Human Nature and the Transcendent

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. Human Restlessness

Let me start with the enigmatic dictum of Blaise Pascal: *'l'homme passe l'homme'* – 'man goes beyond himself'; 'humanity transcends itself'.[1] What does this mean? On one plausible interpretation, Pascal is adverting to that strange *restlessness* of the human spirit which so many philosophers have pondered on, from Augustine before him, to Kierkegaard and many subsequent writers since.[2] To be human is to recognize that we are, in a certain sense, incomplete beings. We are on a journey to a horizon that always seems to recede from view. Unlike all the other animals, who need nothing further for their thriving and flourishing once the appropriate environmental conditions are provided, human beings, even when all their needs are catered for – physical, biological, social, cultural – and even when they enjoy a maximally secure and enriching environment, still have a certain resistance to resting content with existence defined within a given set of parameters. They still have the restless drive to reach forward to something more.

Human beings, in short, are possessed of what one might call 'transcendent urges'. Augustine and Kierkegaard, like Pascal, thought that these transcendent urges were urges for the Transcendent (with a capital 'T'). All three thought (though they expressed themselves in very different ways) that the restlessness and incompleteness of our nature derived from an inchoate longing for God. The notion of such a longing in these and other writers is often coupled with the idea that humans enjoy occasional glimpses into a deeper richer reality than is disclosed in our ordinary mundane experience of the world. William Wordsworth's famous ode on 'Intimations of Immortality' laments the fleetingness of these sporadic glimpses of the transcendent: he describes how, as we are ground down by the preoccupations of routine adult life,

[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [c. 1660], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), no 131.

[2] St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* [*Confessiones*, c. 398], Book I, Ch. 1; Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* [*Sygdommen til Døden*, 1849].

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they 'die away and fade into the light of common day'. But he suggests that this mundane sense of flatness, of incompleteness, which surrounds much of our ordinary existence, itself bears witness to an innate longing for something that transcends it – an intimation that is an ineradicable part of what it is to be human. As Wordsworth puts it, drawing on religious language (with Platonic overtones) we are all born 'trailing clouds of glory … from God who is our home.'[3]

A nice poetic idea, perhaps; or possibly an irritating one, depending on your tastes. But either way, the hardnosed analytic philosopher (which I take it we all are, at least from time to time) may be very sceptical about the move from 'transcendent' longings to a transcendent *object* of those longings. May there not be other ways of explaining those longings, *immanentist* ways, as it were – ways that do not have to involve reference to anything other than the natural world we inhabit? For example, a Darwinian explanation might suggest that the restlessness of the human spirit is simply a by-product of a certain kind of open-ended energy and inquisitiveness that has proved an enormous advantage to our species in the struggle for survival. A tribe that constantly probes and reaches beyond the parameters defined by current conditions may be far better equipped to compete for scarce resources, especially in times of environmental crisis and change. So on this view the so-called urge to transcend could simply arise from a natural and highly advantageous drive to move one step beyond the present, and need not presuppose any ultimate Transcendent object, with a capital T.

The theist might take issue with this, on the grounds that the restlessness we are speaking of is a hunger not just to keep moving one step ahead, but a hunger for some ultimate answer, something entirely beyond the series of natural causes and conditions. But even if one grants that the hunger is of this uniquely transcendent kind, one might still be dubious that it must have an actual – or even a possible – transcendent *object*. Thomas Aquinas may have subscribed to the principle *nullum desiderium naturae inane* – no desire that is inherent in our human nature can be empty or vain – but the principle seems far from self-evident.[4] Even if most human urges have objects that can satisfy them – sexual longings have sexual objects, drives for

[3] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 12, 208–218 [1805 edition].

[4] 'Inest enim homini naturale desiderium cognoscendi causam, cum intuetur effectum; et ex hoc admiratio in hominibus consurgit. Si igitur intellectus rationalis creaturae pertingere non possit ad primam causam rerum, remanebit inane desiderium naturae.' Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266–73], Ia, q.12. a.1.

food have as their object actual or possible meals, and our yearning for affection reaches out towards possible companions and friends[5] – it does not seem to follow that all our natural aspirations must conform to this pattern. We may want there to be an ultimate answer that stills our human restlessness, but such an answer may simply not be available. We may want there to be an ultimate source of being and goodness, but there may not be one.[6]

Nevertheless, we may at least be prepared to agree with Aquinas that 'transcendent' longings in one form or another do seem to be 'natural' – they are a widespread feature of human experience. So without begging any questions about their object, one may at least conclude that they merit serious attention from any philosopher interested in understanding the human condition. I want in this paper to take a look at three aspects of the apparent human reaching after the transcendent, namely the cosmological, the aesthetic, and the moral. The general thrust of my argument will be that the demands of integrity, being sincere and true to the character of our own lived human experience, require us to reject deflationary or reductionist strategies for explaining away our transcendent urges; and as a result, that the field is very considerably narrowed, when it comes to understanding their significance.

