Demandingness, Moral Development and Moral Philosophy*

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1. Preliminary remarks on method

Much contemporary moral philosophy is conducted as if it was happening in a kind of historical vacuum. Philosophers will come up with moral theories, proposing principles or standards or other recommendations, and these will then typically be assessed against our 'intuitions', rather as if scientific theories were being checked against a block of data. Although this kind of model for moral philosophizing has been subjected to considerable criticism since it was championed by John Rawls,[1] it remains very influential. Yet the ahistorical, quasi-scientific conception of how moral philosophy does or should operate seems misguided for many reasons. To begin with, the 'data' in question are not, in reality, an agreed or shared block of observations, but vary enormously from philosopher to philosopher. Of course, we are familiar with the idea that, even in science, observations can be to some extent 'theory-laden'; but even the most enthusiastic Kuhnian might be taken aback by the kinds of radical variation in data that we find in the case of ethical intuitions – differences found not merely between different societies in different epochs, but also within a given society at a given period. What is more, as philosophers ought to be well aware, radical differences persist even among those of seemingly similar intelligence and social and economic background: soundings in a seminar room of well-educated British or American moral philosophy professors will surprisingly often disclose intractable divergences of fundamental intuition on ethical issues.

Philosophers, *qua* philosophers, seldom think much about their childhoods, but a plausible diagnosis for at least some of these divergences of intuition may lie in upbringing. The ethical outlook of each of us was shaped by a complex mix of factors relating to the individual circumstances of our early lives; for it is as children that each of us, long before the stage of rational analysis and evaluation, began to be habituated into certain modes of response – to act and to feel towards others in certain ways, and so begin to develop ethical sensibilities.

This process of ethical formation may be thought of as having two principal dimensions – the individual or psychological, and the social or cultural. Both dimensions clearly involve a *history*. Firstly, from the psychological point of view, the individual path towards moral development for each of us is self-evidently formed as a result of our early, pre-rational interactions with parents and siblings, when we learnt the sometimes joyful and sometimes painful lessons of how to love and be loved, how to assert ourselves and how to hold back, how to give and how to receive. Secondly, moving to the social dimension, moral development is not just a matter of individual growth within the family, but involves induction into a wider ethical culture, with its prevailing rules, norms and expectations. All these elements, as philosophers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Bernard Williams have emphasised, have a genealogy. Our ethical culture in is something with a long past, stretching back many centuries, and no doubt partly dependent on how human nature itself has evolved over many previous millennia.

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[1] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), esp. Ch. 1

So each individual sees things ethically from a certain perspective, a perspective shaped by a history which might have been otherwise. And this generates a further crucial divergence between ethics and science. For whereas in the scientific case we would like to be able to prescind from perspectival bias, to approach as closely as possible to an 'absolute conception' or a 'view from nowhere', there is, in the ethical case, no reasonable prospect of doing so.[2] Nor, indeed, is it clear that we should even want to do so. Genealogical awareness can, of course, sometimes be subversive and unsettling, but it need not necessarily be so.[3] Seeing ourselves as inheritors of a transmitted ethical culture, or at least of various parts of a transmitted culture, may be a legitimate source of pride, and of optimism. By building on our inheritance, reflecting on it, refining it, sometimes modifying it, sometimes revisiting and reviving forgotten parts of it, we may hope to preserve and enrich our ethical sensibilities.

In short, achieving ethical understanding is not simply a philosophical matter of constructing ingenious principles which systematize the mysteriously supplied 'data' of our intuitions. Rather, it is an enterprise of *discernment*: the task of trying to deepen and purify our insights by (amongst other things) reflecting critically on how they have been shaped by that complex interplay of individual psychological development and general social culture which has brought each of us to where we now are.

Thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor have long alerted us to the dangers of ignoring history and culture, and have warned against the 'Enlightenment' fantasy of trying to construct ethics on the thin foundation of supposedly pure 'rational agency'.[4] Some of those warnings have no doubt been heeded, in so far as many modern ethicists have become much less attracted by 'thin' theories of the good than was often the case during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, a great deal of contemporary ethical debate still appears to be conducted in a kind of putative atemporal 'green room',[5] where the participants seem curiously blind to the fact that they are, whether they like it or not, actors necessarily incorporated a cultural story with a distinctive history. A reinvigorated awareness of that historical dimension may, I shall suggest, offer the prospect of more progress in tackling the so-called problem of demandingness than might be achieved by more abstract means.

2. Athens versus Jerusalem

It is a cliché, but nevertheless a true one, that the two most important and long-standing influences on Western thought have been the philosophical culture of Classical Greece and Rome, on the one hand, and the religious culture of

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[2] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1985), Ch. 8. Cf. T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[3] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 36. For discussion of this theme, 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.

[4] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. Ch. 2; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981; 2nd edn 1985), esp. Ch. 6.

