Confidence and Irony

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I believe that in relation to ethics there is a genuine and profound difference [from science] to be found, and also...that the difference is enough to motivate some version of the feeling...that science has some chance of being more or less what it seems... while ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems.

Bernard Williams.[1]

Sceptical reflection about value tends to open up a disconcerting gulf between how ethical thought is, and how it seems to be. It is a good question exactly what it would take for ethical thought to be everything it seems. The answer will depend on how ethical thought in fact seems to some relevant `us'. It is often assumed that the nature of our ethical experience is determinate enough and fixed enough for there to be a number of general claims we can make about it once and for all. But the assumption is questionable. An important reason to question it is that our ethical experience may vary with the historical and cultural location of the ethical community - the `us' to whom morality is seeming one way or another. J. L. Mackie took our moral experience to be metaphysically objectivist, so that for morality to be all that it seems, values would have to be objective entities which had action-guidingness somehow built in - `queer' entities, then, about which scepticism was found to be in order.[2] If this was once the right answer to our question, its rightness will be as historically changeable as our ethical phenomenology may be. Mackie did not attend to the idea that our ethical phenomenology might vary with culture and history. Understandably, perhaps, as he was relying on a feature of our phenomenology which might reasonably be expected to be constant: the idea that moral requirements present themselves in experience as coming from `outside' ourselves. This idea is often, rightly, invoked. But it is very unclear that our grasp of a complex idea as abstract and philosophically problematic as the contrast between `internality' and `externality' to the `self' is determinate enough, or fixed enough, to imply anything very much as to how it figures spontaneously in our ethical experience. If there is a determinate manner in which the idea figures, it must be as the idea is shaped by our particular, ongoing ethical *tradition*.[3]

This means that ethical phenomenology could take different forms. Although we must be wary of over-loading ethical experience with intellectualist luggage (a danger which perhaps attends Mackie's account), in a culture characterized by an empiricist outlook, it would not be surprising if the externality of ethical requirement

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[1]Williams, Bernard, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), 134-5.

[2]Mackie, J. L., *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

[3]On the concept of a tradition, see MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), especially chapter 15.

were experienced as metaphysical objectivity. Or, in a culture where a relativist mindset has successfully asserted itself, perhaps one should expect relativity somehow to register in ethical phenomenology. I don't know whether our moral experience is less metaphysically objectifying than it was before the undeniable cultural influence of postmodernism (an influence which can be recognized even by those who would not accept the idea that `postmodernity' names a special historical moment). But it would surely be surprising if the anxious awareness of social difference within and between different cultures - the psychological logo of postmodernism - had not had any effect upon how ethical requirements present themselves in our experience. Be that as it may, we should allow that how morality seems, and hence the answer to the question whether morality has a chance of being as it seems, is susceptible to cultural and historical change. These matters are, in important part, matters of tradition.

The concept of a tradition is of something social or collective in its nature, and this should shape our understanding of the instability that sceptical reflection about value can bring. J. E. J. Altham has remarked:

> It is possible that for some individuals certain of their ethical dispositions depend *psychologically* upon a belief that they are objectively grounded, but, upon the whole, ethical dispositions, being part of a person's character, are not even psychologically vulnerable to the results of inquiry into their general metaphysical status.

That our ethical dispositions are a matter of character brings considerable practical stability, and this stability is in significant part owing to the fact that personal character is the result of an internalization of an ethical outlook held in common. The stability of character does not mean, however, that scepticism leaves ethical psychology just as it is. For it is not in terms of a practical instability that scepticism should in the first instance be understood as posing a threat. The instability should in the first instance be understood in terms of the destruction of authenticity: the onset of a sense of alienation from our own concepts and attitudes as we go about our normal evaluative and practical business. Wherever sceptical reflection has the power to disconcert ethical thought, that power will not be due to a merely individual motivational psychology, but rather to a shared phenomenology of ethical authority which arises from assumptions and attitudes embedded in the particular tradition. Instability will manifest itself as a form of self-alienation on the part of individuals *qua* members of the society whose tradition it is.

If a given tradition casts the authority of ethical judgements in terms of absolute objectivity - as derived perhaps from some set of values held up as metaphysically objective, or from the law of God, or from the workings of Pure Reason - then, so long as its members are at all likely to go in for sceptical reflection about the supposed source of authority, the tradition sets them up for a fall. It sets them up for the special disillusionment that brings inauthenticity so that, as they shape their actions and judgements according to their ethical concepts, the feeling creeps over them that they are merely acting out, merely going through the motions of something

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Altham, J. E. J., `Reflection and Confidence' in J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 156-69, 162.

which used to be authentic. If they (we?) have no means of escaping this predicament - a tragic predicament insofar as it makes a charade of commitments depended on for life's meaningfulness - then the authority of ethical judgements will depend upon success in repressing sceptical reflection, or else somehow sealing it off from normative ethical thought, so as to keep the disillusion at bay.