2. The Cosmological Dimension

First, then, let me look briefly at the cosmological dimension – at how the human hunger for transcendence affects our conception of the

[5] A simplified version of the argument from the 'non-emptiness of natural desires' is canvassed by C. S. Lewis: 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.' C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [1952; based on radio talks of 1941–44] (London: Fontana, 1960), Bk. III, Ch. 10: 'Hope'. See further J. Haldane, 'Philosophy, the Restless Heart and the Meaning of Theism', *Ratio* **19:4** (December 2006), repr. in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

[6] Indeed some philosophers might be inclined to go further and question the very intelligibility of the idea of the transcendent – of a reality 'beyond' or 'behind' the natural world. Compare Bede Rundle, *Why is There Something Rather than Nothing?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004).

cosmos itself. In the Big Bang scenario, currently the best available account of what happened thirteen or fourteen billion years ago, a singularity of infinite energy produced everything there is: matter, space, time, all burst into existence out of nothing. Actually, you may think, this is uncannily like divine creation. But the increasingly prevalent naturalism of our times will not of course even entertain a theistic picture. Instead, the prevailing conception is of a *closed* cosmos, a universe shut in on itself – a universe that is, in the immortal words of Bertrand Russell, 'just *there*'. (In a radio debate with Frederick Copleston in 1948, Russell was challenged to say whether he could really accept that the universe was utterly contingent and gratuitous; he replied 'I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all.'[7]) So the naturalist or secularist holds that there is no reality beyond the total set of events and properties that emerged from the big bang, or have subsequently evolved from its debris.[8] That totality, pulsating, quivering, expanding until it finally cools down, simply *lies there*. All we have is brute facticity, as Jean-Paul Sartre might have put it – something that, as we contemplate it, produces a shudder or existential horror or nausea. Or as Albert Camus might have said, indeed did say, we inhabit a universe that is inherently *absurd*; we can, like Sisyphus, try to be defiant as we struggle with the meaninglessness of it all; but that queasiness, that shuddering sense of absurdity, always lurks beneath the surface. It was no accident that Camus, for all his defiance, proclaimed that the only serious philosophical problem left for us in such a world is whether to commit suicide.[9]

Now let me make it clear that I don't think we can *prove* philosophically that the universe we inhabit is not just such a brute, contingent universe. Here I follow the current philosophical consensus. Few people now suppose that anything like the cosmological argument, in any of its traditional forms, could provide a watertight demonstration of a transcendent divine cause of the world. My own view is that this is not so much a matter of this type of argument

[7] 'The Existence of God'. Debate with Fr Fredrick Copleston originally broadcast on the Third Programme of the BBC in 1948. Reprinted in Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), Ch. 13, p. 152.

[8] There are however, important distinctions between different kinds of naturalist; a point to which I shall return.

[9] Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), final chapter.

being *invalid*, but rather of its failing to convince because it begs the question. The traditional cosmological argument starts by seeking a rational explanation of contingency, and finds it (as Aquinas put it) in 'something-we-call-God' – the ultimate, non-contingent being.[10] But this simply begs the question of why we should not, as the secularist apparently does, just accept the contingent in the first place. To acknowledge the brute universe as an ultimate dead-end may be horrible, scary, nauseating even: but that doesn't prove this isn't how things are.[11]

Nevertheless, cosmological type arguments do, I think, achieve this much. They show that the 'dead-end' assumption of secularism rides roughshod over something fundamental in our nature. We humans have a yearning for meaning and explanation: in no other area of our human lives do we accept brute facticity. The whole magnificent story of science is the story of human beings insisting, again and again, that there *is*, there *must be*, a reason for what seems initially to be utterly baffling and mysterious.[12] Amazingly (we do

[10] 'It is necessary to posit something which is necessary in its own right, and does not have the cause of its necessity from elsewhere but is itself the cause of necessity in other things; and this everyone calls "God".' Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, question 2, article 3. There are complexities in Aquinas's 'third way', 'from the contingency of the world', which it is not part of my purpose to examine here. I am most grateful to Brian Davies for illuminating several aspects of the argument for me. I should add that he regards my reservations about the argument from contingency as misguided; though I am not so far convinced, it would not affect the argument of the rest of this paper were I to become so.

[11] In case of misunderstanding, these reservations about the argument from contingency should not be taken to imply any general denial of the possibility of natural theology, or of 'reason based' knowledge of God. Indeed, the considerations I shall be putting forward in the remaining sections of this paper do constitute, in my view, substantial rational support (though of a rather special kind) for theism. For a persuasive critique of the Kierkegaardian view that faith defies or overturns reason, see Brian Davies, 'Is God Beyond Reason?' *Philosophical Investigations* **32:4** (October 2009), pp. 338–359.

[12] The phrase 'there must be a reason' is perhaps ambiguous in this context (I owe this point to Peter Dennis). As interpreted by philosophers since the Enlightenment, science makes things intelligible only in the relatively thin sense of subsuming them under general causal principles, not in the sense of uncovering rational explanations. For more on this distinction, see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 70–71. I shall come on to discuss the 'Enlightenment' view of the limits of science in the next paragraph.

not, I think, acknowledge as much as we should just how amazing it is), this supposedly brute, absurd universe turns out to conform to the most marvellous and intricate logical and mathematical patterns. That holds good even at the quantum level. For notwithstanding the implications of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, or rather, in virtue of exploiting that very principle, quantum mechanics has managed to furnish us with laws of staggering accuracy and proven success, which enable us to bring even the micro world into the domain of mathematical understanding. The operation of the micro world, and especially its relationship to the laws of the macro world, may still elude our full grasp; but the fact remains that science, the greatest achievement of modern man, finds *logos*, intricate mathematical and logical order, at the very heart of reality, in the workings of the smallest particles and of the largest galaxies.[13] That all this rational intelligibility can emerge from a brute entity, a raw singularity whose existence defies explanation, could, perhaps, be the case. But I do not believe that it is in the nature of any human being to rest content with brute facticity, let alone with brute facticity that just happens, as a brute fact, to generate a cosmos of such extraordinary intelligibility. Cosmological secularism, the willed insistence on a closed world, impervious to anything beyond its own brute self, is an idea that comes near to self-destructing in the very act of its defiant proclamation.

