# ETHICS AND ONTOLOGY

What are we committed to ontologically by our ethical views and commitments? One common temptation of modern philosophy has been to answer: nothing; moral commitments and factual beliefs are in different spheres. It is one of the great achievements of modernity to have sorted this out, as against earlier views of an order of things, or great "chain of being," in virtue of which certain ends held as valid for human beings—fulfilling our natures, or conforming to our place in the "chain," or whatever. Recently, Jürgen Habermas,[1] in espousing his Weber-derived view about the differentiation of rational spheres, has taken a line of this kind.

Habermas's view has the advantage of allowing for our sense that one's ethical views can be right or wrong, better or worse. He espouses a "cognitivist" position, even though what makes the right position right is not its corresponding to "facts." Many of the attempts to establish a fact/value dichotomy have foundered on their espousal of an implausible subjectivism. Emotivism saw value statements as expressions of our emotional reactions to certain objects. "Murder is wrong" had roughly the same content as, "Ugh murder," where the interjection 'ugh' expressed horror, disapproval, rejection.

But this notoriously came to grief as soon as one recognized how much ethical judgments functioned logically like descriptive statements. "Murder is wrong," for instance, can figure in valid syllogisms; for example, "Murder is wrong," "This act is a murder," therefore, "This is wrong." More fundamentally, various ethical predicates: 'courageous', 'generous', 'noble', plainly apply on the basis of fine discriminations, which different speakers can master more or less well. The basic idea underlying emotivism, that the ethical judgment reflects our reaction to a possible or actual state of affairs, which itself could be described in purely "factual" terms, seems just wrong.

There are descriptions of things which pick them out in virtue of their triggering a certain reaction, for example, 'nauseous', where these put no restriction on the ranges of things that can rightly be said to have this property. Something is nauseous if it makes me want to vomit, or if it has this effect on most people, or generally. If someone was made violently ill by some smell, there would be no point in saying: "But this isn't really nauseous."

[1] *Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 1, Thomas McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

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But where someone reacts with moral disapproval, or indignation, we often feel justified in criticizing their reaction. This act was not really wrong; you are not justified in reacting to it with indignation. This act does not merit the reaction you have to it.

Bernard Williams[2] has been a key figure in these discussions, in which he has helped lay to rest the early unsophisticated forms of the fact/value dichotomy. But his ultimate position escapes easy definition. I know I disagree with it, but I am not sure I can say just where: perhaps the very definition of a fruitful philosophical difference.

Now as Williams, and also John McDowell,[3] have pointed out, the proper application of moral terms cannot be explained by a separable neutral descriptive component, a set of nonevaluative criteria, which are combined in the ordinary usages of these terms with an evaluative component which could be peeled off, as R. M. Hare[4] has tried to argue. With terms like 'courageous', 'generous', and the like, the concept has the extension that it has in part in virtue of its evaluative force.

What has all this got to do with ontology? Well, a widespread motivation for these attempts to split fact and value has been the need to do justice to (what has been seen as) a crucial feature of the universe. In our post-Galilean age, this has been seen as itself devoid of meaning and value; this in contradistinction to earlier conceptions of cosmic order, such as that of Plato, where the order of things is explained by the realization of a plan which itself has intrinsic value, articulated by the idea of the good, or the principle of plenitude, or some such notion. Value comes into the world with us, the human agents who evaluate. Hence the easy step to theories like emotivism, or views that see value as residing in our reactions to what is in itself neutral reality.

McDowell, whose argument I want to follow here for a while, has been concerned to refute a widespread form of ethical "naturalism," in one meaning of this term. This is the view that arises among thinkers for whom seeing humans as part of nature means seeing their behavior and life form as ultimately explicable in terms that are consonant with modern natural science. The late J. L. Mackie is one protagonist of this position whom McDowell has frequently engaged, as is also Simon Blackburn.[5]

[2] See, among other writings, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981).

[3] I shall be drawing mainly on the essays collected in his *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998); hereafter referred to as *MVR*.

[4] *The Language of Morals* (New York: Oxford, 1952).

[5] Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977); Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* (Boston: Routledge, 1985), pp. 1–22.