[5] A retiring room for actors when they are not on stage. The use of the metaphor in this connection goes back to R. M. Hare's critique of Rawls, in *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 91 (April 1973), pp. 144-155.

Judaeo-Christian spirituality on the other. When the ethical problem of demandingness is referred back to these two great sources of ethical thinking in our civilization, it is remarkable what tensions emerge.

If we take Aristotle as the most important and influential representative of ancient Greek ethics, it is striking how *undemanding* his model for the good life turns out to be. This may initially seem an odd thing to say, since Aristotelian ethics is often called 'perfectionist' – on the perfectly reasonable grounds that it presents the good life as one of human excellence in the cultivation and practice of the virtues.[6] Excellence, to be sure, is involved in the very concept of Aristotelian *arete*, and developing the various dispositions required to be a good and fulfilled human being is no doubt a long and complicated process. But it nevertheless falls short of being *demanding* in the following crucial respect: it does not require the individual to face a radical challenge to improve on his way of living, or the standards under which he or his society operates. The Athenian gentleman who is the paradigm of Aristotelian ethical excellence may be supposed to experience what the Greeks called a 'smooth flow of life'.[7] He has been fortunate to receive the right upbringing, so that he does not have to struggle to be virtuous (a struggle with recalcitrant passions, for example, would be the best evidence that he was not entitled to the accolade of having genuine *arete*, but only the second best or 'runner up' status of being *enkrates*, or self-controlled).[8] He (and the masculine pronoun is, in the Aristotelian picture, entirely apt) is conspicuously fortunate in that he has been brought up not just to act well, but spontaneously to desire the good. He has, moreover, in his supreme incarnation as Aristotle's *megalopsychos*, or 'great-souled' man, the resources to pursue that good without difficulty, rejoicing that his external circumstances of wealth and social standing match his personal excellences of character.[9]

Notice that our modern concerns about 'moral luck' do not really gain a foothold within this Aristotelian ethical world. To be sure, Aristotle, like all the Greeks, was intensely concerned about the arbitrary reversals of fortune that can blight an otherwise flourishing life: the example of Priam, noble, virtuous, enjoying appropriate prosperity, but then struck down with horrible tragedy in old age, was a ready reminder of the fragility and contingency of human well-being.[10] But somehow this awareness of how our lives are always hostages to contingency never impinges on the confident self-esteem of the Athenian *megalopsychos*, or his calm sense of entitlement to praise for his successful pursuit of virtue. There is plenty in Aristotle about being in rational control (through the proper exercise of practical wisdom), but precious little about being vulnerable, or about the fact that we are, in MacIntyre's apt phrase '*dependent* rational animals.'[11] The highest excellence requires the enjoyment of wealth, health, good education, social esteem, and membership of a privileged club of free and well-endowed citizens. That a slave, for example, or a woman, is ruled out

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[6] See for example T. Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[7] The notion of a good 'flow' of life, implicit in Aristotle was explicitly invoked as a characteristic of the good life by the Stoics; see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* [3rd century AD], Book 7, §§87-9, in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (eds), *The Hellenistic philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l987), 63C.
[8] For discussion of this important distinction, see J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 2.
[9] For *megalopsychia*, and its allied virtue of *megaloprepeia* ('magnificence'), see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [*c.* 325 BC], Bk IV, Chs 2 and 3.
[10] The case of Priam is referred to by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, Ch. 10.
[11] A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

in advance as a candidate for such excellence would be no more odd to the Aristotelian ethical mindset than the fact that someone with a club foot, or an impoverished diet in childhood, was ruled out as a candidate for athletic excellence, or a tone-deaf person ruled out as a candidate for musical excellence.

It is against this background that the curious undemandingness of ethics for the Aristotelian agent comes into focus. The pursuit of ethical excellence may of course be an exacting task, and the standards he has to meet may be high, but this is no more than what his upbringing and position in society have fitted him for. There is nothing in the scheme of things that does, or can, call the agent to a tribunal that questions the standards of the system itself, under which he lives.

The contrast with the Judaeo-Christian ethical tradition is glaring. While the ethical system of Aristotle is broadly conservative (with a small 'c') – that is, it paints a picture of ethical excellence that assumes the general satisfactoriness of the ethical culture into which the typical agent was inducted as a child, and the general appropriateness of the social arrangements which allow him to flourish – the biblical tradition by contrast returns again and again to the theme of social and individual corruption and ethical failure. The message of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and of their successors in the New Testament, is a constant demand for rejection of the values and standards prevailing in society, and a call to 'righteousness', defined not in terms of the calm and well-resourced development of excellences rooted in good childhood habits, but rather of radical inner change and purification. Moreover, worldly success and esteem, which is, for the Aristotelian, the appropriate seal set on the happiness and achievement of the properly trained ethical agent, is, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, an insidious danger, a temptation to 'gain the world' at the cost of losing one's true self.[12]