Personifying Alienation: The Ironist

An important strategy for confining sceptical reflection so that it cannot undermine ethical authority is Richard Rorty's `ironism'. He divides reflection into `public' and `private' stances towards the ethical, so that the subject is divided between two personae: the public liberal (assuming s/he is a liberal), and the private ironist. It is not merely a division of stances, however - as if it were simply a question of two equally irresistible yet irreconcilable conceptions of the ethical subject. It is rather a division between two different and conflicting sets of concerns or interests which the reflective subject will have: `The core of my book [*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*] is a distinction between private concerns, in the sense of idiosyncratic projects of self-overcoming, and public concerns, those having to do with the suffering of other human beings'. Rorty's ironism is essentially an error-theoretical strategy for living with the threat of sceptical destabilization. He says, for instance, that ironists are never `quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves'. Contingency for Rorty, then, is understood as posing a threat to `seriousness'. But contingency brings such fragility only on a very familiar traditional assumption: that acknowledging the historical and social contingency of our ethical outlook will undermine the authority of our ethical judgements. Given this assumption, dividing one's reflection between public and private stances can seem like a good coping strategy. The ironist puts her sceptical thoughts at a safe distance from ordinary ethical deliberation - rather as the weight-watcher may put the chocolate truffles safely out of his reach. The comparison is not intended to trivialize. Given that the distinction between public and private stances is basically one between different sets of `concerns', the analogy with the weight-watcher's self-disciplinary tactic is not altogether distorting. The difficulty with Rorty's two stances is that (unlike the Humean division between philosophy in the study and life at the billiard table) there is nothing about human psychology which renders us simply incapable of experiencing our naive ethical commitments as undermined by sceptical reflection. It is precisely because we are in fact capable of bringing scepticism to bear on our everyday commitments, producing alienation and inauthenticity, that the private/public distinction can seem well motivated. In the absence of plain psychological incapacity, then, Rorty needs to provide a *justification* for the confinement of sceptical reflection to those particular concerns and projects which define the private stance. And I see little

Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Rorty, Richard, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 307-308, note 2.

Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 73-4.

option here besides the roughly prudential justification that if you want to fulfil both public and private projects, you had better keep them apart. If this is right, and the ironist strategy effectively makes prudence an organizing principle of ethical reflection, then ironism shows up as deeply at odds with actual ethical psychology, so that it is hard to imagine how we might make the transition to the `postmetaphysical' attitude. Further, we can see that such a transition is not even desirable, since an appeal to self-discipline is (as our weight-watcher will know) not a particularly reliable recipe for stability.

There is a different sort of difficulty concerning the relation between public and private stances, which relates to the ideal of transparency in ethics: the ideal that the authority which ethical thought has over us should not depend upon any misunderstanding on our part. At first glance, the figure of the ironist might appear to be a very embodiment of the ideal of transparency: someone who makes no metaphysical pretence of that which is really contingent. We might think, then, that the postmetaphysical society is a place where no one labours under any misapprehension about the authority of ethical judgement. But a more perspicuous description would be that it is a society in which people are, in one (private) area of life, open and explicit about the way in which another (public) area of life involves an ongoing pretence: the pretence that ethical thought is authoritative, when in fact the conditions of authority (conceived still in metaphysical terms) are not met. Thus Rorty describes the ironist as someone who `would like to avoid cooking the books she reads by using *any* [metaphysical]...grid (although, with ironic resignation, she realizes that she can hardly help doing so)'. Looked at in this way, the figure of the ironist is an embodiment not of transparency but rather of self-conscious alienation. Ironism, then, does not serve any genuine transparency. That the authority of ethical thought should depend upon our psychological movement in and out of denial as to its contingency is not much better than a straightforward dependence on misunderstanding. For the ironist, ethical thought cannot be what it seems. Our best hope is in the maintenance of a hermetically sealed sceptical self-consciousness.

But why, it may reasonably be asked, should we want transparency? Why should it matter whether we go about our ethical lives aware of the true nature of the authority of our judgements? So long as we sustain our ethical practice, so long as we carry on the conversation, isn't that enough? These are sensible questions, and it is not the case that transparency must be striven for no matter what. Further, there are different strengths of transparency one may or may not hope for. Bernard Williams distinguishes a modest from an excessive sort when he says `It is one aspiration, that social and ethical relations should not essentially rest on ignorance and misunderstanding of what they are, and quite another that all the beliefs and principles involved in them should be explicitly stated'. The more modest, and essentially anti-ideological, aspiration that our ethical life should not depend on ignorance or misunderstanding is the model we shall have in our sights here. That is all we need to satisfy the hope that ethical thought might be what it seems.

One obvious reason to value transparency of this kind is that any general misunderstanding about the

Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 76.

Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 102.

authority of ethical judgement inevitably comes under suspicion of serving an ideological function. (In a situation where there is no strongly objective authority available for ethical thought, we must not fail to ask why it is that some people want to insist there is one. Is it, for instance, that they hope - consciously or unconsciously, cynically or ingenuously - to bring us to regard their particular ethical views as absolutely authoritative?) The possibility of ideologically contaminated motivation will typically provide sufficient ethical reason to eradicate the misunderstanding, and so achieve transparency. At the very least, then, transparency is valuable in virtue of its place in anti-ideological thinking. It must be acknowledged of course that some sceptical theorists are suspicious of the very idea of ideology. Their scepticism is not metaphysical but socio-political: it revolves around the suspicion that lurking behind all appearances of ethical authority is a will to power. For them the notion of ideology is at best no longer relevant, and at worst itself an instrument of power, because the very idea of ideology depends on the possibility of a contrast between truth and ideology, authority and power, from which they wish to demur. Thus Foucault:

> The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of.... [L]ike it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false.

But there is no reason to concede in advance that ethical authority can only be a channel for the will to power, any more than we must concede that it can never be more than a vain metaphysical hope.

Even granted the anti-ideological value of transparency, however, it would not be wholly fair as an objection to ironism that it fails, as it does, to produce it. For what transparency is made to give way to, given the ironist understanding of our predicament, is the greater good of keeping our ethical practice going at all - and that is obviously a reasonable order of priority. The point, then, is not to use transparency as a stick to beat the ironist with, but rather to see why transparency remains a reflective ethical ideal, and so remains a motivation for seeking an alternative, non-ironist understanding of our predicament. We should look for an alternative conception of what it takes for ethical thought to be authoritative, and hope thereby to move beyond the fragility that motivates ironism. If the philosophical situation were really as is presumed in Rorty's account, one would be glad to have rehearsed the schizophrenic possibilities of the public/private split. But I shall try to show that we need not conceive our predicament in this way. Philosophy, for all its limitations, offers resources to conceive the requirements of moral authority more modestly (genuinely non-`metaphysically'), and so to modify our excessively objectivist tradition which sets us up for the alienation Rorty assumes we must learn to live with. The task is to see if we can locate a conception of ethical authority which is modest enough to be

Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), 118. For a diagnostic discussion of the reductivist postmodern view (which Foucault is careful here not to express), see my `Pluralism Without Postmodernism', in M. Fricker and J. Hornsby (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

realistic, critically well-equipped enough to be politically acceptable, and yet forceful enough to match, indeed to help shape, our experience of ethical necessity.