You may object that what I have just suggested runs in the face of the secular revolution in philosophy that happened in the Enlightenment. Did not David Hume establish once for all that there is nothing wrong with an explanatory dead-end? As he put it in the First Enquiry, 'The utmost effort of human reason is to reduce the principles productive of natural phenomena to a greater simplicity … But as to the causes of these general causes, we should in vain attempt their discovery … The most perfect philosophy of the natural kind only staves off our ignorance.'[14] In other words,

[13] The Kantian tradition would of course construe this order as a mere function of the grid imposed by the human mind. But even if one were to accept that view (which runs counter to the strong common-sense intuition that science discovers order in things rather than imposing it on things), it simply shifts the focus of wonder from the particles and the galaxies to the human beings made out of those materials: how can the marvel of *logos* in the human mind arise from brute facticity?

[14] David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748], Sectn IV, part 1, penultimate paragraph.

no matter how far science progresses, it can never answer the ultimate question about the 'causes of the causes', the reasons for the ultimate laws: we had better just accept them as brute facts.

I think, however, that we have to be very careful how we read Hume here. It would in my view be a serious mistake to interpret cosmologically or ontologically a point that Hume merely intended to be taken epistemologically. Hume was talking (as indeed, in my view, were all the Enlightenment philosophers) about the limits of our *knowledge*, not about the limits of *reality*. This epistemological reading of Hume was persuasively advocated some years ago by John Wright in his book *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*.[15] Take, for example, the case of causation. What Wright argued (later closely followed by Galen Strawson)[16] was that Hume is not denying the intelligibility or the possibility of underlying connections in nature, but is simply making the epistemic point that, since our knowledge is necessarily based on observation and experience, if such connections existed *we could never know anything about them*. This makes good sense of what Hume has to say in general about science and its limits. As a good empiricist, Hume would never go as far as the modern dogmatic secularist, and insist that science tells us the cosmos is closed. For how could science, if (as Hume thought) it is rooted in the phenomenal world, possibly tell us what does or does not like beyond the limits of that world? It is much better to think of Hume as a certain kind of sceptic – and sceptics characteristically suspend judgement; they do not lay down the law about ultimate reality. Hume the sceptic is in no position to pronounce, nor does he, on whether or not there are, as he puts it, some 'ultimate springs and principles' of reality. Admittedly he himself rejected the theistic belief in an ultimate principle – the mysterious first cause which, as Aquinas put it, 'all men call God'; but Hume's very empiricism and scepticism means that he cannot logically rule it out. His point is that if there is any such principle, then given the limits of our knowledge, it must remain (as he graphically put it) 'totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry'.[17]

The upshot of this short digression on Hume (whom I take as a representative of the Enlightenment in general) is that nothing in

[15] J. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[16] G. Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

[17] Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, loc. cit.

Enlightenment philosophy supports the idea of the 'closed' cosmos. The limits of our knowledge *may* be the limits of the world, but reality may, for all we know, transcend our empirical knowledge. And one may add, to revert to my opening theme, that it remains an ineradicable part of our human nature never to rest content with any proposed limits, but always to yearn to reach beyond them. So if there is nothing beyond those limits, if the universe is simply 'there', then we are stuck in a blind cul-de-sac, a dead-end from which our deepest nature recoils in repugnance. Such repugnance does not logically refute the secularist, of course; but it does show, I think, that adopting the secularist outlook generates a certain internal dissonance or tension, which makes it harder than is generally realised to embrace that outlook wholeheartedly and consistently. This is even more apparent when we think about the moral and aesthetic aspects of our human drive to reach towards the transcendent, which will be my main focus in the remainder of this paper.

3. The Experiential Dimension

Let me consider first the aesthetic dimension of our transcendent urgings – though actually the word 'aesthetic', with its rather effete contemporary connotations can be very misleading here (our mind immediately goes to the art critic holding forth about the latest exhibition, or the wine-taster pronouncing on a vintage). What I have in mind rather is the kind of thing I alluded to at the start of the paper, the 'transcendent' moments that many people will from time to time have experienced, the times when the drab, mundane pattern of our ordinary routines gives way to something vivid and radiant, and we seem to glimpse something of the beauty and significance of the world we inhabit. Wordsworth expressed it as follows, in a famous passage in *The Prelude*:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> That with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence – depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
> In trivial occupations, and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse – our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
> A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,

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That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.[18]

Do we classify what is being referred to here in terms of an aesthetic or a moral or a mystical experience? None of these categories is quite adequate, and the implied separation of our experience into such discrete components is in any case misleading. Certainly, great works of art can occasion this kind of heightened awareness, but the experience is not 'aesthetic' in the narrowly compartmentalised sense of that term. For in such moments of 'lifting up', referred to here and in many other passages in Wordsworth, and in the works of many other poetic and religious writers, there is a kind of integrated vision of the meaning of the whole. What 'lifts us up' is precisely the sense that our lives are not just a disorganized concatenation of contingent episodes, but that they are capable of fitting into a pattern of meaning, where responses of joy and thankfulness and compassion and love for our fellow creatures are intertwined; and where they make sense because they reflect a splendour and a richness that is not of our own making. Such a vision is patently at work in the description of a transfigured reality set down by Thomas Traherne in the seventeenth century:

