionally covers at least the area of aesthetic judgment, which raises many questions of its own. It is not called "the normative," a term that covers only part of the interest of the ethical (roughly, the part concerned with rules) and also naturally extends to such things as the law, which again raises different questions. More significantly, it is not called "the practical." This would displace a large part of the problem, for a reason we have already noticed in considering prescriptions and the *is—ought* distinction. It is not hard to concede that there is a distinction between the practical and the nonpractical. There is clearly such a thing as practical reasoning or deliberation, which is not the same as thinking about how things are. It is *obviously* not the same, and this is why positivism thought it had validated the traditional distinction by

reducing the evaluative to the practical. But the reduction is mistaken, and it makes the whole problem look easier than it is.[2]

The basic idea behind the distinction between the scientific and the ethical, expressed in terms of convergence, is very simple. In a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope. The distinction does not turn on any difference in whether convergence will actually occur, and it is important that this is not what the argument is about. It might well turn out that there will be convergence in ethical outlook, at least among human beings. The point of the contrast is that, even if this happens, it will not be correct to think it has come about because convergence has been guided by how things actually are, whereas convergence in the sciences might be explained in that way if it does happen. This means, among other things, that we understand differently in the two cases the existence of convergence or, alternatively, its failure to come about.

I shall come back to ways in which we might understand ethical convergence. First, however, we must face certain arguments suggesting that there is really nothing at all in the distinction, expressed in these terms. There are two different directions from which this objection can come. In one version, the notion of a convergence that comes about because of how things are is seen as an empty notion. According to the other, the notion of such a convergence is not empty, but it is available as much in ethical cases as in scientific—that is to say, the notion has some content, but it does nothing to help the distinction.

I have already said that the point of the distinction and of its explanation in terms of convergence does not turn on the question whether convergence actually occurs. On the scientific side, however, it would be unrealistic to disconnect these ideas totally from the ways in which the history of Western science since the seventeenth century is to be understood. The conception of scientific progress in terms of convergence cannot be divorced from the

history of Western science because it is the history of Western science that has done most to encourage it. It is quite hard to deny that that history displays a considerable degree of convergence; what has been claimed is that this appearance has no real significance because it is a cultural artifact, a product of the way in which we choose to narrate the history of science. Richard Rorty has written:

> It is less paradoxical . . . to stick to the classic notion of "better describing what was already there" for physics. This is not because of deep epistemological or metaphysical considerations, but simply because, when we tell our Whiggish stories about how our ancestors gradually crawled up the mountain on whose (possibly false) summit we stand, we need to keep some things constant throughout the story . . . Physics is the paradigm of "finding" simply because it is hard (at least in the West) to tell a story of changing universes against the background of an unchanging Moral law or poetic canon, but very easy to tell the reverse sort of story.[3]

There are two notable faults in such a description of scientific success and what that success means. One is its attitude to the fact that it is easy to tell one kind of story and hard to tell the other. *Why* is the picture of the world "already there," helping to control our descriptions of it, so compelling? This seems to require some explanation on Rorty's account, but it does not get one. If the reference to "the West" implies a cultural or anthropological explanation, it is totally unclear what it would be: totally unclear, indeed, what it could be, if it is not going itself to assume an already existing physical world in which human beings come into existence and develop their cultures.

The point that an assumption of this kind is going to lie behind any explanations of what we do leads directly to the second fault in Rorty's account: it is self-defeating. If the story he tells were true, then there would be no perspective from which he could express it in this way. If it is overwhelmingly convenient to say that science describes what is already there, and if there are no deep metaphysi-

cal or epistemological issues here but only a question of what is convenient (it is "simply because" of this that we speak as we do), then what everyone should be saying, including Rorty, is that science describes a world already there. But Rorty urges us not to say that, and in doing so, in insisting, as *opposed to* that, on our talking of what it is convenient to say, he is trying to reoccupy the transcendental standpoint outside human speech and activity, which is precisely what he wants us to renounce.[4]

A more effective level of objection lies in a negative claim that Rorty and others make, that no convergence of science, past or future, could possibly be explained in any meaningful way by reference to the way the world is, because there is an insoluble difficulty with the notion of "the world" as something that can determine belief. There is a dilemma. On the one hand, "the world" may be characterized in terms of our current beliefs about what it contains; it is a world of stars, people, grass, or tables. When "the world" is taken in this way, we can of course say that our beliefs about the world are affected by the world, in the sense that for instance our beliefs about grass are affected by grass, but there is nothing illuminating or substantive in this—our conception of the world as the object of our beliefs can do no better than repeat the beliefs we take to represent it. If, on the other hand, we try to form some idea of a world that is prior to any description of it, the world that all systems of belief and representation are trying to represent, then we have an empty notion of something completely unspecified and unspecifiable.[5] So either way we fail to have a notion of "the world" that will do what is required of it.