Some of these differences stem, of course, from deep divergences in the underlying worldview that informs each ethical system. Aristotle's metaphysical outlook is an essentially optimistic one, in the sense that he sees humankind, along with other biological kinds, as naturally oriented towards the goals that are proper for their species, and naturally finding fulfilment in the ordered pursuit of those goals. The Judaeo-Christian world view, by contrast, is premised on the idea of a flawed, or 'fallen' species, which means that our condition is inherently wretched, albeit (since the source of our nature is inherently benign) capable of struggling towards the good. At the centre of the whole outlook, in short, is the idea of what John Hare has termed 'the moral gap' – the gulf between what we are and what we might be; or, as Pascal put it, the contrast between the 'wretchedness' of humankind, and the possibility of our redemption.[13]

The conclusion to be drawn from this so far might so far seem to be that Judaeo-Christian ethics is 'demanding', but only a rather suspect way – gloomily obsessed with the ideas of sin and corruption, and constantly nagging at us to acknowledge our guilt. This was the view of the poet Swinburne (along with no doubt many of his fellow Victorians who were perhaps understandably tired of the incessant

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[12] Mark 8:36. For more on the contrast between the Christian and Aristotelian systems of value, see J. Cottingham, 'Partiality and the Virtues', in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Philosophy of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 57-76.

[13] See John Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). For Pascal, see *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 427: 'La foi chrêtienne ne va presque qu'à etablir deux choses: la corruption de la nature, et la redemption de Jésus Christ.' Compare no. 6: 'misère de l'homme sans Dieu; félicité de l'homme avec Dieu.'

sombre preachiness of the then dominant Christian Establishment): 'Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath'.[14] But although it is true that Christianity carries at its centre a stern ethical demand for radical change, quite unlike anything we find in pagan ethics, it would surely be simplistic to write it off as a convoluted exercise in gloom and guilt, which can with relief be abandoned as we turn back to the sunnier, less demanding, but altogether more rational ethical framework of Aristotle.

The reason why the Judaeo-Christian ethical perspective cannot simply be shrugged off as unworthy of serious consideration, in the context of philosophical accounts of the good life, is that it clearly purports, just like its Aristotelian rival, to provide an account of human fulfilment. And although the uncompromising Judaeo-Christian call for repentance and righteousness does indeed involve a demand that we should acknowledge the gap between our lives as they are and how they should be, this turns out not to be a piece of gloomy puritanical finger-wagging for its own sake, but on the contrary, a call towards the kind of new life that (it is claimed) offers genuine happiness. Nor (as some might be inclined to assume) are such claims reducible to promises about felicity and other rewards in the 'next world', and hence to be consigned to territory outside the scope of rational philosophical ethics. On the contrary, the picture of the righteous man found, for example in the Psalms offers an extraordinary vision of tranquil human flourishing, here and now: 'as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God, trusting in the loving kindness of the Lord forever'.[15] This is not some (to the secularist ear) metaphysically dubious piece of eschatology, but a vivid, this-worldly image – and one, moreover, with remarkable points of contact with what we find in classical Greek culture, for example in the resonant poetry of Pindar: 'human excellence grows like a vine tree, fed by the green dew, raised up, among wise men and just, to the liquid sky.'[16] The promise of Christianity, similarly, involves 'more abundant' life here on Earth.[17] Such flourishing, to be sure, is not, as it is in Aristotle, the fruit yielded by fortunate education and subsequent calm and spontaneous maturity in virtue, but rather requires *metanoia*, radical repentance following a stern call to 'obedience unto righteousness'.[18] But although the call requires acceptance of a discipline, a 'yoke', the resulting authentic life envisaged is one where, paradoxically, the yoke will be seen as 'easy' and 'the burden light'.[19] The Swinburnean picture, in short, is a caricature. Whatever sombre clerics may have subsequently have made of them, the texts leave no doubt that the message is of a 'path of life' (*hodos zoês*) that leads to 'joy' (*euphrosunê*).[20]

In the light of this, one might well ask: do we then, or do we not, have a contrast in terms of 'demandingness' between Judaeo-Christian ethics and its Aristotelian counterpart? Might it not merely be that the two systems have different

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[14] 'Hymn to Proserpine: After the Proclamation in Rome of the Christian Faith.' in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads* (London: Hotten, 1866). The poem's epigram, 'Vicisti, Galilæe', was reported to be the dying exclamation in 363 of Julian the Apostate, the nephew of Constantine the Great, who in 313 had declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman empire.

[15] Psalm 52 [51] (date much disputed – from 10th to 2nd cent. BC).

[16] Pindar, *Nemean Odes* [5th cent. BC], viii, 40-2.

[17] *bion perisson* (John 10:10).

[18] Romans 6:16.

[19] Matthew 11:30.