Now, from this standpoint, there is something problematic about "values," particularly ethical ones. It is hard to see values as part of the ultimate furniture of the universe once one has adopted a post-Galilean stance and no longer understands the cosmos in terms of meaning. So we can be tempted to see our attribution of value to things as a kind of error, systematic and understandable, but error nevertheless. This was Mackie's position. Or we can understand these attributions as a kind of projection we make on the world, as Blackburn does.

McDowell sees this kind of position as deeply confused. There is a sense in which values are not part of the "objective" universe, but this cannot justify our considering them less real for all that. Values are not "in the universe" in the sense that, if we were absent, value attributions could get no purchase on it. That is because an account of what we are attributing, of various value properties, like 'attractive' and 'dangerous', involves at some level or other some reference to their impact on us. (I speak of different levels here, because the impact in question may be on "us" as living beings, or as ethical agents, or as beings who are moved by beauty, or whatever.)

The classical case of properties that are "subjective" in this sense are the "secondary properties" identified in the classical seventeenth-century discussion, like color, heat, taste, and the like. We can say of them, certainly, that they are "not adequately conceivable except...in terms of dispositions to give rise to certain subjective states" (*MVR* 136). An "object's being red is understood as something that obtains in virtue of the object's being such as (in certain circumstances) to look, precisely, red" (*MVR* 133).

But it would be quite unwarranted to speak of error here. The (secondary) quality 'red' would not be there if we sighted beings were not part of the universe; but granted that we are, there are right or wrong attributions of it.

Nor does the notion of a projection seem in place here. Suppose I am angry with you, because I think you have insulted me. You genuinely plead with me that you had no intention to be offensive; quite the contrary, you meant to show respect. But you quite fail to mollify me. At which point a bystander (or maybe you sotto voce) may be judging: "That old codger can't see reason, because he's so full of anger and resentment that he projects hostile behavior onto people even when they are friendly."

Here is a quite different, and stronger, notion of a "subjective" impression. Our hypothesis here is that there was no insult at all, and no hostile demeanor on your part. I "projected" all this erroneously

on you, no doubt because of the largely unadmitted anger and hostility boiling inside me.

McDowell's idea is that a major source of this kind of naturalism is a confusion between these two kinds of "subjectivity," moving from the claim that certain properties are inescapably subject-related to the conclusion that they are therefore erroneous, or less than fully real.

When we move beyond secondary properties to values, the issue is further complicated because questions of *merit* now arise (*MVR* 143). Something is really red because it looks red in standard circumstances; there is no further argument. But when I call your act "dishonest," I can be forced to defend myself through chains of reasoning. Maybe you did not know what you were doing; maybe there was a recent price change which I had not heard of, and so on, and so on. Attributions in this domain are sometimes forced to demonstrate their rational grounds.

And it is clear that they can be well grounded. I follow McDowell in taking the example of the dangerous, what is to be properly feared (*MVR* 143 and ff.). Let us start with what is dangerous to life and limb (call this the *L-dangerous*). This is obviously "subjective" in our first sense: no living beings in the universe, no such thing as L-danger. But it is clearly an "objective" matter whether something is really life threatening or not, one in which we can frequently be mistaken, ignorant of key facts, and the like.

This is so clearly the case that we perhaps have to look elsewhere than this confusion to uncover the deep motivations of naturalism. Their problem does not lie with value predicates like 'L-dangerous'. That is because their conception of what it is to be part of nature is being explicable in terms consonant with post-Galilean natural science; and they are confident that biology can be encompassed in such terms. (That is why, indeed, as we shall see below, they sometimes even try to understand ethics in (socio)biological terms.)

But when we come to ethics, it is a different matter. Ethics involves a range of "values" that are essentially understood to be on a different level, to be in some way special, higher, or incommensurable with our other goals and desires. We would not have a category like the ethical or the moral, unless this were so.