Reflective Conditions of Confidence

If we hope to surpass ironism as a response to the threat posed to ethical authority by sceptical reflection, what alternative non-objectivist model of authority is there available which might protect us against alienation? Williams has proposed something called `confidence' as a model of ethical conviction. Conviction and authority are of course different ideas: ethical conviction is a psychological state, whereas ethical authority is a property of ethical judgement. But they are importantly connected in that a judgement's having authority is a requirement for entitlement to conviction about it. The basic idea will be that the authority of ethical thought derives from the ethical community's approximating the best sort of reflective state; and I agree with Williams that, concerning the ethical, the best sort of reflective state to be in is confidence. Further, given hospitable social conditions, this more modest, less objectivized conception of ethical authority might have some impact on our ethical tradition, and so (indirectly) upon the nature of our spontaneous ethical experience. The envisaged strategy, then, is one of active critical engagement with tradition: to help prepare the way for a non-objectivist turn in the ethical tradition which has set us up for alienation and inauthenticity. There need be no forgetfulness of philosophy's limitations. Clearly, philosophy alone cannot bring about any such change; rather, its role is to help set the intellectual stage. Williams offers us confidence as a model of conviction, and my thought is that insofar as this model might come to find its place in our tradition, so might our experience of ethical conviction (and thus of ethical authority) come to move in a non-objectivist direction that makes for transparency and hence stability.

The strategy exploits the fact that tradition is both the necessary starting point for ethical thought and also, as MacIntyre makes clear, something with which we should have a critical relation. A tradition is, or should be, a site of argument. In exercising a critical capacity with respect to our own tradition we can, to some extent, direct and re-create it. Naturally we are passive recipients of a backlog of history; yet we make history too (whatever we do), and to this degree we have a certain responsibility - albeit very indirect - for how ethical requirements present themselves in experience. This has an immediate bearing on the question whether, and how, we might aim for transparency - a match between how ethical thought is, and how it seems. On Mackie's view, the question is immaterial, since a number of deeply entrenched habits of thought mean we cannot help our objectivizing ethical psychology. Our helplessness has the advantage that scepticism's threat to ethical authority is only academic. But it has the disadvantage that our ethical experience cannot be corrected as to its

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Exactly how much or how little philosophy can do will itself be a social-historical question. Philosophy's impact, or lack of it, on a given ethical tradition will depend (mundanely) on how much attention is paid to philosophical ideas in the culture in question.

Mackie, *Ethics*, 42-46.

objectivizing `error'; not only does it rest on a misunderstanding, it must. If, by contrast, our ethical experience is to some extent changeable via the changeable context of tradition, and if by philosophizing we participate in the ongoing process of re-creating our tradition, then the question of our aiming to bring ethical experience into line with the truth about ethical authority can arise within philosophy as a more than merely academic question.

Again, we must avoid intellectualist presumption as to philosophy's impact on tradition. It is to be avoided not simply by refraining from excited over-statement, but also by ensuring that our notion of a tradition is suitably complex. An ethical tradition cannot be simply intellectual and institutional. `Tradition' here is to be understood as a whole cultural entity, to include not only our intellectual inheritances, and the social practices and institutions that sustain an ethical way of life, but also our cultural symbolism, our *imaginary*. The idea of the imaginary is an invaluable critical and explanatory tool, not least because it has application across diverse arenas of the imagination: notably, ethical and political; psychoanalytic and philosophical. The imaginary is an important domain in which ideology can be at work, so that careful scrutiny of the imaginary (as manifested in common understandings of the social world, or in literature, or in philosophical texts) can reveal residual social meanings that serve unjust power relations. Imaginary meanings which are politically and ethically suspect need not be strictly ideological, since they need not work in a broad and systematic manner to the advantage of one social group at the expense of another. Nonetheless, the imaginary is *inter alia* a depot of oppressive residual meanings that no longer fit well with the self-image we project to ourselves in explicit avowals and in our public rhetoric. An example profoundly relevant to our ethical imaginary might be drawn from the politics of disability, where the drive towards equality and a properly informed social understanding is at odds with our still powerful imaginary association between physical abnormality and wickedness or evil. The imaginary, then,

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The inclusion of the imaginary in the conception of an ethical tradition marks an obvious departure from MacIntyre. There are various different and inter-related notions of the imaginary. In particular, I do not invoke Jacques Lacan's notion, clearly, which takes its meaning precisely from a contrast with the symbolic order. Sources for the notion I intend are Michèle Le Doeuff's seminal (sic) *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: Athlone Press, 1989); and Moira Gatens' *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London/NY: Routledge, 1996). For a discussion of Luce Irigaray's notion of the imaginary (and of how it too is distinct from Lacan's) see Margaret Whitford's *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), chapter 3.

See `The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions', interview with Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd by Susan James in *Women's Philosophy Review*, no.19, Autumn 1998. In her *Imaginary Bodies*, Gatens ends a discussion of how, in a society which ostensibly endorses gender equality, it can still be brought as a consideration in favour of the defendant in a rape trial that when a woman says `no' she often means `yes': `The ethical problem concerning the legal treatment meted out to women...is a political problem. ... There is a multiplicity of embodied habits, customs and laws which continue to bear the scars of [women's political] exclusion. ... As far as the present is concerned, there are some...who unreflectively endorse and perpetuate a sexual imaginary in which women embody the paradox of being considered as *both* free and rational members of a democratic political body *and* beings under the "natural" authority of men' (p.141).