Each side of this dilemma takes all our representations of the world together, in the one case putting them all in and in the other leaving them all out. But there is a third and more helpful possibility, that we should form a conception of the world that is "already there" in terms of some but not all of our beliefs and theories. In reflecting on the world that is there *anyway*, independent of our experience, we must concentrate not in the first instance on what our beliefs are about, but on how they represent what they are about. We can select among our beliefs and features of our world picture some that we can reasonably claim to represent the world in

a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities. The resultant picture of things, if we can carry through this task, can be called the "absolute conception" of the world.[6] In terms of that conception, we may hope to explain the possibility of our attaining the conception itself, and also the possibility of other, perspectival, representations.

This notion of an absolute conception can serve to make effective a distinction between "the world as it is independent of our experience" and "the world as it seems to us." It does this by understanding "the world as it seems to us" as "the world as it seems peculiarly to us"; the absolute conception will, correspondingly, be a conception of the world that might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us. What counts as a relevant difference from us, and indeed what for various levels of description will count as "us," will, again, be explained on the basis of the conception itself; we shall be able to explain, for instance, why one kind of observer can make observations that another kind cannot make. It is centrally important that these ideas relate to science, not to all kinds of knowledge. We can *know* things whose content is perspectival: we can know that grass is green, for instance, though *green*, for certain, and probably *grass* are concepts that would not be available to every competent observer of the world and would not figure in the absolute conception. (As we shall see, people can know things even more locally perspectival than that.) The point is not to give an account of knowledge, and the contrast with value should be expressed not in terms of knowledge but of science. The aim is to outline the possibility of a convergence characteristic of science, one that could meaningfully be said to be a convergence on how things (anyway) are.

That possibility, as I have explained it, depends heavily on notions of explanation. The substance of the absolute conception (as opposed to those vacuous or vanishing ideas of "the world" that were offered before) lies in the idea that it could nonvacuously explain how it itself, and the various perspectival views of the world, are possible. It is an important feature of modern science that it contributes to explaining how creatures with our origins and characteristics can understand a world with properties that this

same science ascribes to the world. The achievements of evolutionary biology and the neurological sciences are substantive in these respects, and their notions of explanation are not vacuous. It is true, however, that such explanations cannot themselves operate entirely at the level of the absolute conception, because what they have to explain are psychological and social phenomena, such as beliefs and theories and conceptions of the world, and there may be little reason to suppose that they, in turn, could be adequately characterized in nonperspectival terms. How far this may be so is a central philosophical question. But even if we allow that the explanations of such things must remain to some degree perspectival, this does not mean that we cannot operate the notion of the absolute conception. It will be a conception consisting of nonperspectival materials available to any adequate investigator, of whatever constitution, and it will also help to explain to us, though not necessarily to those alien investigators, such things as our capacity to grasp that conception. Perhaps more than this will turn out to be available, but no more is necessary in order to give substance to the idea of "the world" and to defeat the first line of objection to the distinction, in terms of possible convergence, between the scientific and the ethical.

The opposite line of objection urges that the idea of "converging on how things are" is available, to some adequate degree, in the ethical case as well. The place where this is to be seen is above all with those substantive or thick ethical concepts I have often mentioned. Many exotic examples of these can be drawn from other cultures, but there are enough left in our own: *coward*, *lie*, *brutality*, *gratitude*, and so forth. They are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action, though that reason need not be a decisive one and may be outweighed by other reasons, as we saw with their role in practical reasoning in Chapter 1. Of course, exactly what reason for action is provided, and to whom, depends on the situation, in ways that may well be governed by this and by other ethical concepts, but some general connection with action is clear enough. We may say, summarily, that such concepts are "action-guiding."

At the same time, their application is guided by the world. A concept of this sort may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to apply to some new situation. In many cases the agreement will be spontaneous, while in other cases there is room for judgment and comparison. Some disagreement at the margin may be irresoluble, but this does not mean that the use of the concept is not controlled by the facts or by the users' perception of the world. (As with other concepts that are not totally precise, marginal disagreements can indeed help to show how their use *is* controlled by the facts.) We can say, then, that the application of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-guiding. How can it be both at once?

The prescriptivist account discussed in the last chapter gives a very simple answer to this question. Any such concept, on that account, can be analyzed into a descriptive and a prescriptive element: it is guided round the world by its descriptive content, but has a prescriptive flag attached to it. It is the first feature that allows it to be world-guided, while the second makes it action-guiding. Some of the difficulties with this picture concern the prescriptive element and how it is supposed to guide action in the relevant sense (telling yourself to do something is not an obvious model for recognizing that you have a reason to do it). But the most significant objection applies to the other half of the analysis. Prescriptivism claims that what governs the application of the concept to the world is the descriptive element and that the evaluative interest of the concept plays no part in this. All the input into its use is descriptive, just as all the evaluative aspect is output. It follows that, for any concept of this sort, you could produce another that picked out just the same features of the world but worked simply as a descriptive concept, lacking any prescriptive or evaluative force.