[20] Acts 2:28.

conceptions of the conditions for true human fulfilment, and different accounts of what is needed to achieve it? To answer this properly, we will need to shift the focus away from the cultural-historical, and go back to the individual, psychological dimension of ethical formation referred to in our opening section.

3. Diachronic ethics

A good portion of modern normative ethics, as noted at the beginning of the paper, has been concerned with constructing theories of right action that will systematise our prevailing intuitions in a coherent, elegant and satisfying way. I do not mean to suggest that such approaches are always conservative of existing moral beliefs: a given intuition, tested by a process of critical reflection on how it coheres with other intuitions we have, and by various requirements of the system itself, may end up being modified or even discarded completely. And there is no doubt that some contemporary work which makes use of a reflective equilibrium based methodology has resulted in powerful and radically oriented moral philosophy.[21] Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that this way of doing ethics makes for a certain 'staticness' of approach, in connection with problems like that of demandingness. Philosophers set about formulating and adjusting their generative principles until they can reach a result that requires people to give up not too much of their wealth, or quite a lot, or more or less what they now give but perhaps a little bit more, or whatever suitably qualified amount seems on reflection reasonable to 'me and my mates' (to use a phrase once coined by David Lewis). The proposed ethical theory is, so to speak, chalked up on the blackboard of the seminar room, while the various intuitions lie on the table: we may cross out or change some of the principles on the blackboard, and we may push some of the items off the table, but the process operates, if I may so put it, in a synchronic rather than a diachronic fashion. It is as if we (the philosophical community of ethicists) are an established committee with a precise and specified task to undertake, sifting through the papers we have been given, and reaching conclusions on how best they can be ordered and incorporated into our resulting theory. There is nothing whatever wrong with this, as far as it goes; but there is something it leaves out, or which never fully enters its purview, namely the way in which an individual moral outlook is constantly shifting and developing over time. What I may have been tempted to push off the table on day *d*, or year *y*, as too 'demanding' for incorporation into a theory that coheres with my other intuitions and values, may, in the light of radical developments in my outlook, emerge on day $d+1$, or year $y + 1$, as absolutely central to the intuitions and values I now have.

The shift from the first person plural to the first person singular towards the end of the preceding paragraph is no accident. For the contrast between 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' approaches to ethics is compounded by a further contrast between collective and individual approaches. The kind of 'committee' ethics described above tends to pay little attention to the individual psychological drama of moral change and renewal that is (or should be) going on in each of our lives. You may say: 'but why should such messy and unpredictable private dramas affect the rational deliberations of philosophers about the best theory of the good life?' I answer: because ethics is not science; and while science may legitimately aim to filter out the distorting variations of individual personality and perspective, ethics cannot do so, since ethical insight is, by its very nature, achieved in the lived experience of each of us as we struggle to

[21] A distinguished example is B. Hooker, *Ideal Code Real World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

grow. Ethical understanding (as indeed Aristotle realized) 'must take cognisance of particulars', and such cognisance involves lived personal experience (which is why practical experience is 'often more effective' in action than knowledge of theory.[22] By filtering out that personal dimension, philosophy may protect its image of being impressively abstract and 'rigorous', but only at the cost of cutting itself off from the one of the main points of doing moral philosophy in the first place. Philosophizing about how to live certainly needs, as Socrates showed, to be conducted through careful rational dialogue with others. But as Socrates also insisted, it also needs to pay attention to the inner voice, the *daimon* 'first heard as a child' – the unique individual perspective shaped by the way each psyche has grown and developed.[23]

Let me move to a concrete example which directly bears on demandingness. The Don Giovanni who is the eponymous hero of Mozart's opera is presented as a character who finds it intolerably demanding even to contemplate abandoning his glamorous, exciting life – a life of self-gratification, and the exercise of seductive charm and ruthless power over others. The goods he celebrates in his defiant aria *Viva le femine, viva il buon vino!* are relate to the pursuits that give him 'sustenance', and indeed (so he claims) make human life itself worth living: *sostegna e gloria d'humanità!* The intuitions of such a character, at any rate as presented in the opera, involve no inhibitions about the need to respect the feelings of others. The Don exercises his undoubted talents in 'diverting' himself (*mi voglio divertir!*, he imperiously announces to Leporello), and the distress suffered by the casualties of his diverting behaviour simply does not, for him, weigh in the scales as something seriously to be taken into account.[24]

One key point of interest in the story lies in the fact that the protagonist is presented with an opportunity for repentance, in the Commendatore's final appeal to him to change his ways. There is a crude interpretation of this, and a more subtle one. On the crude interpretation, the Commendatore is warning the Don on a prudential level, that his vicious and egoistical life will result in his sooner or later being caught out; or failing that, his having to pay for it in the next world. This may or may not be true, but even if it is true, it is somehow too simplistic to capture what is at stake. In the final act of Mozart's opera, Don Giovanni, to be sure, does end up being dragged down to hell, and the other principal singers sweep onto the stage, piously declaring 'that's the way all sinners end.' But somehow that solution seems a little too neat and tidy (the over-neatness is brilliantly conveyed in Mozart in the smugness and somehow forced jaunty optimism of the final chorus).