Examples are ubiquitous in children's stories of ugly wicked witches and so on, but also in literary culture quite generally. One unforgettable example is found, for instance, in Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Upon the exposure of the cruel intrigue spun by the Marquise de Merteuil and Vicomte de Valmont, we learn that Merteuil contracts a disfiguring disease which costs her one eye and renders her, everyone agrees, `vraiment hideuse'. Her fate prompts an unnamed marquis to remark that the disease had turned her inside out, so that she now wore her soul on her face - `que la maladie l'avait retournée, et qu'à présent son âme était sur sa figure' (Laclos de, Pierre Choderlos (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 378).

may be understood as an unofficial store of collective meanings, which functions as a kind of historical buffer zone: the locus of a critical lag between past and future, from where a residue of not quite expelled meanings exercises a surreptitious influence on social understanding. If you want to know a tradition's private motivations, its secret rationalizations, its possibly shameful origins - then explore the cultural imaginary. Perhaps we should think of the imaginary as the synchronic counterpart to genealogy.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (NY: Random House, 1967).

Anti-conservative Reflection

What, then, is confidence? Williams introduces it as `basically a social phenomenon', though it is also a normative notion, and not a merely social-psychological description. If confidence is a good state to be in with respect to the ethical, it must inhabit a midway position between bad kinds of conservatism on the one hand, and neurotic or otherwise exaggerated kinds of self-questioning on the other. A bad kind of conservatism might be a conservatism of mere thoughtless complacency; or it might be one of brute dogmatism; or again it might be a conservatism motivated by ideology. That confidence is distinguished from these bad conservatisms shows that it is a normative state, and it shows, in particular, that confidence requires the sort of critical thinking which safeguards against our ethical concepts' colluding with the forces of ideology. It will be a cultural-historical question whether this safeguard can be achieved through merely reactive critical reflection (so that we mobilize our critical powers only after some complaint has been expressed) or whether a more pro-active reflective attitude is called for. If at some moment in a given tradition there is reason for pessimism about the credentials of the relevant thick concepts, or about the good order of the discursive climate, then clearly a more pro-active attitude will be required than if there is reason for optimism about such things. Whether the order of the day is optimistic or pessimistic, however, the crucial aspect of our reflective attitude is that it should be politically astute. One must have a nose for the ideological if one is to achieve confidence. If we fail to detect that a given concept has an unjust ideological function, so that it should be modified or phased out, then we will have failed to safeguard against a bad kind of conservatism. For example, contrary to an (incredibly) still popular marriage vow, we are not entitled to confidence in the concept of wifely obedience, because this concept presupposes a relation of subordination to a husband which is oppressive to women. The airing of such a critical consideration exemplifies the workings of immanent critique in our ethical lives: we judge our concepts by our best ethical standards. Anti-ideological reflection will be of special importance so long as it is in the nature of human society for there to be a marked risk of ethical concepts' evolving under the sway of unjust power relations. So long as this is the case, safeguarding against ideological function will require more than merely reactive critical reflection.

Our reflective activity (whether pro-active or reactive) is not supposed to underpin any strongly positive conclusion as to our concepts' desirability or justification. The suggestion is more modest, and in tune

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Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 170.

Williams makes the normativity separate from confidence itself, though consequently more explicit as a requirement, in `Who Needs Ethical Knowledge?' (in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *Ethics, Supplement to Royal Institute of Philosophy*, 35 (1993), 213-22) where he introduces what in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is simply called `confidence' as `reasonable confidence': `A desirable state for one to be in with regard to one's ethical views is confidence. ... But we do not want the confidence of bigotry - if there is to be confidence, it should be reasonable confidence' (213). As I shall use the term, confidence is something we possess only if we are entitled to it.

I take the defining rough contrast between thick and thin ethical concepts to be that the former are substantially world-guided, in that they have significant descriptive content, whereas the latter are not. Examples of thin concepts are `right', `wrong', `obligation' (probably), and `duty' (possibly); examples of thick are `courageous', `charitable', `kind', `cowardly', `spiteful'.

with Williams' view that no objective justification is available, or necessary. The requisite critical reflection is such that a thick concept's survival of it is sufficient to show that one is not being badly conservative in living by it. Thus the reflection which licenses confidence is basically negative. It is immanent in our own ethical outlook - though always involving the exercise of social imagination as we entertain possible alternative ways of going on. It essentially involves asking the question: is this is an acceptable way to organize and interpret our social world? For example, should we - as in that marriage vow - conceive of a wife's behaviour towards her husband as falling under the concepts `obedient' and `disobedient'?; should we reserve the concept of a `family' to contexts of heterosexual parenting?; should we think of a parent's punishing a child with a slap as `discipline' or `assault'? We will draw our (defeasible) conclusions to such specific questions *en route* to confidence. Confidence itself, however, will not be the conclusion to any line of critical reasoning; it is rather a by-product of critical reflection. If critical reflection must be self-conscious, confidence need not be. Confidence is a *stance* we achieve towards our ethical concepts, and should be construed, as it were, adverbially.