Giving an account of this distinction has been one of the most difficult and knotty issues in ethical theory. The famous categorical/hypothetical distinction was Kant's attempt to define it. McDowell gives an interesting critique of this (*MVR*, essay 5). In a sense, Kant fails here because he tries to shirk the task of recognizing certain substantive activities or purposes as higher. He tries to make the distinction turn on formal considerations, on whether or not there is

a substantive purpose at play at all. McDowell brings out the qualitative specialness of the ethical in discussing what it is for the requirement of virtue to override those of our other goals and desires. When the courageous person sets aside his desire to run for safety in the face of the enemy, it is not that he sees his goal of defending the polis as *outweighing* that of personal safety. This would be to make two goals commensurable. It is rather that, within the space of questions that define the ethical, this kind of rival consideration is neutralized, counts for nothing.

Remaining within the Aristotle-derived example, we can say that, in the light of the higher goal, *to kallon* or the "noble," saving our skin just does not weigh here. In the deliberation, it is not outweighed by something practically "heavier," but just set aside as irrelevant (*MVR* 47, 92).

(This incidentally opens a new and much more fruitful avenue for addressing the issue of akrasia or "incontinence," as McDowell points out (*MVR* 92–93); the classical puzzle comes from framing the question: How can something rationally assigned a lesser weight end up motivationally heavier? Much of the paradox disappears once we free ourselves from this homogenized image of commensurable weights.)

I could not resist this short digression into McDowell's Aristotle interpretation and ethical theory. But returning to the issue of naturalism, it is clear that this qualitative status of the ethical is a deep source of the trouble. Naturalism, as I have been using it here, which holds to the omnicompetence of post-Galilean science, believes that it can cope with the life-related values: survival, flourishing as a living being, including health, strength, energy, the desires which de facto accompany life: sex, food, (in certain cases) dominance. Let us call these the *L-values*. But it cannot see how values of an incommensurably higher range can have a place in post-Galilean nature.

That certain values should have higher priority over others can be easily understood, for example, survival over some marginal pleasure. That any animal should be "wired" by evolution to respect this priority is easy to accept. Hence desires that are dominant, stronger, more persistent than others must be part of the picture. But the ethical dimension of human life turns on something different: purposes, activities, and qualities which are not necessarily (alas) motivationally dominant, but which are understood and lived as higher in the sense of more worthy. But the higher in this sense is one of the things expunged from the cosmos by post-Galilean science. It had its place in the great "chain of being," but not in the "mechanized" world picture.

Hence, naturalists think, there has to be some error here (Mackie), some projection onto the world (Blackburn), involved in the moral dimension of our lives.

There is a tension between phenomenology and ontology. The former, properly and honestly carried through, seems to show that values of this higher status, like *to kallon* for Aristotle, are ineradicable from our deliberations of how to live. But ontology, defined naturalistically, says that properties of this kind can have no place in an account of things in the world, including its human and animal denizens. These properties are ineradicably "queer," in Mackie's celebrated expression.

One way of resolving the tension is resisting the phenomenology. This kind of position regularly crops up, and one sees it today with certain theories of sociobiology. We try to explain ethics in terms of L-values. Why do we have prohibitions against murder? Why do we value cooperativeness, generosity? It is obvious: the survival conditions of gregarious species like ours require a certain degree of mutual trust and comity. Hume was one of the originators of this kind of account; and the fundamental idea is expressed in the thesis of Philippa Foot, that "moral virtues are qualities necessary if men are to get on well in a world in which they are frightened, tempted by pleasure and liable to hurt rather than help each other" (quoted in *MVR* 177, n21).

Whatever the worth of this as some sort of genetic account, it plainly fails to capture what we mean by virtue. If we try to track our sense of the incommensurably higher through our responses of admiration and its opposite, we can see that whatever the ultimate links with survival and group flourishing, the admirable is never simply defined in terms of them, and sometimes even runs athwart them (*fiat justitia ruat coelum*). We can try to reduce the gap, by paring away at the virtues that we recognize. We repudiate the stern proponent of justice at any price as a "fanatic" or an "enthusiast." But the gap remains: even the most stripped-down utilitarian holds a value like "rationality" as a virtue in the ethical sense; that is, she sees this quality in people not just as useful, not just as desirable, but also as *admirable*. Maybe some day social science will show that having a society of tubby people contributes greatly to mutual tolerance and well being. Tubbiness will then be seen as useful and desirable, but it will not win admiration. That admiration and its opposites are such an ineradicable part of the human life form testifies to the centrality of values that are seen as essentially higher, more worthy.