> The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The Dust and Stones of the Street were as Precious as GOLD … And yong Men Glittering and Sparkling Angels, and Maids strange Seraphic Pieces of Life and Beauty! … Eternity was Manifest in the Light of the Day, and som thing infinit Behind evry thing appeared: which talked with my Expectation and moved my Desire.[19]

Notice that this kind of 'transfiguration' is not a 'religious experience', if that latter term is understood in the rather narrow way that has become common in our culture, when philosophers speak, for example, of the 'argument from religious experience'. What is often meant under this latter heading is some kind of revelation which is taken to be evidence for, or to validate, the supposed truths of some particular creed or cult – a vision of the Virgin Mary, for example, or what William James calls 'a sense of presence', of some

[18] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* **12**, 208–218 [1805 edition].

[19] Thomas Traherne, 'The Third Century' [*c*. 1670], § 3, in *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings* ed. H.M. Margoliouth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 111. Quoted in J.V. Taylor, The Christlike God (London: SCM, 1992), p. 33.

mighty being. This kind of notion is I think uppermost in many people's mind when they insist that they have never had a 'religious experience'. By contrast, the kinds of 'transcendent' experience I've just been referring to – the kind described by Wordsworth or Traherne – involve not so much a revelation of supernatural entities, but rather a heightening, an intensification, that transforms the way in which we experience the world. Once one thinks in these terms, it is much harder for most of us, if we honestly interrogate ourselves, baldly to deny that our human experience has ever encompassed such moments. The term 'transcendent' seems appropriate not in the sense of that there is necessarily an explicit invocation of metaphysical objects that transcend ordinary experience, but rather because the categories of our mundane life undergo a radical shift: there is a sudden irradiation that discloses a beauty and goodness, a meaning, that was before occluded.

The domain of music provides another example, that in some ways is clearer, since we are not dealing with a pictorial medium and hence there is less temptation to suppose that transcendent experiences must involve a vision of a supernatural entity. Roger Scruton, writing of the work of Richard Wagner (for example in the Ring cycle) has put it as follows, inviting us to draw the lesson

> that you could subtract the gods and their stories … and still the most important thing would remain. This thing has its primary reality not in myths but … in moments that stand outside time, in which the deep loneliness and anxiety of the human individual is confronted and overcome. By calling these moments 'sacred' we recognize both their complex social meaning and also the respite that they offer from alienation. Forget theology, forget doctrine and belief, forget all the ideas about an after-life – for none of these have the importance … that attaches to the moment … when the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it.[20]

Depending on one's musical tastes, one may readily respond to the Wagner example, or prefer instead to invoke the work of some other composer. But I think it will be difficult for anyone who has had an overwhelming response to a great musical work not to acknowledge the force of Scruton's contention that what is offered thereby is a 'respite from alienation'. In using the label 'sacred' to

[20] Roger Scruton 'The Sacred and the Human' [2010] *http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/gifford/2010/the-sacred-and-the-human/* accessed 30 March 2010.

describe the moments in which we have the relevant kinds of transcendent experience, he is referring in part to the way they take us far beyond the drab world of our ordinary transactions, and open up new layers of meaning.

But there is nevertheless one part of Scruton's account which may seem wholly problematic even to those who are sympathetic to the general notion of 'transfiguration' and 'irradiation' which I have been sketching out. The secularist may be fully alive to the deep human need for meaning and value in our lives, and wholly receptive to the transformative and transfiguring power of great artistic and musical creations that enables us to glimpse such meaning and value, but will nonetheless be strongly resistant to the suggestion that in such cases the human world is (in Scruton's phrase) 'suddenly irradiated from a point *beyond* it.' Can we not give an entirely immanentist account of the meaning and value disclosed in such experiences – an account that remains firmly within the confines of the human world? To tackle this question, which is crucial to my argument, it will be helpful to focus more closely on the phenomenology of our experience of value, both in the types of case we have been considering, but also in the domain of interpersonal morality, where the issues are thrown into sharper relief.

4. The Phenomenology of Value

I have spoken up till now of transcendent 'longings' or 'urges'; and the use of terms like these may give the impression of something entirely internal or endogenous, like an obsessive urge to scratch, or a wistful longing to become a television celebrity. Someone who confesses to restless yearnings of the latter kind may reasonably expect to be told 'get over it!' or 'grow out of it!'. But applying such a douche of cold water in every case simply will not work. To attempt to psychologize or subjectivize *all* our human longings would in many cases do violence to the phenomenology involved. In the case of the transfiguring experiences we have just been discussing, the disclosures of richness and beauty in works of art and of nature, what happens is irresistibly presented to the subject not merely as an endogenous occurrence, but as a *response*: it arises, to be sure, from something deep inside our nature, but it is also called forth and sustained by something outside of us, something that we in a certain sense seem constrained to submit to, in amazement or awe. René Descartes, often held up as the paradigm of the detached rational inquirer, described his encounter with the infinite

source of goodness and truth in the *Meditations* in a way that can only be characterised in terms of submission: 'here let me pause for a while', he says at the end of the Third Meditation, 'and gaze at, wonder at and adore the beauty of this immense light, in so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it.' Today's university lecturers tend to filter out such passages, perhaps from embarrassment, or because the texts do not fit their preferred image of Descartes as the detached academic epistemologist, but suggest instead something closer to the worshiper. But Descartes's account of the meditator's reaction is, I submit, meant quite seriously, and meant to do justice to the special phenomenology involved. The transcendent source that the meditator has groped towards in the course of his rational inquiries, turns out, once it is glimpsed even faintly, to call forth a passionate Cartesian response of wonder and admiration.