If this account of its relation to reflection is correct, then confidence is in one respect a stronger notion than knowledge: members of the fictional hypertraditional society, where there is next to no reflection, are perfectly capable of ethical knowledge (knowledge gained through the correct employment of thick concepts); but their somnambulant unreflectiveness will render them incapable of satisfying the conditions of confidence. In another respect, however - and according to certain comments made by Williams (not in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* but elsewhere) - confidence is characterized in a way which would make it a weaker notion than knowledge. The core idea is that we can have confidence in our thick ethical concepts provided that their way of carving up our social world is all right. But Williams says that we can also have confidence in judgements made using *thin* ethical concepts, even though we cannot have knowledge at this level. It is important for Williams that there should be a model available for ethical conviction concerning judgements couched in terms of thin concepts, because he holds that, not to put too fine a point on it, thick concepts are on the decrease. Modern society is, for Williams, characterized not merely by a climate of intense self-inquisition but also by an increasingly exclusive dependence on thin concepts. He suggests this independently from philosophical considerations, as a historical claim for which he then offers a philosophical explanation. The explanation is that reflection not only tends to drive individual thick concepts from use, but to do so without replacing them with new ones, so that the overall ratio between thin and thick concepts becomes ever greater as reflection and history roll on.

The idea that reflection depletes our stock of thick concepts motivates the claim that we can have confidence in judgements couched only in the thin. There would not be much comfort, after all, in claiming

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For a Wittgensteinian account of the nature of our responsibility for our own conceptual practices, see Lovibond, Sabina, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

See Williams' reply to Altham, in which he says the idea he had in mind in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was that `granted the nature of modern societies, we would face a good number of ethical tasks with the help of unsupported thin concepts, and, since there was not going to be knowledge in that connection, it would be as well if we had confidence' (J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics*, 207).

confidence in only our thick concepts if we were in any case doomed to rely largely on thin ones. And since it is reflection which is thought to diminish our stock of thick concepts, there is not a lot the reflective society can or should do about the depletion. If that were how things stood, it would indeed come as a relief to find we could have confidence in the unsupported thin. But I do not see how we can have confidence in thin concepts independently from a confidence in a set of thick concepts that orchestrates their use. In the case of thick concepts, the suggestion has been that we gain confidence in them only if they survive appropriate levels of appropriate sorts of critical reflection. But it is hard to see how the reflective condition is to be met in the case of unsupported thin concepts. What would it be for a thin concept - `wrong', `right', `good', `bad' - to survive reflection where survival demonstrates non-conservatism? Presumably the required reflection would address not feckless questions such as `should we carry on with the concept of wrong?', but rather questions such as `should we carry on using the concept of wrong in relation [for example] to wives not doing-what-their-husbands-tell-them-because-their-husbands-tell-them-to?'. The unconvincingly long-hand character of the questions which would have to be asked in order to win confidence in unsupported thin concepts may lead one to suspect that one is not really succeeding in testing a thin concept here at all, but only an ungainly conjunctive artefact whose function, if any, would be rather that of a thick concept. This suspicion gives rise to the further doubt that there could ever really be a situation of unsupported thin concepts. Certainly, thin concepts are singularly unsuited to carving up anything but the most hermeneutically bland of social worlds. It is hard to see how, in a situation where our only obviously evaluative concepts were thin, there would not have to be some other, less obviously evaluative concepts carving up our social world for us, thereby functioning much as the bygone thick ethical concepts did. In this situation, apparently non-evaluative concepts - `family', say - might be used in a way which is implicitly evaluative. This is not hard to imagine, since implicitly evaluative practices are already perfectly common: as when someone might withhold the concept of a family from two parenting adults and the child they are jointly bringing up, on the ground that the adults are of the same sex. But it remains very hard to imagine a situation in which the employment of thin concepts was wholly unsupported by other concepts functioning basically as thick ethical concepts do.

Be that as it may. We need not be concerned with the question whether an ethical community could live, confidently or not, by thin concepts alone, for we need not quite accept Williams' motivating idea that the modern world is characterized by an increasingly exclusive reliance on thin concepts. We may accept instead the closely related claim that the modern era is characterized by a marked preoccupation with certain thin concepts (in the context of liberal democracy, the concept of a right particularly comes to mind). On this view, there is no presumption that thick concepts are decreasing overall, but only that modernity has led us to attach comparatively little importance to them. We continue to acknowledge that reflection tends to put particular thick concepts out of use, but we leave open the possibility that it tends equally to introduce new ones. Perhaps reflection is usually best described not as discarding or introducing any concepts, but as modifying them by changing their application. (This would, for instance, be so in the case of `obedience' as applied to wives, since

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Thus I agree with Susan Hurley's `non-centralism' about reasons for action (see her `Objectivity and Disagreement' in Honderich, T. (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 54-97).

reflection obviously does not point to making the whole concept of obedience redundant, but specifically the obedience of wives to husbands. Or, again, consider the case of `family', or `cruel', where the issue is one of how broadly the term should be applied.) If this is right, then we need not accept that reflection tends to deplete our stock of thick concepts, leaving us to rely increasingly on the thin. And so we need not be concerned if, as I have suggested, the reflective conditions of confidence are not such as to be met in relation to thin concepts unsupported by a system of thick ones organizing their use.

Rejection of the historical claim which Williams is inclined to accept is neutral with respect to the related and important idea that reflection, by putting certain thick concepts out of use, can destroy knowledge - an idea which, although controversial, is surely right. No doubt it has been controversial for many reasons, but one explanatory factor must be that it exemplifies a general fact about knowledge which mainstream epistemology is singularly ill-equipped to acknowledge: that access to knowledge can be affected, and independently from its effect on the inquirer's rational standing, by a very non-epistemic-looking factor: *who one is*. A matter of `mere' social identity - one's place in history and culture - can present an obstacle to possessing knowledge, even when it presents no obstacle to satisfying the rational conditions of knowledge (the possession of a justified true belief, perhaps). As history rolls on and culture changes, critical reflection can lead us to disown, or (less strongly) to cease identifying with, certain of our concepts, so that some knowledge which was once ours is no longer ours. Knowledge we once possessed is put out of our epistemic reach by a social-psychological gap opened up by reflection, and so may with some literal accuracy be described as `destroyed'.