The more subtle and interesting reading is expressed by Mozart in the strange, haunting underlay given to much of Don Giovanni's earlier music, even at the very moment he is defiantly declaring himself to be happy. He is, long before the demons come to collect him, a psychologically damaged figure – a person who at some level senses, even in the midst of his 'diversions', that his life is out of joint. The reason for this, to put it simply, is that his human capacities have been misused. His capacities for sympathy and caring and vulnerability and openness, and for the whole complex and precarious enterprise of reaching out to another human being – all these have been buried, in favour of power and exploitation and ego gratification. And furiously though he may eat and drink and womanize, he cannot escape this fact: he cannot truly be happy. As with the protesting crew, gorged on the lotus fruit, whom Odysseus

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[22] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. book VI, ch. 7.
[23] For Socrates' 'inner voice', see Plato, *Apology*. [c 390 BC], 40a2-c2.
[24] W. A. Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, libretto by L. Da Ponte, 1787.

had to forcibly drag back to the ship,[25] he may kick and scream against it, he may insist that he is quite happy as he is; but (as the Don's inner turmoil makes manifest) human beings, whether they like it or not, have an inbuilt drive towards the good (despite the flaws inherent in all of us), and if that drive is blunted, then however many delights and gratifications they may secure, however 'successful' they may be in outward terms, they cannot be at peace. (There are, of course, alternative, more defiantly 'Nietzschean' or 'Gauguinesque' readings of the opera, insisting that Giovanni is an authentic hero, but they do not seem to do justice to the complexity of the music; or rather, if they do capture something of the bold, self-assertive will to power of Giovanni, they do not tell the whole story, unless the moral dimension just unfolded is also acknowledged.)[26]

Let us now imagine a different narrative from the one told by Mozart and Da Ponte – perhaps a less exciting one for the spectators: one without the furious last act of defiance and the flames of hell, but a more 'developmental' one, in which a 'deutero-Giovanni' is led to a greater self-awareness, and achieves some realization of where his life has gone wrong. Let us for the sake of brevity short-circuit the question of what personal trajectory has led this imaginary alternative Giovanni to come to such awareness – perhaps it is as a result of the 'learning through suffering' of which Aeschylus famously spoke,[27] perhaps as a result of some sudden and overwhelming conversion experience, perhaps (jumping to a more modern setting) as a result of extended psychoanalysis. Whatever the vehicle for such a moral transformation (take your pick), it seems plausible to suppose that, once it has occurred, the hero's previous intuitions and inclinations will gradually come to be transformed. Certain projections will be lifted, certain egotistical distortions that allowed him to ignore the reality of the feelings of others will straighten out, and as a result his perception of ethical reality will begin to be purified. I am not suggesting a glib scenario in which overnight the libertine loses his previous urges, but rather a gradual process in which the allure and glamour of his previous life fades. What before would have seemed intolerably demanding, to give up the 'diversions' that make his life bearable, now begins to be seen in a different light. His conception of what makes life worth living starts to reshape itself; and having tentatively reached towards a more mature, more reciprocal form of human intercourse, the gradual relinquishing of the earlier mindset, with its associated specious goods, no longer seems to him an alien 'demand', but part of his own, now incorporated, vision of the good.

The point of these observations is not to try to present a piously bowdlerised 'happy ending' for Giovanni, let alone to try to 'improve' on the existing masterpiece, or to deny the supreme artistry of the operatic story as it stands. The point rather is simply to highlight the way in which what counts as demanding is heavily dependent on the psychological profile of the agent, and his or her personal and ethical development over time.

Consider, before we move on to draw some general conclusions, one further example, this time imagined in a contemporary context. Keith is an investment banker who believes there is no such thing as society, only individuals. He regards paying his

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[25] Homer, *Odyssey* [*c.* 8th cent. BC], Bk IX.

[26] For Friedrich Nietzsche's exaltation of individual will and creativity above Christian morality and concern for others, see his *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886]; for Bernard Williams' use of the figure of Gauguin. see *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 2; for his critique (partly influenced by Nietzsche) of 'the morality system', see *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Ch. 10.