The gap also shows up if we think of ego's deliberation on what to do. How far could it get on the basis only of considerations of what is in general good for human life? How does the general value of a virtue show that I ought to aim to realize it in my life? McDowell

expounds this brilliantly in his parable of the rational wolf (*MVR* 169–73).

Once one sees that phenomenology can not be forced into line with ontology, the other recourse of naturalism is precisely that explored by Mackie and Blackburn. You accept that that is how it looks, but you insist that it is not really like this in the objective world. The difficulty is that this begins to pose epistemological problems for the naturalist ontology. We might set this up in a syllogism in order to pinpoint the difficulty: (1) everything in nature is to be explained in terms of post-Galilean science; (2) humans and their life forms are part of nature; therefore (3) humans, and so forth, are to be explained in post-Galilean terms. (3) then gives the background in terms of which values appear "queer."

But like such syllogisms in Barbara, one can ask what is the evidential relation between major and minor premise. How do we know (1) to be true? Is it because we have independently verified (2), and a whole host of such particulars? Or do we know (1) a priori? This latter claim seems a bit tall, so we would have to fall back on the independent verifiability of (2).

But this is what is now in trouble. One strong bit of evidence for (2) would consist in our being able to make sense of our deliberations in post-Galilean terms. But that is exactly what the phenomenology has shown we cannot do. Failing that, we can appeal to an explanatory account of what we do, including deliberations about higher values, exclusively in post-Galilean terms. But such accounts have nowhere been produced. They are entirely in the realm of promissory notes for a remote future. They are drafts on a bank which may be solvent in 2200, but has not a bean today.

Thus the queerness resides rather in projectivism. It leaves values standing in our actual life-world as inescapable in our real-life deliberations, but then makes a global, marginal comment to the effect that they are not really real. This is a strange claim, not least because it is hard to see where the warrant comes from.

But the strangeness also comes out in the lability of this kind of claim. As it stands, it is purely external to ethical life; that is, it is not a move within ethical reflection and deliberation. But it stands very close to claims that are internal, attempts like the above to pare down the list of acceptable virtues, based on closely related considerations: that we are after all natural, animal beings, that our first allegiance ought to be to life and happiness, and so on. And indeed, the same thinkers very often are found making both kinds of claim: both that values are queer, and that certain values that seem remote and inhospitable to the L-values are just wrong—such as those exalted by ascetic

ideals, or a too great concern for one's own integrity. It is not always clear where the argument for one flips over into an argument for the other—or whether the two ultimately conflict. If you play the game internally with such vigor, how seriously can we take your claim that it is all a kind of shadow play?

McDowell's resolution of this tension is to challenge the ontology. Why should we assume that the human world should be explicable exclusively in post-Galilean terms? The existence of human beings brings a whole flock of subjective properties with it. This human world of thick and strong evaluations needs to be understood on its own terms, and not cut and sliced a priori so that it fits the post-Galilean model. This world cannot be made transparent to Galilean science. In relation to this it is as opaque as Stanley Cavell's "whirl of organism" that McDowell loves to quote (see, for instance, *MVR* 206–07). But this can begin to make sense to us if we do not consistently try to denature it.

This fundamental point, about the integrity of the human world, resounds through a number of the dimensions of McDowell's thought; not just on ethics and ontology, as we have seen, but also on issues of explanation, epistemology, and meaning.

From the naturalistic standpoint, it is normal to see the human world as somehow constructed out of Galilean materials. We take in an input that is characterized naturalistically—various forms of energy, or pulses of stimulation, or discharges through neurons. The world of human significance is then constructed in a certain "processing" of this "information." There was originally a certain intellectualist version of this: we construct our view of the world by putting together simple "ideas." But this has now largely been replaced by a reductive-scientistic version that sees the processing as taking place below consciousness, through the functioning of the nervous system and the brain.

Even beyond the disputes in cognitive science, and about Artificial Intelligence, this outlook is deeply anchored in modern thought. It accounts for a certain reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein as a skeptic, which McDowell deconstructs (in *MVR*, essays 11 and 12).