It may be that talk of `destruction' is, however, unhelpfully provocative, for it can encourage the misunderstanding that reflection is being said to cause a rationally retrograde step of some kind. Take the example of `female chastity', which is no longer (in the main) one of our concepts. A proposition such as `the princess is chaste', where the princess in question is some historical figure who was indeed `chaste' and where we have good reason to believe it, cannot constitute a piece of our ethical knowledge, even though we stand in the proper rational relations to it. Nonetheless, there remains a sense in which it is not simply the case that knowledge has been destroyed since the concept lost its ethical currency, for we can of course still grasp such propositions in thought - certainly we haven't lost *that* ability. What we have lost is the ability to *own* (as opposed to disown) such a proposition, with the result that we can no longer possess it as a piece of ethical knowledge. The metaphor of `ethical currency' is an apt one. Our relation to rejected thick concepts is analogous to our relation to shillings and farthings. Since we put them out of use, they are not our money any more. We can still grasp them in our hands all right, but not as currency - they are not current, but historical. Instead of talking only in terms of destruction, then, we might add that what was once a piece of ethical knowledge has been replaced by a piece of historical knowledge - knowledge about our forebears' ethical life. Reflection through time has *displaced* the ethical knowledge that the princess was chaste along two planes: horizontally (it's now about someone else's way of life), and vertically (it's now knowledge at the reflective level). The result

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See, for instance, A. W. Moore's `Can Reflection Destroy Knowledge?' *Ratio* (New Series) 4, (1991), 97-107; and Blackburn, Simon, `Making Ends Meet: A Discussion of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*', *Philosophical Books*, 27 (1986).

is, we no longer know that the princess was `chaste' as a piece of knowledge *in* our ethical way of life, but rather as knowledge *about* an ethical way of life, and not our own (hence the appropriateness of inverted commas). We might wish to emphasize, then, that wherever reflection destroys ethical knowledge, it gives way to a replacement item of historical knowledge. This means that reflection will not have brought any overall rationally retrograde step. Thus understood, the idea that a piece of *ethical* knowledge can be destroyed when concepts required for it are expelled from our outlook should not be epistemologically jarring.

This picture of knowledge's destruction shows up the relation between the question what sorts of reflection earn confidence, and Williams' idea of stability under reflection. I have been presenting confidence as a route to stability under sceptical reflection, in virtue of the fact that the anti-ideological vigilance required for confidence inevitably aims at transparency. But it is clearly not the case that confidence brings stability under all other kinds of reflection. The reflection required to sustain confidence will bring a general stability, but locally - in connection with particular concepts - some *in*stability is demanded. For we have seen that confidence requires the sort of anti-conservative reflection which will sometimes alter thick concepts' application, or even make them redundant. Without the local instability this causes, we should be suspicious that we were not in fact in a state of confidence at all, but of a bad conservatism instead. Here, the fact that our relation to history should not be merely receptive but critical and creative shows up in reflective practice. We are seen to make history by forcing certain conceptual practices into the past. In fulfilling the conditions of confidence, we play an active role in the development of our ethical tradition.

Reflection As Collective Critical Activity

So far I have been exploring how confidence - `basically a social phenomenon' - is also intended as a normative phenomenon. And I have tried to say something useful about its normativity through an account of the sorts of critical reflection it might require. Another way to approach confidence's sociality is under the aspect of a contrast not with `normative' but with `individual'. Thinking of confidence as an ideal epistemic state to be in regarding the ethical encourages a characterization of ethical judgements as deriving their authority from the agent's social setting - from something outside the individual, then. This inspires hope that the notion of confidence will help to make sense of our externalizing ethical phenomenology - our experience of the practical necessity of ethical judgement as originating outside ourselves. If the authority of ethical thought is derived from our confidence in our ethical concepts, then the necessity in question comes from something not simply in the individual, but in the collective. And this is precisely what we need to give an explanation of our externalizing ethical experience which (unlike Mackie's error theory) is also a vindication.

Mackie does acknowledge that the sociality of the ethical means `the attitudes that are objectified into moral values have indeed an external source, though not the one assigned to them by the belief in their absolute authority' (Mackie, *Ethics*, 42-3), and he also says that when someone expresses moral demands `he is expressing demands which he makes as a member of a community, which he has developed in and by participation in a joint way of life' (44). But because he does not consider the possibility that our moral experience could be externalizing but *not* metaphysically (or otherwise strongly) objectifying, Mackie fails to allow that our externalizing experience might be vindicated (found free of error) by an account which conceives the authority of ethical judgement as deriving from a state of the collective - for instance, the collective state of confidence.

But a vindication of our externalizing ethical experience will only be forthcoming on a strongly social understanding of confidence - stronger, I think, than Williams intends. The strongly social understanding depicts confidence as a collective analogue to an individual's psychological state of confidence. The word *analogue* makes the crucial point. It means that confidence would not be properly understood as the aggregate of independent individual confidences. The notion would not be properly explained by saying that it is what a society has when enough of its individual members have it, for the order of explanation would be the other way around. Individuals can have confidence, for sure, but they do so in virtue of being socially constituted: it is *qua* members of a society where there is confidence that individuals can have confidence. This seems in tune with Williams' claim that

> the conclusion of practical necessity...[seems] to come `from outside' in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside - from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others.

However, my strongly social interpretation seems incompatible with something else Williams says about confidence:

> It is basically a social phenomenon. This is not to deny that when it exists in a society, it does so because individuals possess it in some form, nor that it can exist in some individuals when it is lacking in society. When this happens, however, it is in a different form, since the absence of social confirmation and support for the individual's attitudes must affect the way in which he holds those attitudes.