[27] In the final stanza of the 'Hymn to Zeus', in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* [458 BC], ll. 160-82.

higher rate taxation as an outrageous burden. His mansion is protected on a gated road which is patrolled by security guards. He considers public sector workers to be idle, overpaid, and a drain on the economy. But then he collapses quite unexpectedly with a serious illness when away from home, and wakes up in a National Health hospital. His condition is too acute to allow him to be moved to one of the private hospitals his insurance entitles him to. His shell of self-sufficient individuality is slowly shattered by the kindness and care he receives during the crisis and his subsequent difficult recovery. His daily experience starts to make him aware, properly aware for the first time, that every person he encounters on the ward, every trainee, every cleaner, is needed and vital to the running of the system; and he comes to appreciate that the cheerful words of encouragement he has received from them have re-connected him with his humanity as much or more than the perfunctory sympathy expressed by his smug and self-absorbed business colleagues. The resulting shift in ethical mindset would be tiresome to attempt to detail, except for one with the imaginative skills of a novelist, rather than a philosopher. But enough has probably been said in this crude sketch to illustrate how a change in ethical perspective might result in a radical reappraisal of what counts as unreasonably demanding. One might, for example, imagine a future in which our protagonist becomes a hospital visitor in his spare time, and devotes further substantial resources to medical charities, in addition to paying his taxes – which he now no longer sees as unreasonably burdensome. His experience has led to an emotional, not just an intellectual, change – a Gestalt switch that has wholly shifted his judgements about what kinds of ethical requirement confront him, and how far they count as unreasonably demanding.

4. Ethical growth and the role of philosophy

The kinds of examples so far discussed will have served their purpose if they illustrate how ethical understanding is never something static, abstract and simply intellectual, but develops over time, arises through concrete experience, and (at its most significant) involves seismic shifts in our whole way of feeling as well as thinking about the world. The moral is that philosophical discussion of many ethical 'problems' such as that of demandingness needs to be invigorated by a more serious attempt to come to terms with the psychological complexity of the human ethical predicament.

Parodying the oft repeated dictum of Marx, one might perhaps put the point by saying that moral philosophers have hitherto offered interpretations of human life, but the point is to change it. As a handbook of the good life, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is unlikely to change our conception of how we should live. We may agree with him about the contribution of some virtues (such as courage) to human *eudaimonia*; we may find his advocacy of other virtues (such as *megalopsychia*) laughable or revolting. We may engage in earnest debate about the consistency, or otherwise, of his recipe for practical flourishing with his claims about the supremacy of the theoretical life. But there is nothing he offers which pulls us up short with a demand for change, nothing which says, like the eyeless yet all-searching gaze of Rilke's Apollo, *du must dein Leben ändern* – you must change your life.[28]

But why on earth should *philosophy* try to do this? Surely philosophizing is one thing, and ethical conversion quite another. Surely the philosopher's tools are reason and argument, and not, for example poems and parables. Granted, parables,

[28] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaïscher Torso Apollos* [from *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, 1908].

like that of the prodigal son, or the good Samaritan, by the very fact of affecting us at many different levels (literal, illustrative, symbolic) and along many different dimensions (emotional, intellectual, spiritual), may have a special power to produce radical changes in the lives of the hearers. They are the vehicles for what is, in effect, a call to repentance. But such devices, one might reasonably go on to object, are in the service of advocacy or persuasion – aimed at generating a certain kind of conduct or a certain kind of ethical or spiritual reaction – while philosophy's aim is surely quite different. Philosophy, surely, is about logical analysis, and, in the sphere of ethics, about rational justification. Philosophers are arguers; they are not, and should not be, preachers.

The distinction is of course an important one; but if it is construed as a rigid dichotomy of function, aim or method, it will not, in the end, hold up. We may grant that philosophy must, if it is to retain its distinctive character, be subject to logical standards of clarity, precision, and consistency ('analytic rigour' is the phrase favoured by some).[29] And a poem, or a parable, works in a rather different way. Since its very point is that it should resonate at different levels of understanding, a poem or parable would not gain, but would lose most of its force, by being replaced by a clear and precise literal paraphrase.[30] But it simply does not follow that such multi-layered discourse cannot play a legitimate part in making a philosophical case – particularly where the subject of philosophical investigation is an area as a complex as that of human conduct and ethical development. We also need to recognize that a great deal of philosophy, particularly in ethics, consists of urgent and emotionally engaged advocacy of certain principles or courses of action, or frameworks for decision-making (not to mention the whole area of practical or applied ethics, where direct recommendations are frequently the object of the exercise). And in the course of that process, a vast amount of work is done by examples, anecdotes, thought-experiments, intuition pumps, and whole armoury of other weapons whose purpose is to appeal to the listener, to change them in various ways, which can seldom, if ever, be done by forcing them along the rigorous path of a 'coercive argument'.[31] Although 'reasoning' in some form or other plays a important role, it seldom (as Galen Strawson has recently pointed out) amounts to 'a matter of formally arrayed premises and conclusions'. Instead

> The fundamental philosophical activity … is a kind of open, investigative dwelling on ideas. It may well make use of formal argument, but it need not, and it is at its heart an essentially looser matter of redescribing things, putting them in other ways, spreading them out descriptively, telling stories that articulate and animate them. … It is, as a science, a suasive art, a mixture of plain speaking and the 'arduous invention which is the very eye of research' (George Eliot [*Middlemarch*, 1871-2], Ch. 16.)[32]

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[29] It was one of the criteria listed by the Philosophy Panel in the UK's 2008 'Research Assessment Exercise' (a complex procedure designed by the British Government to control university funding for research by limiting the lion's share to selected institutions in accordance with the judgements, in each subject area, of a small peer-review panel as to the excellence or otherwise of published output during a five-year period).