Against this, critics have made the effective point that there is no reason to believe that a descriptive equivalent will necessarily be available.[7] How we "go on" from one application of a concept to another is a function of the kind of interest that the concept represents, and we should not assume that we could see how people "go on" if we did not share the evaluative perspective in which this kind of concept has its point. An insightful observer can indeed come to

understand and anticipate the use of the concept without actually sharing the values of the people who use it: this is an important point, and I shall come back to it. But in imaginatively anticipating the use of the concept, the observer also has to grasp imaginatively its evaluative point. He cannot stand quite outside the evaluative interests of the community he is observing, and pick up the concept simply as a device for dividing up in a rather strange way certain neutral features of the world.

It is very plausible, and it is certainly possible, that there should be ethical concepts that make these demands on understanding. It does not need, in fact, to be much more than possible to play an important part in this argument, by reminding moral philosophy of what the demands made by an adequate philosophy of language or by the philosophy of social explanation may turn out to be. If it is not only possible but plausible, moral philosophy will be well advised to consider what must be said if it is true.

The sympathetic observer can follow the practice of the people he is observing; he can report, anticipate, and even take part in discussions of the use they make of their concept. But, as with some other concepts of theirs, relating to religion, for instance, or to witchcraft, he may not be ultimately identified with the use of the concept: it may not really be his.[8] This possibility, of the insightful but not totally identified observer, bears on an important question, whether those who properly apply ethical concepts of this kind can be said to have ethical knowledge.

Let us assume, artificially, that we are dealing with a society that is maximally homogeneous and minimally given to general reflection; its members simply, all of them, use certain ethical concepts of this sort. (We may call it the "hypertraditional" society.) What would be involved in their having ethical knowledge? According to the best available accounts of propositional knowledge,[9] they would have to believe the judgments they made; those judgments would have to be true; and their judgments would have to satisfy a further condition, which has been extensively discussed in the philosophy of knowledge but which can be summarized by saying that the first two conditions must be nonaccidentally linked: granted the way that the people have gone about their inquiries, it

must be no accident that the belief they have acquired is a true one, and if the truth on the subject had been otherwise, they would have acquired a different belief, true in those different circumstances. Thus I may know, by looking at it, that the die has come up 6, and this roughly[10] involves the claim that if it had come up 4, I would have come to believe, by looking at it, that it had come up 4 (the alternative situations to be considered have to be restricted to those moderately like the actual one). Taking a phrase from Robert Nozick, we can say that the third requirement—it involves a good deal more elaboration than I have suggested—is that one's belief should "track the truth."

The members of the hypertraditional society apply their thick concepts, and in doing so they make various judgments. If any of those judgments can ever properly be said to be true, then their beliefs can track the truth, since they can withdraw judgments if the circumstances turn out not to be what was supposed, can make an alternative judgment if it would be more appropriate, and so on. They have, each, mastered these concepts, and they can perceive the personal and social happenings to which the concepts apply. If there is truth here, their beliefs can track it. The question left is whether any of these judgments can be true.

An objection can be made to saying that they are. If they are true, the observer can correctly say that they are; letting *F* stand in for one of their concepts, he can say, "The headman's statement, 'The boy is *F*,' is true." Then he should be able to say, in his own person, "the boy is *F*." But he is not prepared to do that, since *F* is not one of his concepts.

How strong is this objection? It relies on the following principle: A cannot correctly say that B speaks truly in uttering *S* unless A could also say something tantamount to *S*. This may seem to follow from a basic principle about truth, the ***disquotation principle***,[11] to the effect that *P* is true if and only if P. But that principle cannot be applied so simply in deciding what can be said about other people's statements. For a naive example, we may imagine a certain school slang that uses special names for various objects, places, and institutions in the school. It is a rule that these words are appropriately used only by someone who is a member of the school, and this rule

is accepted and understood by a group outside the school (it would have to be, if it were to be *that* rule at all). People know that if they use these terms in their own person they will be taken for members of the school, or else criticized, and so forth. Suppose that in this slang "Weeds" were the name of some school building. Under the imagined rules, an observer could not, entirely in his own person and not playing a role, properly say "Robertson is at Weeds." But he could say, "Smith said 'Robertson is at Weeds,' " and he could then add to that, "and what Smith said is true." (Indeed—though this is not necessary to the argument—it seems quite natural for him to go one step further than that and say, "Smith truly said that Robertson was at Weeds.")