As I understand it, this quotation shows that Williams' own understanding of confidence is methodologically individualist (the order of explanation is bottom-up so that individuals' possession of confidence is prior), and that it is not necessary that a society possess confidence for one of its members to possess it, if in a different form. If so, then Williams' idea of confidence is weakly social - assimilable, for instance, to the model of a speculative market, where if enough individual dealers have confidence in the pound, say, then this will be contagious so that others come to share the confidence, resulting in a general confidence where the climate of reciprocation could be said to transform that of the individuals. The sociality at stake here is (as we might call it) severalist, as opposed to collectivist.

But there are at least two reasons in favour of the collectivist, or strongly social conception. Firstly, it

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Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 191.

Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 170. I am grateful to Adrian Moore for pointing this remark out to me, and more generally for helpful discussion.

can better accommodate the division of reflective labour. Clearly, it cannot be a requirement of confidence that every individual who possesses it fulfil the overall reflective conditions. As with most other spheres of epistemic practice (e.g. the empirical-scientific), in the ethical sphere individuals can piggy-back on the deliberations of others regarding the credentials of shared concepts. There is a delicate balance to be found between the need to rely on others in this way and the exigencies of personal responsibility for one's own evaluative thought, but that there be some significant degree of non-individual responsibility through the division of reflective labour is a matter of quotidian necessity. Without such a division, the achievement of confidence would make full-time ethical theorists of us all - a price certainly not worth paying. The strongly social conception of confidence allows us to make proper sense of the fact that reflective advances are held in common, as a shared ethical resource available to individuals even while they are looking the other way, variously getting on with the thing that gives all this reflection its point: life. The work of critical reflection, and especially that most politicized branch of ethical reflection we might call conceptual activism, will tend to be unevenly undertaken. This unevenness reveals an important epistemic consequence of social differentiation within the collective, inasmuch as it will be the social experience of women which particularly affords a critical perspective on certain marriage vows, or particularly that of lesbians and gay men which affords a critical perspective on the narrow application of `family'. Nonetheless, the confident stance towards the relevant concepts is won generally, at the collective level (and conceptual activists do a considerable ethical-epistemic service to their less critical contemporaries). On the severalist conception, the key relations between bearers of confidence are inter-individual relations of `confirmation and support'. This makes it hard to explain the fact that it is possible for unreflective individuals - who have scant critical thoughts available to be confirmed or supported - nonetheless to use common ethical concepts with confidence.

The second reason to favour the strongly social conception of confidence is that it is better placed to give the hoped for vindication of our externalizing ethical phenomenology. It surely won't be enough to understand confidence as social simply in the sense that it usually involves social confirmation and support. That understanding does not give us the idea we need, namely, that the authority of ethical judgements derives from something which transcends the individual. The way in which ethical authority features in our spontaneous experience as coming from outside us cannot be justified by the idea that it is supported by *more* individuals, simply. Mere inter-subjectivity - mere confirmation and support - is not enough. What is needed to vindicate our externalizing experience is something different from the mere aggregate of individuals: the collective. There is nothing metaphysically mysterious about this idea. A collective is composed, naturally enough, of individuals. The crucial difference is simply over the question whether an individual can have confidence independently from her belonging to a collective where there is confidence. And the driving thought remains the familiar one that individuals can satisfy the conditions of confidence only through critical participation in a shared way of life, a tradition. Indeed, conceived in abstraction from some such specific cultural-historical setting, the question whether an individual has confidence does not arise, so the right conception of the individual, for those asking that question, must be as of someone who is already a participant in a collective practice where there is or is not

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`Confidence is merely one good among others: it has a price, and the price should not be set too high' (ibid.).

confidence. No weaker conception of confidence's sociality, it seems to me, is capable of honouring Williams' idea that the seeming externality of ethical necessity derives from the fact that it comes from an `outside' which is `deeply inside'. The only thing `deeply inside' that could authorize ethical necessity, is the collective practice which constitutes individuals by shaping their character and socializing them into a particular ethical outlook.

On the collectivist conception, collective confidence is necessary, though not sufficient, for individuals to share in it. On this point, an analogy with money may, again, be helpful. Individuals can possess money only if they belong to a collective which operates the requisite institutions and practices, though membership of such a collective naturally provides no guarantee that any particular individual will have any money. So it is, I am suggesting, with confidence: an individual can only have it if the collective has it, though he might not have it even then. He might, for example, be prey to neurotic self-inquisition, perhaps because he believes, falsely, that that is the only way to avoid ethical imperialism. (An individual among us can have too low, as well as too high, an opinion of our ethical thought.)

Reflection As Socially Differentiated

Anti-individualist arguments from *conception*, however, only get us so far. At this stage of the argument, one may still legitimately demand to know why a lone reflective individual in an otherwise unreflective society is not able critically to assess her culture's ethical concepts so that, on finding them to be all right, she might achieve confidence. This is surely a conceptual possibility, even on the collectivist conception: a collective ethical practice could, in principle, contain one remarkable participant who alone makes confidence-earning use of generally neglected collective critical resources. However, in relation to many of our thick concepts there is a powerful reason for denying that this is an *epistemological* possibility (whatever the starting conception). Our thick concepts are part of the hermeneutic constitution of our shared social world, and we have seen that confidence requires us to safeguard against bad kinds of conservatism. But individuals are differentially placed in that social world. There is a plurality of social identity positions that make a difference to social experience, so that a lone reflective individual in a society where collective levels of reflection fall short of confidence will not be in a position to achieve the safeguarding. One is not in a position to regard one's ethical practices as free from bad kinds of conservatism if there are social groups who are (perhaps subtly) prevented from going in for the kind of reflection about their own social experience which would equip them to rebel against a conceptual practice that did them an injustice - for example, by characterizing them as `naturally' subordinate and so fit for obedience to another group, or by characterizing their sexual orientation as `unnatural' and so shameful. Thus, for many of our thick concepts, being justified in believing that they are all right requires participation in reflective activity going on more generally in society by people who are differently socially positioned.