[30] See J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 5.

[31] For Robert Nozick's critique of 'coercive' argument in philosophy, see *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), Introduction, pp. 4ff.

[32] Galen Strawson, *Real Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), Introduction, p. 3.

Weeding out the offending shoots of invention, myth, parable, illustration, emotive image, persuasion, emotional engagement, personal anecdote, self-revelation, psychological involvement – such attempts at 'rigour' may and often do end up producing not better philosophical plants, but very drab and indigestible cultivars, which few would willingly devote their precious time to tending unless driven by the imperatives of survival in a highly competitive professional environment.[33]

The main point or justification for doing moral philosophy must surely be what it has always been, namely the ancient Socratic one, that one wants to understand better how one should live, or (to put it in Aristotelian terms) that we should try to discover and to pursue the good for humankind. It would take an extraordinarily shallow view of the human predicament to suppose that the way to address ourselves to these questions was to cut ourselves off from all but the most narrowly intellectual modes of human understanding. And it would take an extraordinarily complacent view of our progress to date to suppose that our ethical and philosophical search can be undertaken on a purely static and abstract level, without any need to open our lives to the possibility of radical psychological change.

Part of what is at stake here has been eloquently expressed by Martha Nussbaum in her subtle discussion of Plato's celebrated critique of emotion as an obstacle to philosophical understanding. Taking the case of Creon's slow and painful process towards ethical maturity in Sophocles' *Antigone*, she points out that

> Creon learns not by being defeated in an argument, but by feeling the loss of a son and remembering a love that he had not seen or felt truly during the loved one's life. As long as Creon remained on the level of intellect and argument, he remained self-confident, not convinced of anything. It took the sudden rush of grief, the tug of loss, to make him see an aspect to the world to which he had not done justice. The tragedy even suggests that Creon's feelings were, all along, more deeply rational that his intellect; submerged feeling preserved a balanced scheme of values, while ambitious intellect erred in the direction of one-sidedness and denial.[34]

The kinds of insight referred to here cast serious doubt on Plato's claim (at any rate in some of his writings) that philosophical understanding works best when operating through the intellect alone. Plato's dialogues are rightly revered as the foundation of the Western philosophical tradition, with their call to 'every reader to engage actively in the search for truth'. Yet we have good reason (Nussbaum persuasively argues) to be suspicious of a restrictive conception of human rationality in which 'only certain elements' within us are appropriate to that search.[35]

5. Final remarks

We are now in a position draw some of the threads together. Perhaps the clearest result from the discussion to date is that is that the notion of the 'demanding' is far too

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[33] For the damaging effects of academic hyperspecialisation on our philosophical culture, see J. Cottingham, 'What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it At Risk?', forthcoming in A. O'Hear (ed.), *Conceptions of Philosophy*, Royal Institute of Philosophy series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[34] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 133.

[35] Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 134.

unstable to play a decisive role in the assessment and evaluation of ethical theories. For what counts as demanding for a given individual will clearly be a function of his or her ethical mindset, and the stage of ethical and psychological development he or she has reached. It follows that for a philosophical critic of a given proposal in ethical theory to put their hand up in the seminar room and say 'your theory has implications that are unreasonably demanding', or 'your recommendations violate common-sense intuitions about what it is reasonable to expect', simply has no standing as an objection, at least until far more is known about the actual psychological mindset and ethical outlook from which such 'reasonableness' or 'unreasonableness' are supposed to be perceived. Ethics is, of course, about the good for humankind, and this does, to be sure, mean that any ethical theory or proposal must be at least compatible with our human capacities and abilities: it must be capable of being acted upon by humans, in the light of certain broad truths about the kinds of creature they are. For this reason (as I have myself argued in earlier work) [36] it is indeed a perfectly valid criticism of an ethical theory to say that it involves an 'ethics of fantasy' (in John Mackie's phrase) – that it diverges too far from the realities of the human condition to stand any chance of being incorporated into a practical blueprint for living. Yet the light of some of the points noted above about how ethical teaching can have the power to generate a radical shift in our perceptions and behaviour, the Mackie objection will turn out to exclude far fewer theories than might at first appear.