Saul Kripke's[6] famous discussion of what he sees as the basis for the "private language argument" is the best example. Kripke grounds his interpretation on Wittgenstein's remarks about following a rule. Wittgenstein pointed out in the *Philosophical Investigations*[7] that after

[6] *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982).

[7] G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

any number of initial instructions or paradigm examples, it is possible with a little ingenuity to devise a number of incompatible ways of continuing the series or following the rule. Even given a series like: 2,4,6,..., 998, 1000, we could imagine someone going on: 1004, 1008, on the ground that, as the learner understood it, the increments of two were only valid up to a thousand, when they should be upped to four. But we often have quite a strongly-held common view on what is the right way; so that we find Wittgenstein's examples here weird and funny. But how can we know the "right" way?

One possibility would be that the person who has grasped the rule has worked out, perhaps largely unconsciously, all the alternative possible interpretations, and has eliminated all but one, which we call the right one. But this clearly will not work, for the number of such possible weird interpretations is indefinite. So then we might flip from the intellectualist to a mechanist stance, and see the person as hard wired so that she follows only one way. The rules are like "rails," as McDowell puts it. But this cannot account for the fact that we live this as something you can get right or wrong; it is following a rule, not an involuntary response to stimulus.

The puzzled conclusion that Kripke arrives at is that nothing in the person's mind, or in her unconscious processing, or in her hard wiring can be what makes it the case that she has learned the rule, and knows how to go on. This "skeptical problem" then is supposed to find in Wittgenstein the "skeptical solution," which attributes the narrowing of endless possibility to the authority of society, demanding conformity from the individual.

It can seem that one is inescapably driven to some such desperate solution as long as we keep thinking of the human agent as an individual information processor in a neutral world. But this is precisely not what a human being in a culture, or life form, or particular "whirl of organism" ever is. For some imagined Martian, or "cosmic outsider" as McDowell has put it elsewhere, it may be an open question whether the increments should be upped to four after 1000, or (why not?) 10,000; or whether we should follow arrows on signposts in the direction of their feathers rather than their tips. Anything is up for grabs. But human thinking is situated thinking, in which any questions that can be raised only make sense against a background or framework of the taken utterly for granted. Our capacity for rational reflection is such that some of what was formerly background can now be put into question, but only against its own background of the unchallenged. To grasp someone's form of life is to understand this pattern of questions against the unnoticed background, perhaps by participating in it unreflectively, perhaps also by some very partial explicit understanding of its limitations.

Where the neutral information processor may stand before endless possibilities, only one may make sense to the encultured human being, whose life form consists of ways of sense making, some of them totally implicit. The enculturated actor does not need an interpretation; she knows right off. That was Wittgenstein's point. The purpose of the weird examples was to offer a reductio of the cosmic outsider picture, not to describe a real problem. This not only makes more sense of Wittgenstein, but it shows once again in another context the advantages of shifting to a view of the human world as to be made sense of on its own terms and not on post-Galilean models.

Does this resolve the issue? Are the ontologically-driven suspicions of "naturalism" toward ethics shown to be unfounded? McDowell seems to have done the trick, and to have reconciled the deliverances of phenomenology (we really discern ethical differences in human life, and these have to be understood as involving incommensurable, higher values), and the basic concerns of a naturalistic ontology, which cannot allow such values into the furniture of the universe. Or put in other terms, he seems to have shown how we can see values as imported into the universe by human beings, without seeing them as merely a matter of subjective reactions or projections which we might peel off things.

I have concentrated on McDowell's work here, but a parallel reconciliation seems to have been achieved by David Wiggins,[8] whose finely calibrated and insightful work has shown how human culture over time can refine our shared perceptions and responses so that we develop socially accepted understandings of the funny, or appalling, or shocking, and the like, which indeed set standards for our individual discriminations.

So has the question been resolved? Are Mackie's error theory and Blackburn's quasirealism just failures to understand the obvious middle ground? Or perhaps Blackburn's present position is just another way of occupying that middle ground?

I am sorry to trouble a hard-won peace, but it seems to me that there remains an issue here. Some sources of the temptation to undercut the phenomenology of the moral life in the name of a post-Galilean "naturalism" have been perhaps laid to rest, but others remain.