In this simple case, it is of course true that the observer has other terms that refer to the same things as the slang terms. Presumably, so do the local users; but there are other examples in which this is not so, as with languages in which males and females use different names for the same thing. In the school case, both the observer and the locals have verbal means to factor out what makes a given slang statement true from what, as contrasted with that, makes it appropriate for a particular person to make it. Where the gender of the speaker determines the correct term that he or she should use, it is more complicated. In the case of the thick ethical concept, it is more complicated still, because the observer does not have a term that picks out just the same things as the locals' term picks out and, at the same time, is entirely independent of the interest that shapes their use. (He has, of course, an expression such as "what they call *F*," and the fact that he can use it, although it is not independent of their term, is important: his intelligent use of it shows that he can indeed understand their use of their term, although he cannot use it himself.)

Despite its differences from the simple case of school slang, however, we can see the case of the ethical concept as only a deeper example of the same thing. In both cases, there is a condition that has to be satisfied if one is to speak in a certain way, a condition satisfied by the locals and not by the observer, and in both cases it is a matter of belonging to a certain culture. When we compare those

cases with each other, and both of them with the situation in which vocabulary is affected by the speaker's gender, we can understand why the observer is barred from saying just what the locals say, and we can also see that he is not barred from recognizing that what they say can be true. The disquotation principle, then, does not lead to the conclusion that the locals' statements, involving their thick ethical concepts, cannot be true.

There is a different argument for the conclusion that the locals' statements may not be true. This claims, more bluntly, that they may be false: not because they can be mistaken in ways that the locals themselves could recognize, but because an entire segment of the local discourse may be seen from outside as involving a mistake. This possibility has been much discussed by theorists. Social anthropologists have asked whether ritual and magical conceptions should be seen as mistaken in our terms, or rather as operating at a different level, not commensurable with our scientific ideas. Whatever may be said more generally, it is hard to deny that magic, at least, is a causal conception, with implications that overlap with scientific conceptions of causality.[12] To the extent this is so, magical conceptions can be seen from the outside as false, and then no one will have known to be true any statement claiming magical influence, even though he may have correctly used all the local criteria for claiming a given piece of magical influence. The local criteria do not reach to everything that is involved in such claims. In cases of this sort, the problem with conceding truth to the locals' statements is the opposite of the one discussed before. The earlier claim was that their notions were so different from the observer's that he could not assert what they asserted. Now the problem is that their statements may imply notions similar enough to some of his for him to deny what they assert.

We may see the local ethical statements in a way that raises this difficulty. On this reading, the locals' statements imply something that can be put in the observer's terms and is rejected by him: that it is *right*, or *all right*, to do things he thinks it is not right, or all right, to do. Prescriptivism sees things in this way. The local statements

entail, together with their descriptive content, an all-purpose *ought*. We have rejected the descriptive half of that analysis—is there any reason to accept the other half?

Of course, there is a minimal sense in which the locals think it "all right" to act as they do, and they do not merely imply this, but reveal it, in the way they live. To say that they "think it all right" at this level is not to mention any further and disputable judgment of theirs; it is merely to record their practice. Must we agree that there is a judgment, to be expressed by using some universal moral notion, which they accept and the observer may very well reject?

I do not think we have to accept this idea. More precisely, I do not think we can decide whether to accept it until we have a more general picture of the whole question; this is not an issue that in itself can force more general conclusions on us. The basic question is how we are to understand the relations between practice and reflection. The very general kind of judgment that is in question here—a judgment using a very general concept—is essentially a product of reflection, and it comes into question when someone stands back from the practices of the society and its use of these concepts and asks whether this is the right way to go on, whether these are good ways in which to assess actions, whether the kinds of character that are admired are rightly admired. In many traditional societies themselves there is some degree of reflective questioning and criticism, and this is an important fact. It is for the sake of the argument, to separate the issues, that I have been using the idea of the hypertraditional society where there is no reflection.

In relation to this society, the question now is: Does the practice of the society, in particular the judgments that members of the society make, imply answers to reflective questions about that practice, questions they have never raised? Some judgments made by members of a society do indeed have implications, which they have never considered, at a more general or theoretical level. This will be true of their magical judgments if those are taken as causal claims; it is true of their mathematical judgments and of their judgments about the stars. We may be at some liberty whether to construe what they are saying as expressing mathematical judgments or opinions about the stars; but if we do take them to be

making those judgments and expressing those opinions, their statements will have more general implications. If what a statement expresses is an opinion about the stars, it follows that it can be contradicted by another opinion about the stars.

There are two different ways in which we can see the activities of the hypertraditional society. They depend on different models of ethical practice. One of them may be called an "objectivist" model. According to this, we shall see the members of the society as trying, in their local way, to find out the truth about values, an activity in which we and other human beings, and perhaps creatures who are not human beings, are all engaged. We shall then see their judgments as having these general implications, rather as we see primitive statements about the stars as having implications that can be contradicted by more sophisticated statements about the stars. On the other model we shall see their judgments as part of their way of living, a cultural artifact they have come to inhabit (though they have not consciously built it). On this, nonobjectivist, model, we shall take a different view of the relations between that practice and critical reflection. We shall not be disposed to see the level of reflection as implicitly already there, and we shall not want to say that their judgments have, just as they stand, these implications.