Naturally the lone reflective individual's lack of justification applies directly only to those ethical concepts which are at least *candidates* for doing an injustice to someone's social experience. However, the candidature inevitably spreads fairly widely among our concepts, since we cannot assume we are able to tell exactly *which* of our concepts are the one's we should regard as suspect. (What straight person was in a position to see that one might question the justice of an exclusively heterosexual application of the concept `family' before gay people forced the issue into public view?) Social imagination is of course essential in ethics, and it can get us a very long way; but it cannot get us to a place from which the lone reflective individual is able to survey her concepts and the social world they help construct, and be justified in a unilateral rubber-stamping.

Where reflection is distributed across social difference sufficiently for confidence, an individual's reflective activity will show up as dependent upon that of the collective, not simply in the sense sustainable by the insight from the philosophy of mind and language that using concepts at all is a fundamentally public activity, but rather in the sense sustained by the epistemological insight that different individuals' critical reflection will make different contributions to fulfilling the anti-conservative conditions of confidence. Thus we see that a socially differentiated division of ethical reflective labour is not merely convenient, but crucial to the achievement of confidence. The fact of social difference, then, combined with the requirement of anti-

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Clearly, adequate distribution across social difference will be a less than perfectly socially differentiated distribution - lest we set our standards for confidence too high.

ideological reflection, presents an insurmountable epistemological obstacle to the lone individual's earning confidence. But it poses no obstacle to a properly distributed collective reflective practice in which, to a sufficient degree, everyone has their say. The conclusion to be drawn here is that it is only through participation in a collective critical practice which is democratic enough to earn confidence, that an individual may earn confidence.

The main idea argued for here is that the basic source of authority in the ethical is a particular kind of collective ethical practice: one in which there is confidence. This idea is importantly different from the idea that ethical practices in which we confidently participate constitute *an ethical authority* - as if tradition were something which, when in doubt, we could consult for a ruling. To see things that way would be to forget that a tradition is a site of argument, and so to construe the kind of authority it can embody too positively and too concretely. A tradition is the precondition of any consideration's weighing with us as an ethical reason for or against doing something. Once a consideration presents itself as a *reason*, there is nothing further to be said about its authority outside the immanent critical thinking of the confidence-earning kinds I have been at pains to identify. Thus, location in a tradition is the precondition equally of ethical conservation and ethical change (even revolutionary change - all criticism is immanent, and some is radical). The suggestion has been that confidence, conceived now as basically a collective phenomenon, is essential for a tradition's being in good shape; and if a tradition is in good shape, then its ethical thought is authoritative and an externalizing ethical phenomenology can be vindicated.

An Irony of Critical Engagement

Earlier I suggested that anti-ideological reflection aims *inter alia* at transparency about the nature of ethical authority. The achievement of transparency would render us insusceptible to the special disillusion which otherwise threatens to follow sceptical reflection. If we are free from misunderstanding about ethical authority, then veridical sceptical reflection cannot show us anything we don't already accept. The special disillusionment we thus avoid is such as to cast all ethical judgements in the same mould: as claiming a false authority. So the achievement of transparency in ethical thought safeguards our ability to employ a fundamental distinction required for critical reflection: that between genuine authority and false authority. This is a distinction we mark out whenever we modify or discard a thick concept because we have discovered its function is ideological, or in some other way unacceptable. The observation that the anti-ideological reflection required for confidence presupposes a contrast between genuine and bogus authority brings into view the proper place of irony in ethics. Postmodernist cynicism about authority has co-opted the ironical attitude so that it can seem as if its only form is sceptical. But this is not so. In the literary Modernist tradition, the idea of the unreliable narrator is essential, where this takes the form of an ironic stance on the part of the author to the testimony of the narrator, an irony which is then taken up by the reader. Such an ironical stance presupposes the contrast between reliability and unreliability in a narrator, and is therefore a conceit wholly foreign to any general scepticism about the very idea of the authority of the authorial (sic) voice. Yet it is also a stance which encourages, indeed requires, the reader

to be alert to the possibility of unreliability - of false authority. This sort of irony, then, is part and parcel of the reflection required for confidence: to attend, with some political perceptiveness, to the ways in which a given concept may serve an unjust social function, and so to question with appropriate suspicion the purported authority of any judgement employing it. The irony of someone who is critically engaged in the ethical is an irony of vigilance as to the potential for false authority. It is an irony of self-conscious engagement, not sceptical disengagement.

I have tried to elaborate Bernard Williams' idea of confidence in order to present it as part of a proposal for moving beyond what we can now see as the contingently destabilizing power of scepticism about value. Confidence - construed as a strongly social notion but still not a strongly objectivizing one - has been presented as the basic (because preconditional) source of authority in ethical judgement. Williams talks in terms not of authority but of conviction. I favour approaching the issue from the point of view of authority because it wears on its sleeve the normative dimension of the sort of conviction which has always been hoped for in ethics: conviction which is not only practically efficient, but also well grounded; conviction which is located in individual psychology, and yet which flows from a source that transcends merely individual patterns of motivation. More broadly, the proposal here has been that the explication of authority in terms of confidence might be the centrepiece of a strategy for re-shaping our ethical tradition - a tradition which, as it stands, renders ethical authority unnecessarily vulnerable in the face of certain traditional sceptical goadings. The proposed strategy is directed towards an ideal of transparency, because the kind of reflection that confidence requires is inevitably so directed. In such a situation there would be no risk of disillusionment, for ethical authority would at last seem just as it is.