One confusion that has been adequately dealt with is that between the two senses of 'subjective'; we no longer need think that because a property is subject-related it must needs be projected onto things, or not properly real, or incapable of yielding a fact of the matter.

[8] *Needs, Values, Truth* (New York: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 199–200.

And another more subtle and seemingly compelling set of reflections may also have been deprived of its force by the arguments of McDowell and Wiggins, as well as many of the writings of Williams. This is the view I shall call *microreductionism.* Following this, a naturalistic outlook requires that we ultimately be able to explain the "higher" activities of our psychic and social lives in terms of lower order sciences; in the first instance, biological sciences, and then later even in terms of physics and chemistry.

Pursuant to this goal, we can imagine explaining our psychic life in terms of the neurophysiology, endocrinology, and so on, where the explanatory terms and natural kinds of these sciences will in the end prove omnicompetent: they will account for everything, at the "higher" psychic and social levels as well. We imagine the various discriminations we make, including moral ones, being accounted for, say, in a computer-based model of the brain and nervous system, perhaps supplemented with parallel processing. The inputs to the computations that produce such discriminations will be, say, different wave lengths of light impinging on the eye, the stimulation of nerve endings in the fingers, and so on: what W. V. Quine calls "surface irritations."[9]

This is the source of the naturalistic outlook I described a few pages back, which sees the human world as constructed through "information-processing." If we take this path, it can seem that the significance properties of the human world—'dangerous', 'attractive', 'funny', 'appalling', 'noble', and the like—are the stuff of mere "folk psychology," which we have to go beyond to get to the real explanatory factors on the physiological level of input-computation-output. The natural kinds of folk psychology may often be crudely congruent with those of the deeper explanation, but they can also throw us badly off the track, just as our ordinary everyday perception of heavenly bodies can mislead us as to the "sinking" of the sun below the horizon.

A question mark hangs therefore over these significance properties as a class. They can only be declared "real" where they prove congruent with the real underlying factors, and hence they frequently fail of reality. Following this route, moral properties turn out to be dubiously real, not because of any features specific to them, but as one of the broad class of significance properties.

Now, McDowell and Wiggins have done a great deal to combat this microreductionism, and to show how much in our lives becomes unintelligible if we try to sideline the human world. They have not

[9] "Epistemology Naturalized," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia, 1969), pp. 69–89.

convinced everyone—microreductionism is still alive and well in cognitive science. But let us say we are convinced (anyway, I am), and we either abandon naturalism or adopt a more sophisticated variant. We agree that explanations such as "he convinced them because of his generosity" do not need to be backed on a deeper level with reductive accounts in terms of processing of neutral data.

We have now lost a reason to consider all significance properties as "queer" or less than fully "real." But there remain the reaons specific to moral properties, namely, that they invoke incommensurably higher values. These by definition have no place in what I have been calling the "post-Galilean" conception of nature. So even if we no longer aspire to reductive explanations, we still can balk at the full "reality" of the intrinsically higher, in the name of a naturalistic, evolutionary account of the human animal and its life form.

In fact, it is not entirely clear where McDowell and Wiggins stand on the issue of this kind of modified naturalism. It may be significant that the major discussion by Wiggins I referred to above, on the development of shared perceptions and responses of significance properties, centers on the funny as the key example; this is a property which does not at first blush invoke the incommensurably higher as many moral properties do.

So we have not discharged our entire debt to phenomenology once we have laid the ghost of microreductionism to rest. There remains the tension between the phenomenology of the incommensurably higher and a naturalist ontology which has difficulty finding a place for this.

Let us remember the real-life disputes of which these often rather bloodless philosophical debates are echoes. Much of ethics in human history has been articulated in terms of religious or metaphysical beliefs. That is, the incommensurably higher has been understood in terms of, say, God's will for human beings, or the way we have been made by God, or the debt we owe him for being; or else (to take up another major tradition) in terms of the order of things in the cosmos of which we are a part.