This kind of passivity or submission is very characteristic of what I have been calling transcendent experiences. It is manifestly to be found in our experience of sublime works of art. Martha Nussbaum, talking of our response to a great poem or other literary text, speaks of an awareness that involves a 'deliberate yielding'. The text in question

> *enlists us in … a trusting and loving activity* … we allow ourselves to be touched by the text, by the characters as they converse with us over time … Before a [great] literary work … we are *humble, open, active yet porous*.[21]

To any who reflect on the nature of transcendent experiences, Nussbaum's conjunction 'active yet porous' will I think seem particularly illuminating. There has to be activity on the part of the subject, a voluntary action of attentiveness, of willingness to be open to what is going on; yet there is also a passive receptivity to the power of something entirely other than oneself.

The same combination can I think also be seen in the exercise of our human moral faculties. The Danish philosopher Knud Løgstrup speaks of the 'ethical demand' in terms of trust and self-surrender that are a basic part of human life'.[22] His particular focus is the openness and responsiveness to another person which is

[21] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 281 and 282 (emphasis added).

[22] Knud E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand* [*Den Etiske Fordring*, 1956] ed. H. Fink and A. MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Ill.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

morally required in any human encounter or relationship. But a phenomenologically somewhat similar process occurs, it seems to me, in our responsiveness to central moral values. What philosophers have come to call 'normativity' is one way of referring to a remarkable feature of moral values like the wrongness of cruelty, for example, or the goodness of compassion: such values exert a demand upon us, they call forth our allegiance, irrespective of our inclinations and desires. When we contemplate such properties, with the required combination of attentiveness yet receptivity, we transcend ourselves, as Pascal might have put it: we are taken beyond our own inclinations or endogenous attitudes to something higher and more authoritative. No matter what you or I may feel about cruelty – even if we develop a taste for it – it remains wrong, wrong in all possible worlds. And no matter how disinclined you or I may be to show compassion, the goodness of compassion retains its authority over us and demands our admiration and our compliance, whether we like it or not.

These are truths that we cannot honestly deny, if we sincerely interrogate ourselves. Integrity is important here: we may pretend to question these truths, or may try to construct some philosophical argument against them as apart of an intellectual game; but if we retain our integrity, if we are 'active yet porous' in the way Nussbaum recommends, we cannot deny the authoritative power of these values (which of course, and unfortunately, does not mean that we always follow them, since we are self-evidently weak and conflicted beings).

The conflictedness of our nature is of more than incidental interest here, since it is connected with the 'moral gap', as the theologian and philosopher John Hare has called it – the gap between what we are and what we might be, or what we are called to be. This ties in closely with our theme of transcendence. In our transcendent moral impulses, as with the other areas we have been discussing, something appears to draw us forward and beyond ourselves, beyond the flux of our contingent and fluctuating inclinations, beyond the bundle of traits and characteristics we happen to have evolved to have, towards something more absolute and unchanging. This of course was what was expressed by the traditional notion of the 'eternal' verities – timeless and authoritative values of truth, beauty and goodness that seem immune to the vicissitudes of fashion, culture and inclination.

5. Eternal Values Versus Darwin and Nietzsche

Some may find this traditional notion of eternal values very implausible: since conditions change over time, it may be objected, then

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surely how we should act must correspondingly change (for example, tribal loyalty may have been at a premium in an earlier stage of our development, while environmental stewardship was largely irrelevant; whereas today the opposite is true).[23] Of course I would not deny that there are many rules for living that fluctuate, and rightly so, over time, as conditions change. But this does not at all show that there are not certain fundamental core moral values that do not and cannot change. Those who reject this, denying that our deepest and most central moral impulses give us a window onto the transcendent, are typically inclined to see the domain of moral value as ultimately dependent on certain structural features of human nature, as it has developed over time. But before we are tempted down this route, we should reflect on the hostages to moral anarchy that are offered in this capitulation to contingency. For what we are in the end faced with, if we go down this route, is a damagingly deflationist conception of morality. Once the historical and developmental contingency of moral values is allowed, then instead of providing us with insight into ultimate meaning and value, our faculty of moral judgement becomes simply a product, or by-product, of how our ancestors happened to have evolved in the struggle for survival. In the course of Chapters 4 and 5 of the *Descent of Man*, which are about the evolution of our moral sensibilities, Charles Darwin drops a highly significant phrase – the '*so-called* moral sense'.[24] His essentially reductionist approach sees conscience, and other so-called 'higher' impulses, as merely one or more of a plethora of natural feelings that have developed under selection pressure. Altruism and self-sacrifice, for instance (to take one example he discusses) may have arisen because tribes in which this trait is prominent 'would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection'.[25]

But this approach in the end undermines everything that has traditionally been associated with the idea of eternal moral values – their objectivity, universality, necessity and (ultimately) their normativity. *Objectivity*: it is vital to the idea of morality that does not

[23] Cf. Alan Holland 'Darwin and the Meaning of Life' *Environmental Values* **18** (2009) pp. 503–18, and the response in J. Cottingham, 'The Meaning of Life and Darwinism', *Environmental Values* **20** (2011).