The choice between these two different ways of looking at their activities will determine whether we say that the people in the hypertraditional society have ethical knowledge. It is important to be quite clear what ethical knowledge is in question. It is knowledge involved in their making judgments in which they use their thick concepts. We are not considering whether they display knowledge *in using those concepts rather than some others:* this would be an issue at the reflective level. The question "does the society possess ethical knowledge?" is seriously ambiguous in that way. The collective reference to the society invites us to take the perspective in which its ethical representations are compared with other societies' ethical representations, and this is the reflective level, at which they certainly do not possess knowledge. There is another sense of the question in which it asks whether members of the society could, in exercising their concepts, express knowledge about the world to which they apply them, and the answer to that might be yes.

The interesting result of this discussion is that the answer will be yes if we take the nonobjectivist view of their ethical activities: various members of the society will have knowledge, when they deploy their concepts carefully, use the appropriate criteria, and so on. But on the objectivist view they do not have knowledge, or at least it is most unlikely that they do, since their judgments have extensive implications, which they have never considered, at a reflective level, and we have every reason to believe that, when those implications are considered, the traditional use of ethical concepts will be seriously affected.

The objectivist view, while it denies knowledge to the unreflective society, may seem to promise knowledge at the reflective level. Characteristically, it expects the demands of knowledge to be satisfied only by reflection. No doubt there are some ethical beliefs, universally held and usually vague ("one has to have a special reason to kill someone"), that we can be sure will survive at the reflective level. But they fall far short of any adequate, still less systematic, body of ethical knowledge at that level, and I think that the outcome of my earlier discussion of ethical theory has shown that, at least as things are, no such body of knowledge exists. Later I shall suggest that, so far as propositional knowledge of ethical truths is concerned, this is not simply a matter of how things are. Rather, at a high level of reflective generality there could be no ethical knowledge of this sort—or, at most, just one piece.

If we accept that there can be knowledge at the hypertraditional or unreflective level; if we accept the obvious truth that reflection characteristically disturbs, unseats, or replace those traditional concepts; and if we agree that, at least as things are, the reflective level is not in a position to give us knowledge we did not have before—then we reach the notably un-Socratic conclusion that, in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge*. In the next chapter, when I turn to the concerns of relativism, we shall see what this conclusion means.

Another consequence, if we allow knowledge at the unreflective level, will be that not all propositional knowledge is additive. Not all pieces of knowledge can be combined into a larger body of

knowledge. We may well have to accept that conclusion anyway from other contexts that involve perspectival views of the world. A part of the physical world may present itself as one color to one kind of observer, and another to another; to another, it may not exactly be a color at all. Call those qualities perceived by each kind of observer *A, B, C*. Then a skilled observer of one kind can know that the surface is *A*, of another kind that it is *B*, and so on, but there is no knowledge that it is *A* and *B* and *C*. This result would disappear if what *A* or *B* or *C* meant were something relational—if, when observers said 'that is *A*" they meant "*A* to observers like us." It is very doubtful that this is the correct account.[13] If it is not, the coherence of those pieces of knowledge is secured at a different level, when the various perceived qualities are related to the absolute conception. Their relation to the conception is also what makes it clear that the capacities that produce these various pieces of knowledge are all forms of *perception*. Of course we have good reason to believe this before we possess any such theoretical conception, and certainly before we possess its details. This is because our everyday experience, unsurprisingly, reveals a good deal of what we are and how we are related to the world, and in this way leads us toward the theoretical conception.[14]

Some think of the knowledge given by applying ethical concepts as something like perception. But we can now see a vital asymmetry between the case of the ethical concepts and the perspectival experience of secondary qualities such as colors. This asymmetry shows, moreover, that the distinction between the scientific and the ethical has wider implications. It is not merely a matter of distinguishing between an ideally nonperspectival science on the one hand and ethical concepts on the other. Not all perspectival concepts are ethical, and there are significant differences between ethical and other perspectival concepts, such as those of sense perception.

The main difference is that, in the case of secondary qualities, what explains also justifies; in the ethical case, this is not so. The psychological capacities that underly our perceiving the world in terms of certain secondary qualities have evolved so that the physical world will present itself to us in reliable and useful ways. Com-

ing to know that these qualities constitute our form of perceptual engagement with the world, and that this mode of presentation works in a certain way, will not unsettle the system.[15] In the ethical case, we have an analogy to the perceptual just to this extent, that there is local convergence under these concepts: the judgments of those who use them are indeed, as I put it before, world-guided. This is certainly enough to refute the simplest oppositions of fact and value. But if it is to mean anything for a wider objectivity, everything depends on what is to be said *next*. With secondary qualities, it is the explanation of the perspectival perceptions that enables us, when we come to reflect on them, to place them in relation to the perceptions of other people and other creatures; and that leaves everything more or less where it was, so far as our perceptual judgments are concerned. The question is whether we can find an ethical analogy to that. Here we have to go outside local judgments to a reflective or second-order account of them, and here the analogy gives out.