Nor were these languages just gratuitous. They made sense to people because they seemed to articulate their sense of the higher. Take one example. One of the core intuition types of our ethical outlook is that which identifies humans as worthy of respect; one might say "incommensurable respect" to mark the notion that their rights are not to be traded away for anything else. This is a particularly strong intuition in our time, but it is part of a family which arguably is always present in human society. Those who command such respect may be a small minority in some societies; they may not include the many

subordinate classes—women, slaves, underlings, and so on—but there are always some such. The reasons for such respect vary quite considerably, but it is always there.

Now, the basis of this respect has often been articulated in such terms as the logos that resides in human beings and which is close to the divine in the Universe (some Stoics), or more recently, as our being made in the image of God. Recently, Vaclav Havel[10] has pointed to some such basis for universal human rights.

Is this grounding just a mistake? Or a historically understandable limitation in the imagination of past generations? If so, what kind of mistake was it? Did these people have false views about human psychology? So that they imagined (and others still today wrongly imagine) that you cannot get as worked up about human rights if you do not see humans in this theological or metaphysical spotlight?

But this cannot really be the issue. Because these articulations of the "respect worthiness" of the human did not just offer extra incentives or an extra rhetorical impulse to our inclination to act rightly toward our fellows. They were meant to articulate what respect worthiness consisted in. In other words, they offer further specifications of the concept that is in play here, the one that we can apply rightly or wrongly, and that we therefore cannot see as a simple projection.

And indeed, this emerges clearly in the impact that they have had in the debates about what is due to humans. The theological claim based on Genesis I has been invoked to challenge restrictions on the recognition of rights, as famously with abolitionism in the United States. This is not to say that accepting the theology automatically leads to the emancipatory conclusion; history shows otherwise. But it is undeniable that in this case the abolitionists felt constrained by the logic of their belief. And this led them to propose far-reaching change in the human rights practice of their time. It is hard to fault their logic.

Nor are such issues only to be found in the past. The same theology can inspire action to defend or help people who might be relegated

[10] "I have often asked myself why human beings have any rights at all. I always come to the conclusion that human rights, human freedoms, and human dignity have their deepest roots somewhere outside the perceptible world. These values are as powerful as they are because, under certain circumstances, people accept them without compulsion and are willing to die for them, and they make sense only in the perspective of the infinite and the eternal. I am deeply convinced that what we do, whether it be in harmony with our conscience, the ambassador of eternity, or in conflict with it, can only finally be assessed in a dimension that lies beyond that world we see around us. If we did not sense this, or subconsciously assume it, there are some things that we could never do"—*The New York Review of Books*, XLVI, 10 (June 10, 1999), p. 6.

more to the margins in the light of other outlooks. We might think here of Mother Teresa's care for the old and dying in the streets of Calcutta. Or the concern for abortion among many Christians. On the other side, a Utilitarian thinker, like Peter Singer, can countenance infanticide in certain circumstances.

Now, there is clearly no simple logic at work here. We cannot take single propositions about the basis of respect and then pair them with universally accepted conclusions about its extension. And it is clear that for any given concrete position on extension, a plurality of ontological views can be arrayed in a coalition behind it. But it is also clear that in the logic of the actual arguments people make and follow, basis articulations have consequences for extension decisions. Some of these arguments are, no doubt, mistaken. But are they all? If not, then the question can arise whether the values we espouse can be supported on the basis of the ontology to which we want to subscribe. Maybe Havel is right, and the kinds of things most of us believe about rights call for an articulation that would take us beyond the bounds of a naturalist ontology. The battle between phenomenology and ontology would break out again.

Or let us take it from another angle. Many of us have a concept of nobility; all the way from Aristotle (translating thus *to kallon*), to E. O. Wilson.[11] Here is a term that invokes the incommensurably higher, which McDowell's argument depends on, according to my reading.

Now one can feel the tension in Wilson's position. If morality is what has been programmed into our brains, if it has "no other demonstrable ultimate function" (*ibid.*, p. 167), then a gap seems to open up between the ontology of what we discriminate in our world (which includes the noble/non-noble), and that of the universe including complex organisms in which we act, and out of which our evolution and present action is to be explained.

One might think that this is just a problem for Wilson, in virtue of the sociobiological account that he espouses; that it disappears once we have taken on board the antireductive arguments of McDowell and others. But it seems to me that a problem still remains.