[24] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* [1871; 2nd edn repr. 1879] (London: Penguin, 2004), Ch. 4, p. 143.

[25] Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Ch. 5, p. 157–8. Modern evolutionary theorists would see this apparent endorsement of group selection as problematic, but, with the aid of genetic theory, could easily adjust the story, rewriting in terms of the advantages of prevalence within a given population of an individual gene or genes linked to altruistic behaviour.

depend merely on our subjective drives and preferences (which may change, or be corrupted). *Universality*: conceptions of virtue do of course differ in different epochs and tribes – something that Darwin makes great play with– but there can still be core moral values that hold always and everywhere. The wrongness of slavery, for example, or the goodness of compassion, may not universally acknowledged in all lands or all historical periods, but that does not prevent their reflecting perfectly objective and universal truths about virtue and value. (Compare scientific laws, which hold universally, but are certainly not acknowledged everywhere and always.) *Necessity*: cruelty does not just *happen* to be wrong, but is wrong in all possible worlds. We may of course transgress such fundamental norms, and often do, but they are, as Gottlob Frege put it in a rather different connection (discussing the truths of logic and mathematics) rather like 'boundary stones which our thought can overflow but not dislodge'.[26] And finally *normativity*: moral principles (as I have stressed earlier) exert an authoritative demand or call upon us, whether we like it or not. Darwin tries to wriggle out of acknowledging this special kind of authority this when he speaks deflatingly of 'the imperious word *ought*'. 'The imperious word *ought*', he says in the *Descent*, seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a rule of conduct, *however it may have originated*.'[27]

But notice the disturbing implications of this idea. If our ethical conceptions are a product of a purely contingent concatenation of events, if they might have been otherwise, then it begins to look as if they might be *overridable*. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it, in the *Genealogy of Morals* (published not too long after Darwin's *Descent*) once we start to think about the conditions under which man invented the value judgements good and evil, we can start to ask *what value to these value judgements themselves possess*.[28] It is no accident that Bernard Williams's conception of ethics, and his scepticism about what he called 'the morality system', was strongly influenced by Nietzsche, and his idea that, once we accept that ethics

[26] Frege was talking about the laws of logic, which he regarded as wholly objective, holding independently of contingent facts about human psychology. They are 'fixed and eternal … boundary stones set in an eternal foundation, which our thought can overflow, but not dislodge.' Gottlob Frege, *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* [*Die Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, Vol. I, 1893], transl. M. Furth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 13.

[27] Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Ch. 4, p. 140.

[28] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* [*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887], Preface, § 3.

has a genealogy, a contingent history, this frees us from acknowledging the authority of so called eternal moral values.[29] Williams in his later work was seriously occupied with this problem of the 'radical contingency' of the ethical, as he called it, and opinions differ about whether he succeeded in defusing it. But Nietzsche's sinister conclusion, at any rate, was that we can, if we are strong enough, decide to *invert* eternal moral values. In a godless universe, where God is 'dead', then we are not subject to any higher authority, and so questions of value become merely a function of the projects we autonomously decide to pursue. So (as Nietzsche frighteningly suggested in one of the most disturbed and disturbing passages in Western philosophy) there might be conclusive reasons to steel ourselves *against* impulses of love and mercy, to harden our hearts against compassion and forgiveness, since such sentiments might get in the way of our will to power, or our passion for self-realisation as a new and stronger kind of being.[30]

6. Some Qualified Concessions to the Naturalistic Framework

Before drawing the threads together to a conclusion, I want to make some qualified concessions to the naturalistic framework for understanding ourselves, which in my talk of eternal values I may seem to have been entirely rejecting. We human beings are, to be sure, creatures who belong within the natural world, and any plausible account of human nature needs to acknowledge this. The existentialists of the twentieth century of course went so far as to deny there was any such thing as human nature; instead there was just the existing subject, free to write any script he desired on the blank slate of his self-sufficient and autonomous life. But whatever his faults, Darwin was surely right to insist that we humans are part of nature, shaped and formed by the dynamic flux of the natural world. And although

[29] '[A] truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are not obviously related to them a way that vindicates them against possible rivals.' Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Ch. 2, p. 20.

[30] See F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse, 1886*], § 37, and (for 'inverting' eternal values) § 203. For further discussion of the issues raised in this paragraph, see J. Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical",' in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 2, pp. 25–43.

Darwinian ideas may seem to give comfort to the existentialist denial of a human essence, by putting pressure on the idea of fixed and immutable natures,[31] any plausible developmental account of our origins must surely allow there are stable features of the human condition that remain virtually unchanged across vast swathes of time. These stabilities are of course reflected in the ethical domain. For example, Aristotelian ethics aimed at specifying those excellences of character that enable us to flourish as the kind of creatures we are – possessed of drives and needs we share with other animals, yet also having the capacity for rational reflection; and it is striking how much of that ethics continues to speak to us today. Of course it is not entirely immutable: there may be room for dispute about which virtues need to be added to or subtracted from the list; but despite all the ways in which our lives diverge from those of Classical Greece, say, there is ample evidence from literature and history and biology to believe that our human nature has changed very little, if at all; indeed, in evolutionary and genetic terms, the whole human story since prehistoric times is the merest blink of an eye. So it is perfectly plausible to maintain that any account of human flourishing must be anchored in certain relatively stable, basic facts about human nature, and that, whatever the variations in these accounts from epoch to epoch, or culture to culture, there will necessarily be a vast amount in common.