There is, first, a problem of what the second-order account is to be. An *explanation* of those local judgments and of the conceptual differences between societies will presumably have to come from the social sciences: cultural differences are in question. Perhaps no existing explanation of such things goes very deep, and we are not too clear how deep an explanation might go. But we do know that it will not look much like the explanation of color perception. The capacities it will invoke are those involved in finding our way around in a social world, not merely the physical world, and this, crucially, means *in some social world or other*, since it is certain both that human beings cannot live without a culture and that there are many different cultures in which they can live, differing in their local concepts.

In any case, an explanatory theory is not enough to deal with the problems of objectivity raised by the local ethical concepts. In the case of secondary qualities, the explanation also justifies, because it can show how the perceptions are related to physical reality and how they can give knowledge of that reality, which is what they purport to do. The question with them is: Is this a method of finding our way around the physical world? The theoretical ac-

count explains how it is. In the ethical case, this is not the kind of question raised by reflection. If we ask the question "is this a method of finding our way around the social world?" we would have to be asking whether it was a method of finding our way around some social world or other, and the answer to that must obviously be yes (unless the society were extremely disordered, which is not what we were supposing). The question raised is rather "is this a good way of living compared with others?"; or, to put it another way, "is this the best kind of social world?"

When these are seen to be the questions, the reflective account we require turns out to involve reflective *ethical* considerations. These are the considerations that some believe should take the form of an ethical theory. The reflective considerations will have to take up the job of justifying the local concepts once those have come to be questioned. An ethical theory might even, in a weak sense, provide some explanations. It might rationalize some cultural differences, showing why one local concept rather than others was ethically appropriate in particular circumstances (we can recall here the possibilities and perils of indirect utilitarianism). But while it might explain why it was reasonable for people to have these various ethical beliefs, it would not be the sort of theory that could explain why they did or did not have them. It could not do something that explanations of perception can do, which is to generate an adequate theory of error and to account generally for the tendency of people to have what, according to its principles, are wrong beliefs.[16]

If a wider objectivity were to come from all this, then the reflective ethical considerations would themselves have to be objective. This brings us back to the question whether the reflective level might generate its own ethical knowledge. If this is understood as our coming to have propositional knowledge of ethical truths, then we need some account of what "tracking the truth" will be. The idea that our beliefs can track the truth at this level must at least imply that a range of investigators could rationally, reasonably, and unconstrainedly come to converge on a determinate set of ethical conclusions. What are the hopes for such a process? I do not mean of its actually happening, but rather of our forming a coherent picture of how it might happen. If it is construed as convergence on

a body of ethical truths which is brought about and explained by the fact that they are truths—this would be the strict analogy to scientific objectivity—then I see no hope for it. In particular, there is no hope of extending to this level the kind of world-guidedness we have been considering in the case of the thick ethical concepts. Discussions at the reflective level, if they have the ambition of considering all ethical experience and arriving at the truth about the ethical, will necessarily use the most general and abstract ethical concepts such as "right," and those concepts do not display world-guidedness (which is why they were selected by prescriptivism in its attempt to find a pure evaluative element from which it could *detach* world-guidedness).

I cannot see any convincing theory of knowledge for the convergence of reflective ethical thought on ethical reality in even a distant analogy to the scientific case. Nor is there a convincing analogy with mathematics, a case in which the notion of an independent reality is at least problematical. Besides the reasons mentioned in Chapter 6, there is the important point that every noncontradictory piece of mathematics is part of mathematics, though it may be left aside as too trivial or unilluminating or useless. But not every noncontradictory structure of ethical reflection can be part of one such subject, since bodies of ethical thought can conflict with one another in ways that not only lack the kinds of explanation that could form a credible theory of error, but have too many credible explanations of other kinds.

I do not believe, then, that we can understand reflection as a process that substitutes knowledge for beliefs attained in unreflective practice. We must reject the objectivist view of ethical life as in that way a pursuit of ethical truth. But this does not rule out all forms of objectivism. There is still the project of trying to give an objective grounding or foundation to ethical life. For this, we should look in the direction of the ideas about human nature discussed in Chapter 3. Those ideas should be now freed from the Socratic requirement that they should provide a reason to *each* person to lead an ethical life rather than not. For the purposes we are now considering, it would be significant enough if such consid-

erations could give us a schema of an ethical life that would be the best ethical life, the most satisfactory for human beings in general. The question to be answered is: Granted that human beings need to share a social world, is there anything to be known about their needs and their basic motivations that will show us what this world would best be?

