Contemporary Dilemmas in the Project of Ethical Understanding

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the inclosures of regularity.

Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*[1]

THE FAILURE OF THE ETHICS OF PRINCIPLE

Introduction

Moral philosophers since Socrates have put their trust in reason— rather than the authority of tradition or supposed revelations from divine sources—as the best guide to right conduct and living well, for traditions may become corrupt or be rendered anachronistic, and divine sources have a notorious history of equivocation, ambiguity, and duplicity. Even those whose faith in the divine had somehow survived the shocks of experience still needed to decide which gods to trust: the necessity to understand could never be abrogated for very long. For as Socrates attempted to explain to a baffled Euthyphro, it is not enough to agree that some actions are dear to *all* the gods; we must still understand what it is about those actions which makes them dear to the gods.[2]

Yet reason's work in understanding human action contained its own uncertainties and has required regular reinterpretation throughout history. To most of the ancients moral wisdom was a matter of either discovering a timeless Platonic essence of justice or conforming to an Aristotelian *telos* (natural end) of human life. To the medievals, usually working within one or other of these two ancient conceptions, it was a matter of making as intelligible as possible theological presuppositions which ultimately were

accepted on faith. Today, these notions of timeless essence and natural *telos* have not well withstood the force of centuries of criticism. And while the enmity between faith and reason has perhaps abated somewhat since the early modern period, they maintain, at best, an uneasy truce.

The moderns, from the seventeenth century on, chose instead to tie their notion of rational authority to that of science, especially to that of scientific law or principle. The formal features of valid moral principles began to be specified and elaborated theoretically: generality of form, universal applicability, disinterestedness, publicness, and overridingness. The purest expression of this approach is Kant's deontological ethics: an action is moral if it is done for the right motive, namely out of duty—i.e., out of respect for the moral law. And Kant could go so far as to call this purely formal principle of universal law "the supreme principle of morality": "Act only on that maxim that you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

Utilitarianism, while relying on a material definition of the good (whether pleasure, the general welfare, the maximal satisfaction of preferences, or various forms of ideal end), is still a principle-based theory in its conception of the right: that action (or rule of action) is right which is justified by the principle of producing the greatest good (happiness, pleasure, welfare, etc.) for the greatest number of people.

Of course it was recognized that these formal absolutes, although they worked quite well in the schoolroom, worked less well in the full human world complicated by subjective viewpoints and the historical uniqueness of events. Still, general principles seemed to apply for the most part, and this was enough for most people most of the time. Those practice professionals, such as priests and school teachers, who needed an account of when and why apparently universal moral principles did not apply in certain cases could consult the detailed, if unacademic, manuals of casuistry.[3]

Academics for the most part disdained casuistry and continued to explore the domain of the ethical in a theoretical way, clarifying and deepening key moral concepts such as authority, autonomy, and impartiality. At the same time, however, an increasing air of unreality began to surround philosophical attempts to lay bare the rational grounds for ethical behavior. Too often, moral theorists seemed engaged in a kind of duplicity whereby they

claimed to be fully convinced by their own principles (*pour encourager les autres?*) but were unable, in concrete terms, to communicate the rational ground of that conviction to others.[4]

Part of this neglect of the concrete context of moral problems has no doubt been due to the professionalization of philosophy. Distinctions which began as useful fictions for purposes of analysis have been elevated into a professional creed. Today, undergraduate students are quickly taught the distinction between descriptive ethics (the study of the moral values that people actually hold), normative ethics (the hortatory enunciation of moral norms and precepts with the aim of persuading people to be more ethical), and meta-ethics (the study of the logic of moral principles and the meaning of ethical terms). After a few brief gestures, descriptive ethics is quickly passed over to the province of anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists. Normative ethics is rarely regarded as a legitimate academic activity at all and is usually left to popular moralists and religious preachers. Meta-ethics alone has been embraced by many as the only legitimate province of philosophy.