A theory that requires us give up our individuality, that urges us to become mere instrumental cogs in some impersonal machine delivering the 'general good' and abandon or dilute our human love for ourselves and those who are dear to us – this is indeed an impossible prescription, able to be implemented only at the cost of re-engineering our very nature. But to call us to recognize the fellow-humanity of every single one of those with whom we share the planet, to extend the concern we feel for ourselves and our dear ones to everyone we may encounter who is in desperate need: this is, to be sure, an exacting prescription, but it is one that (as the story of the good Samaritan shows)[37] is perfectly capable of being acted on by some and rejected by others. Condemning a theory as impossibly demanding only bears, as an objection, against theories that threaten to violate manifest truths about what is psychologically feasible for our human nature; in all other cases, the debate is still left entirely open.[38]

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[36] J. Cottingham, 'Ethics and Impartiality', *Philosophical Studies*, 43 (1983), pp. 83-99. I should add that I now think I was quite wrong in supposing, as I did in that early article, that Mackie's critique could properly be targeted at Christian ethics. For my more recent views on how demandingness affects questions of partiality and self-preference, see Cottingham, 'The Self, The Good Life and the Transcendent,' in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (London: Palgrave, 2008). pp. 228-271, and 'Impartiality and Ethical Formation', forthcoming in B. Feltham (ed.), *Partiality and Impartiality in Ethics.*

[37] Luke 10: 25-37. It is worth adding that the good Samaritan should not be construed as a 'utility-maximizer, seeking whatever is "most conducive to the general good" ', but a person who seeks help other individuals, *one at a time* 'in whatever particular circumstances he and they may find themselves.' I take this excellent formulation (albeit slightly out of context) from David Oderberg, 'Self-love, Love of Neighbour and Impartiality', in Athanassoulis and Vice (eds), *The Moral Life*, p. 61.

[38] It is interesting in this connection to note that one of the best recent analytic writers on demandingness, Garrett Cullity, in the course of providing an elegant defence of various prevailing strands in current morality against standard demandingness objections, concedes that his arguments 'do not speak against the possibility that our [current]

If I may end (at the risk of irritating some readers)[39] by citing another passage not from Plato or Aristotle but from the Bible, there is a vivid anecdote in the Gospels about the rich young man who sought the way to live a perfect life, and was eventually told to 'sell what you own and give the money to the poor.'[40] Is this an ethic of fantasy? Is it part of a code that could be incorporated for use in the real world? Such questions, perhaps, are beside the point in the context of the story. The young man had already been referred to the standard code of Moses, the Ten Commandments, and had reported, no doubt sincerely, that he had always kept to it faithfully. When he persisted in asking what more he could do, and was given the 'demanding' answer, we are told that he 'went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.' What the answer revealed to him was, in effect, that there was something suspect about his supposed search for moral perfection. He was seeking to be praised for his supreme ethical excellence, for his scrupulous observance of the Commandments, but when confronted with the advice to abandon his riches, he was made to realize that his wealth was, in fact, crucial to who he was, to his sense of self-esteem and well-being; and that, in reality, his supposed search for goodness was only conditional on its not threatening his comfortable way of life.

So was the recommendation too demanding? To ask this is, in a sense, to miss the meaning of the story (and indeed of the present paper, part of whose purpose has been to argue that assessments of demandingness cannot be made in abstraction from the complex story of the psychological and ethical development of those concerned). What the young man received was a challenge, to reorder his priorities: to cease to try to do ethics by asking for a glib recipe for the good life, and to subject himself instead to a question about his own integrity. What he heard, in other words, was a call for the inner purification that must take place before we can begin to perceive aright the degree of demandingness of a given prescription – measured not just against the 'common-sense view' of what it is sensible to expect of us, but against what, when called to account, we may come to see that we have it in us to achieve. If moral philosophy is to be rescued from the abstract intellectual exercise that much of it has become, then those who practise it may have to take a far greater interest than is now generally the case in questions of personal integrity and psychological growth, rather than relegating these to a separate domain, outside that of philosophy proper. Only in this way can we hope to reach a starting point from which it makes sense to try to assess how demanding our moral principles ought to be.

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conceptions of the morality of concern, respect and co-operation need to be overturned and replaced with normative views that are not only much more demanding than we think in some respects, but also much less demanding in others.' 'Demandingness and Arguments from Presupposition', in Chappell (ed.), *The Problem of Moral Demandingness*, pp. 8-34.

[39] Older readers, brought up on the Bible, but who have subsequently firmly rejected religion, may be among those irritated. But quite apart from questions of religious allegiance, we need to remember that (in Western Europe at any rate) many of the younger generation of students now coming to philosophy are almost entirely ignorant of Scripture. Yet since the Bible must be acknowledged (by believers and unbelievers alike) to have had a profound influence on Western ethical culture, it should not surely not be taboo for moral philosophers to refer to it; indeed it may plausibly be seen as part of their pedagogic duty, as transmitters of our ethical heritage, not to outlaw from consideration one of its most influential texts.

[40] Mark 10: 21; Matthew 19: 21.