I doubt that there will turn out to be a very satisfying answer. It is probable that any such considerations will radically underdetermine the ethical options even in a given social situation (we must remember that what we take the situation to be is itself, in part, a function of what ethical options we can see). Any ethical life is going to contain restraints on such things as killing, injury, and lying, but those restraints can take very different forms. Again, with respect to the virtues, which is the most natural and promising field for this kind of inquiry, we only have to compare Aristotle's catalogue of the virtues with any that might be produced now to see how pictures of an appropriate human life may differ in spirit and in the actions and institutions they call for. We also have the idea that there are many and various forms of human excellence which will not all fit together into a one harmonious whole, so any determinate ethical outlook is going to represent some kind of specialization of human possibilities. That idea is deeply entrenched in any naturalistic or, again, historical conception of human nature—that is, in any adequate conception of it—and I find it hard to believe that it will be overcome by an objective inquiry, or that human beings could turn out to have a much more determinate nature than is suggested by what we already know, one that timelessly demanded a life of a particular kind.

The project of giving to ethical life an objective and determinate grounding in considerations about human nature is not, in my view, very likely to succeed. But it is at any rate a comprehensible project, and I believe it represents the only intelligible form of ethical objectivity at the reflective level. It is worth asking what would be involved in its succeeding. We should notice, first, how it would have to be human beings that were primarily the subject of our ethics, since it would be from their nature that its conclusions would be drawn. Here this project joins hands with contractua-

lism, in seeing other animals as outside the primary constituency of ethics, and at most beneficiaries of it, while it expects less than contractualism does of our relations to extraterrestrials, who would be connected with it simply through the rules of mutual restraint that might figure in a nonaggression treaty.

If the project succeeded, it would not simply be a matter of agreement on a theory of human nature. The convergence itself would be partly in social and psychological science, but what would matter would be a convergence to which scientific conclusions provided only part of the means. Nor, on the other hand, would there be a convergence directly on ethical truths, as in the other objectivist model. One ethical belief might be said to be in its own right an object of knowledge at the reflective level, to the effect that a certain kind of life was best for human beings. But this will not yield other ethical truths directly. The reason, to put it summarily, is that the excellence or satisfactoriness of a life does not stand to beliefs involved in that life as premise stands to conclusion. Rather, an agent's excellent life is characterized by *having* those beliefs, and most of the beliefs will not be about that agent's dispositions or life, or about other people's dispositions, but about the social world. That life will involve, for instance, the agent's using some thick concepts rather than others. Reflection on the excellence of a life does not itself establish the truth of judgments using those concepts or of the agent's other ethical judgments. Instead it shows that there is good reason (granted the commitment to an ethical life) to live a life that involves those concepts and those beliefs.[17]

The convergence that signaled the success of this project would be a convergence of practical reason, by which people came to lead the best kind of life and to have the desires that belonged to that life; convergence in ethical belief would largely be a part and consequence of that process. One very general ethical belief would, indeed, be an object of knowledge at that level. Many particular ethical judgments, involving the favored thick concepts, could be known to be true, but then judgments of this sort (I have argued) are very often known to be true anyway, even when they occur, as they always have, in a life that is not grounded at the objective level.

The objective grounding would not bring it about that judgments using those concepts were true or could be known: this was so already. But it would enable us to recognize that certain of them were the best or most appropriate thick concepts to use. Between the two extremes of the one very general proposition and the many concrete ones, other ethical beliefs would be true only in the oblique sense that they were the beliefs that would help us to find our way around in a social world which—on this optimistic program—was shown to be the best social world for human beings.

This would be a structure very different from that of the objectivity of science. There would be a radical difference between ethics and science, even if ethics were objective in the only way in which it intelligibly could be. However, this does not mean that there is a clear distinction between (any) fact and (any) value; nor does it mean that there is no ethical knowledge. There is some, and in the less reflective past there has been more.

The problems I have discussed here are not merely hypothetical questions, of whether ethics might eventually turn out to be objective and, if so, how. They are problems about the nature of ethical thought, the way in which it can understand its own nature and the extent to which it can consistently appear to be what it really is. Those are serious problems on any showing, and would be so even if ethical thought turned out to be objective in the only way that is intelligible. We shall see them more distinctly when we have looked at them from a different angle, that of relativism.

W. D. Hudson, ed., *The Is-Ought Question* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969); also John Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 61–63, and *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), pp. 64–73.

4. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, p. 21.

5. I am indebted here to David Wiggins; see "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life" (British Academy Lecture, 1976), and "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in Amelie O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

6. The phrase "the linguistic turn" is the title of a collection of papers on philosophical method edited by Richard Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

7. An exception has been Peter Winch, in *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London, 1958; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1970), and elsewhere.