We give a special importance to nobility. People have been known to risk their lives, their prosperity, their ordinary happiness and fulfillment in its name. It is a powerful ideal. (Of course, it is not for everybody, but for many who espouse it.) How can we explain its rise

[11] *On Human Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1978), p. 197. I have discussed Wilson's position in *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989), pp. 406–07.

as a major motivation among this lately developed simian species we belong to? This would seem a legitimate question, although terribly difficult, perhaps unanswerable. But then even though we may no longer acknowledge a necessity to restrict our explanation to the factors that might have impinged on precultural hominids evolving in the late Pleistocene, even though we have rejected a certain kind of evolutionary reductionism, we are still left with a basic conundrum.

In terms of the ontology we allow ourselves as post-Galilean naturalists, this strong human motivation, defined intentionally in terms of nobility, has to be explained in terms that recognize no such intrinsic value. That is precisely why the temptation is so strong to explain it in terms of L-values of the kind which figure in sociobiological accounts: for example, there was an evolutionary advantage to warriors feeling they had to risk their lives for the clan, so this very strong impulse got selected for. The response to the current situation is accounted for in terms of our discriminating alternative courses of action as noble/base. But in the genetic account, it is explained in terms of our response to alternatives as strongly/weakly desired. This cannot but evoke the sense that what underlies our strong inclination to nobility is a response that is triggered by a situation that is describable without this value term.

How to avoid this sense of contradiction? Well, by concurring that the evolutionary story does not have to be confined to the extramoral terms and L-values that the post-Galilean restriction requires. Our genetic account has to allow for the emergence of such higher value properties. It has to allow in other words that these properties can figure in their own genetic account, in the sense that they cannot be entirely and adequately explained by the lower-order factors governing the genetic process before their appearance. In terms of L-values, by which we explain the evolution of lower animals, these higher ones represent a kind of surd.

Now, maybe this is what McDowell's antireductive argument is meant to involve. And one could argue that something like this is intended in Wiggins's account of the social-cultural evolution of, for example, the funny. But whatever the views of these writers, it has to be admitted that emergence in this sense puts a severe crimp in the standard naturalism of today's dominant evolutionary theories. We are constantly told that these are meant to explain the rise of the most complex and evolved organisms, including ourselves, by the same principles as govern the emergence of the lowest such beings. Nothing but the chance recombinations of DNA, coupled with the mechanisms of natural selection, is needed to explain the whole saga. But once you accept strong emergence to account for human ethics

and culture, then why not also on lower levels as well? One can already hear Daniel Dennett muttering about irresponsible recourse to skyhooks.

In this way, too, it would appear that the hoped-for reconciliation between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology is, to say the least, somewhat premature.

This much, however, seems clear. We cannot retrieve the original innocent belief of modern, naturalistic philosophical culture that places moral commitments and factual beliefs in different spheres, so that no problem can arise of reconciling phenomenology and ontology. It is clear that naturalism rules out certain bases for ethics, for example, the Stoic or the Christian ones referred to above; and with these, it rules out the property terms that are defined in terms of them. We cannot combine just any set of properties with any old ontology.

The really interesting question that remains is whether the ethic that all of us share, naturalists and antinaturalists alike, say, the affirmation of universal human rights, with their sense that human beings are unconditionally worthy of respect, can consort with the evolutionary naturalism that finds such higher goods "queer." Certainly, the vast majority of our naturalist colleagues believe so. But others, like Havel, seem to have the opposite intuition. Here, on the brink of the really interesting question, I have to break off, partly through lack of time; and partly because the conceptual means at my disposal are still too crude to explore this in an illuminating fashion.[12] I hope to return to this at another time.

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[12] The conceptual indigence is perhaps not entirely mine. Awareness of these issues is somewhat obscured (a) by the tendency in "analytic" philosophy to neglect questions of articulation in favor of issues around already established formulations, then also more particularly (b) by its tendency to concentrate in ethics on the morality of obligatory action, neglecting issues of the good life and of moral sources; finally, the crunch here is hidden (c) by the understandable confusions as people tack between arguments about the ontological commitments of an already accepted ethic, and revisionist arguments aiming to establish a more stripped-down naturalist ethic (see above, p. 314).