[31] There are complex philosophical issues involved in the move away from fixed essences, which I won't discuss here, except to say that they go way beyond the domain of pure natural science, and have important implications for ethics, and for our general conception of the human predicament. For example, if our human characteristics, including our deepest impulses, inclinations and intuitions, are not grounded in anything beyond the contingent flux of evolution, which itself is driven by blind and indifferent natural forces, then it becomes much harder to hold on to the kind of teleological framework for the guidance of life which informed so much philosophical writing on the good for humankind prior to the modern era. In the theistic worldview of Thomas Aquinas, or in the earlier Greek philosophical framework which strongly influenced him, the good for humankind consists in our following the *telos* or goal determined by our nature. By investigating the human nature, and our place in the overall scheme of things, we can see, in principle, the kinds of thing that are good for creatures like us to pursue. *En tô ergô to agathon*, as the Platonic and Aristotelian slogan has it: in the function lies the good. The function is related to the *telos*, and the telos is related to the essence. Ethical debate thus operates within a very stable metaphysical landscape.

So our human nature is part of a relatively stable but slowly evolving story that gradually unfolds as part of the developing history of the natural world. Nothing I have said today should be taken as denying that: we human beings are indeed 'dust of the earth', as the book of Genesis puts it,[32] and we have to understand ourselves as part of the vast natural process of the cosmos. And yet, if what I have been arguing here has any force, we also, in some way that we cannot perhaps fully grasp, transcend that process. We have, as I began by suggesting, transcendent cosmological impulses: the idea of accepting the 'given', of tranquilly making our home within an entirely closed cosmos that is simply 'there' – this generates a fundamental sense of dissonance deep within us. And, as I went on to suggest, even within our ordinary human lives, as we endeavour to cope with the routine demands of living, we are gripped from time to time by powerful intimations of beauty and goodness that seem to take us beyond the domain of the contingent.

You may object to the last step. Why should not our ethical impulses simply reflect certain fundamental and relatively stable contingent facts about our biological and social nature as it has evolved over time? Here, I return to the argument from phenomenology. Go back to Descartes: the meditator described in the Third Meditation encounters something that calls forth responses of admiration and awe – something that he recognizes as exceeding his capacity to fully grasp. In somewhat analogous fashion, I am suggesting that our responses to value are of this kind: as we struggle through life, we seem compelled to acknowledge, sooner or later, the call to orient ourselves towards values that we did not create, and whose normativity cannot be explained merely as a function of a given subset of our natural impulses. Love, compassion, mercy, truth, justice, courage, endurance, fidelity – all belong to a core of key virtues that all the world's great religions (and the modern secular cultures that are their offspring) recognize, and which command our allegiance whether we like it or not. We may try to go against them, to live our lives without reference to them, but if we are honest we cannot gainsay their authority over us. And it's that authority which it seems to me is likely to prove the Achilles heel of all reductionist accounts of value, which relegate them to the status of merely natural phenomena.[33]

[32] Chapter 2, verse 7.

[33] There is no space here to discuss the various reductionist or deflationary accounts on offer, from those (like projectivism) that effectively deny the reality of objective moral properties), to more recent 'buck-passing' accounts

The 'enriched' naturalism of John McDowell might at first seem to offer a way out here. On McDowell's view, the term 'nature' is ambiguous: it can merely mean what I have called the brute facticity of the natural processes and events as described by physical science; but in a richer sense it can refer to the products of human culture, including our systems of morality. These are perfectly 'natural', in the sense that they were developed out of our ordinary contingent activities as biological and social creatures of a certain kind, and hence they do not require us to posit any transcendent or supernatural properties or entities. But they are nonetheless genuine realities, to which we

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which make moral properties second order reason-providing properties based on natural properties. Some of these are discussed in J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 3, and *Why Believe* (London: Continuum, 2009), Ch. 2. It is interesting that many modern ethicists have moved away from naturalism altogether, but the resulting 'non-naturalism', in so far as it floats free from anything like a traditional theistic support, seems to me to reach a terminus of explanation rather too quickly for comfort. Thus Russ Shafer-Landau tells us that values are 'a brute fact about the way the world works'; or, in a later formulation, 'moral principles are as much a part of reality as … the basic principles of physics'. *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 46; 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Non-naturalism', in Shafer Landau (ed.) *Ethical Theory*, Ch. 8. In fairness, Shafer-Landau concedes that his theory is one with 'very limited explanatory resources' (*Moral* Realism, p. 48). But in that case, the danger is that it will not come down to much more than the mere assertion that moral values really (mysteriously) exist. Another non-naturalist moral realist, Eric Wielenberg asserts that moral truths are 'part of the furniture of the universe', and indeed constitute the 'ethical background of every possible universe.' *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 52. This latter phrase suggests that we should think of values as purely abstract objects, perhaps rather like triangles or prime numbers. So if we are prepared to accept that abstract mathematical entities exist (waiting to be discovered and investigated by mathematicians), could we not perhaps accept that abstract values exist (waiting to be investigated by moralists)? Yet this kind of approach seems to invoke one mystery (the existence in all possible worlds of objective mathematical realities) in order to explain another (the existence of moral realities). If eternal mathematical and logical and moral reality is somehow involved in the very existence of things, yet cannot be explained in naturalistic terms, then this is a remarkable fact (and, one might add, remarkably consistent with traditional theism); it seems the non-naturalist needs to *respond* to this, instead of just asserting that such realities are 'part of the universe'.