8. Knowledge, Science, Convergence

1. The best-known route for reducing the evaluative to the practical runs through the notion of the prescriptive. That strategy was criticized in the last chapter.

2. See the work of Wiggins cited in Chapter 7, note 5.

3. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 344–345. I have discussed Rorty's views in some detail in a review of his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982): *New York Review of Books*, 28 April 1983.

4. There is a confusion between what might be called empirical and transcendental pragmatism. Similar problems arise with the later work of Wittgenstein: see "Wittgenstein and Idealism," in my *Moral Luck*; and Jonathan Lear, "Leaving the World Alone," *Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (1982).

5. Rorty, "The World Well Lost," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 14. See also Donald Davidson, "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 67 (1973–74).

6. This has already been mentioned, Chapter 6, note 14. See also N. Jardine, "The Possibility of Absolutism," in D.H. Mellor, ed., *Science, Belief, and Behaviour: Essays in Honour of R. B. Braithwaite* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Colin McGinn, *The Subjective View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

7. Notably John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Im-

peratives?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 52 (1978); "Virtue and Reason," *Monist*, 62 (1979). McDowell is above all concerned with the state of mind and motivations of a virtuous person, but I understand his view to have the more general implications discussed in my text. The idea that it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest is basically a Wittgensteinian idea. I first heard it expressed by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar in the 1950s. For the application of ideas from Wittgenstein's later philosophy to ethics, see e.g. Hanna F. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), and Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). For a wide-ranging reflection that owes much to Wittgenstein, see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), esp. parts 3 and 4. Wittgenstein's personal outlook on ethical questions was a different matter: see the posthumous "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965); Rush Rhees, "Some Developments of Wittgenstein's View of Ethics," ibid.; B.F. McGuiness, "The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*," ibid., 75 (1966).

McDowell himself draws important consequences in the philosophy of mind, rejecting the "belief and desire" model of rational action. I do not accept these consequences, but I shall not try to argue the question here. Some considerations later in this chapter, about the differences between ethical belief and sense perception, bear closely on it.

8. McDowell ("Virtue and Reason") allows for this possibility, but he draws no consequences from it and ignores intercultural conflict altogether. He traces skepticism about objectivity in ethics, revealingly, to what he calls a "philistine scientism," on the one hand, and to a philosophical pathology on the other, of vertigo in the face of unsupported practices. Leaving aside his attitude to the sciences, McDowell seems rather unconcerned even about history and says nothing about differences in outlook over time. It is significant that, in a discussion of the virtues that mostly relates to Aristotle, he takes as an example kindness, which is not an Aristotelian virtue.

9. The most subtle and ingenious discussion of propositional knowledge I know is that of Robert Nozick in chap. 3 of his *Philosophical Explanations*. Some central features of Nozick's account, notably the use of subjunctive conditionals, had been anticipated by Fred Dretske, as Nozick acknowledges in his note 53 to that chapter (p. 630), which gives references.

10. How rough? Perhaps I cannot read four dots as 4, though I can read six dots as 6. What if I can only read six dots as 6, and everything else as not 6?

11. Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages," in *Logic, Semantics, Meta-Mathematics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981). On the present issue, see David Wiggins, "What Would Be a Substan-

tial Theory of Truth?", in Zak van Straaten, ed., *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P.F. Strawson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Wiggins' discussion raises a further issue, whether the observer could even understand what the sentences mean, unless he could apply a disquotational truth formula to them. In this he is influenced by Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," *Synthese*, 17 (1967). The fact that there can be a sympathetic but nonidentified observer shows that it cannot be impossible to understand something although one is unwilling to assert it oneself.

12. See John Skorupski, *Symbol and Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

13. See Wiggins, "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life"; McGinn, *The Subjective View*, pp. 9–10, 119–120.

14. A formulation of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is very nearly as old in the Western tradition as the self-conscious use of a principle of sufficient reason.

15. I have taken two sentences here from my article, "Ethics and the Fabric of the World," to appear in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), a volume of essays in memory of John Mackie; it discusses Mackie's views on these subjects, in particular his idea that perceptual and moral experience each involve a comparable error. See also McGinn, *The Subjective View*, esp. chap. 7.

16. This difficulty, of finding an adequate theory of error, is encountered by any theory of ethics that concentrates on the notion of ethical truth. When the ethical takes the special form of *morality*, it is connected with a particular deformation, *moralism*. The insistence that a given person is wrong, disconnected from any possible understanding of how it comes about that he is wrong, tends to leave the commentator entirely outside that person, preaching at him.

17. This conclusion is connected to the point made at the end of Chapter 3, that there is a sense in which all value rests in dispositions of character. See also my Postscript.

9. Relativism and Reflection

1. See in particular Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review*, 84 (1975); reprinted in Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland, eds., *Relativism, Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), a useful collection on this subject.

2. Vulgar relativism, as I have called this view, is discussed in my *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics.*