gain access by being inducted as children into a certain ethical culture; and in virtue of the access thereby gained, we do indeed become subject to moral requirements and demands. As McDowell puts it:

> the rational demands of ethics are not alien to the contingencies of our life as human beings … Ordinary upbringing can shape the actions and thoughts of human beings in a way that brings these demands into view.[34]

It would take far more space than I have here to embark on a proper discussion of McDowell's rich and subtle position. But perhaps I have said enough already to indicate why I do not believe it will work. On the McDowell view, the 'reality' of the moral demands to which we are subject is in the end simply a function of a given human culture with a given biological and social history. There is no further, no more ultimate, moral reality to constrain it or measure it against. Yet that brings us right back into contact with the difficulty discussed in the previous section in connection with Nietzsche and Williams. The history of our ethical culture is a contingent one; it might have been otherwise, and if it had, then, it seems to follow, even on McDowell's enriched picture of nature, that the relevant ethical 'realities' and 'demands' might have been different. I see no way of escaping the subversive implications of this for what Bernard Williams (with a scathingness that was surely apt enough given his Nietzschean reflections on its contingency) called the 'peculiar institution' of morality.[35] Once the cat is out of the bag, once the idea is accepted that the authority and power of the moral demands which seem to call forth our allegiance is simply a function of the contingent culture into which we happen to have been inducted, then true normativity evaporates. The 'morality system' becomes one among other potential systems, a 'peculiar institution' whose shackles we may think, like Nietzsche, that we have reason to shake off in our quest for self-realisation. Yet my argument has been that, although we can try to think ourselves into this subversive frame of mind, to do so runs counter to the depth and richness of our human experience which we cannot in integrity gainsay.

[34] McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 83.

[35] B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins, 1985), Ch. 10.

7. Conclusion

The human experiential facts I have been referring to in the paper seem to me, if we think about them, to be very striking and important ones. We are dependent and flawed creatures, yet possessed of impulses that awaken within us a powerful longing to orient ourselves towards certain enduring values. If we reflect on this, and couple it with an awareness of the obvious fact of our human weakness, and the notorious difficulty humans experience in steadfastly pursuing the good they aspire to, then one is struck by the extent to which religious belief offers a *home* for our aspirations. Theism, in its traditional form found in the three great Abrahamic faiths, involves the idea of a *match* between our aspirations and our ultimate destiny. On this picture, the creative power that ultimately shaped us is itself the source of the values we find ourselves constrained to acknowledge, and has made our nature such that we can find true fulfilment only in seeking those values. In the much-quoted words of St Augustine, 'you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds repose in you.'[36] The natural response to this – to acknowledge that creative source of goodness with joy, and to turn towards it for strength in our struggle – is so basic that it presents itself to the believer as a fundamental and necessary way of going through life. It is not a matter of intellectual hypotheses about the precise macro- or micro- mechanisms that formed our planet or our species, but rather a *necessary impulse of trust*.

I have called this an argument from phenomenology, but in one way that label may mislead because it may suggest that various aspects of our experience are supposed to provide evidential support for a form of theistic-based ethical objectivism. In a certain way I am saying just that, but it needs to be understood correctly. I have not here claimed to provide any sort of coercive argument, or indeed an probabilistic one, if probabilistic is interpreted in the normal way, in terms of impartially and impersonally accessible evidence. What I have tried to offer instead is a challenge, or appeal, to the integrity of the listener. Of course integrity is itself a moral category, and that indicates something important about the kind of 'evidence' we are speaking of. Just as the Cartesian 'encounter' of the finite mind with the infinite requires a certain kind of submission to the light, so the power exerted by the values of beauty and goodness may require a moral change in the subject if it is to be fully

[36] Augustine, *Confessions* Book I, Ch. 1: "fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te."

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apprehended. Moral and aesthetic realities, like religious ones, may be among the set of truths which are subject to what I have elsewhere called 'accessibility conditions': they do not manifest themselves 'cold', as it were, but require a focused and sincere receptivity on the part of the subject.[37]

So the challenge, in conclusion, is to focus, clearly and sincerely, on the character of our transcendent impulses, and our intimations of compelling meaning and value which seem to call us forward to transcend our nature. And then to ask if we are really satisfied with deflationary attempts to classify those impulses away as no more than a given subset of the propensities humans happen to have evolved in the random process defined by genetic lottery and the struggle for survival. If we *are* satisfied with that, well and good. But we need to be very clear about what we would be giving up.[38]

Heythrop College, University of London
jgcottingham@me.com

[37] Cf. Cottingham, *Why Believe?*, Ch. 5, section 2.

[38] Earlier versions of this paper were given at the 2010 Royal Institute of Philosophy Conference on Human Nature, at Oxford Brookes University, at the 2010 Sullivan Lecture delivered at Fordham University, New York, and at the Philosophy Department seminar at Stirling University in May 2011; I should like to thank the participants at those events for helpful discussion. I am also most grateful to Peter Dennis for substantial improvements arising from his detailed and acute comments on the penultimate draft.