Along with this professionalization, there has been a growing separation of ethical theory from ethical practice. A non-initiate who naively picked up a professional journal of ethics in the hope that it might provide some moral guidance would quickly become perplexed and frustrated. Many ethical theorists have expressed some concern over this, but see it as a necessary evil. Ethics just *is* a complex and difficult study, they argue, and advancements in the understanding of it can come only through trained analysis of critical obscurities in carefully discriminated abstractions.

Whatever may be the merits of the motives which inspired this division of labor, a notable consequence of it has been the irrelevance of much of ethical theory to the ethical lives that people are actually striving to lead. The irrationalism that underlies much of contemporary normative discourse in the political domain and the mass media can be viewed as a fully understandable, if tragic, response to this unhealthy divorce between theory and practice. While the distinction between ethical theory and ethical practice is a venerable and valuable one, its entanglement with the modern professionalization of philosophy so that philosophy is only legitimately concerned with the former, has, I believe, been costly.

Many teachers who have perceived this irrelevance have sought to alleviate it by emphasizing 'practical ethics' and achieved

some measure of success in probing problems such as abortion, euthanasia, and civil rights issues. But all too often this approach has meant either the purchase of relevance at the expense of theoretical depth and consistency or the engagement in increasingly implausible gymnastic attempts to reconnect principles to practice.

I suggest, instead, that the solution lies neither in making ethics less theoretical and more practical nor in elevating the functional separation of theory from practice into a professional creed, but rather in modifying what we take to be ethical theory so that it may operate more freely and more wisely in the domain of concrete ethical life. In particular, this will require that we dislodge the notion of principle from its current position of centrality in ethical theory.

Before we proceed, however, let us clarify the nature of the impasse to which we have been brought. The failure of ethical theory's preoccupation with principle is most clearly revealed in two contemporary problems faced by the project of ethical understanding—the well-known problem of moral relativism, and a variously named problem which I have called "the theoretician's dilemma."[5]

The Problem of Relativism

The problem of relativism, I believe, is one of two core problems defining the limits of the ethics of principle. It is not really one problem, but rather a syndrome of problems arising out of the failure to give a satisfactory account of the relationships between fact, rationality, and value. Moral relativism is the thesis that moral actions and attitudes cannot be evaluated by criteria of reason and value that have their source and criteria of legitimation outside the culture of that society.[6] It goes much further than the innocuous and obviously true remark that a substantial portion of our ethical thinking is shaped by, and applicable only within, the cultural meanings and social norms of the society that we inhabit. In its more radical form it implies that if the (majority of) persons in a society or sub-society believe that an action is the right thing for them to do, it follows a priori that it really is the right thing for them to do. While few people who claim to be moral realtivists endorse such a bald statement, they are usually at a loss to show why it is not a natural inference from the things that they do believe.

The problem of moral relativism has two aspects. It is a problem of authority (how can we judge between alternative accounts of the right if there is no universal authority to appeal to?) and a problem of discernment (how can we judge between alternative accounts of the right if they spring from different concrete visions of the good? These two aspects of the problem of relativism reveal a hidden bankruptcy in the separation between a theoretical study of formal principles and a practical knowledge of the problems of moral life. The problem of authority reveals that the rationality of thought about concrete cases is *only* rational if it is integrated into a broad understanding of what is good, and not otherwise. The problem of discernment reveals that the rationality of principle is only rational in thought about concrete cases, and not otherwise.

The temptation to engage in polemics over relativism can be abated by recognizing that there are healthy and unhealthy versions of it. Healthy relativisim is a natural product of our growing sensitivity to context. Seung has put the point elegantly:

> Recently, some critics have begun to behave as though our contextual abyss were a swamp of misfortune thay had fallen into by some unfortunate accident. But this contextual or hermeneutic abyss is not a gift of accident, but our own achievement, which has been secured through our gradual realization of contextual significance. It is not a cognitive chaos that has been thrown over our fumbling intellect by some evil genius, but an epistemic space that has been created by our maturing contextual awareness.[7]

Healthy relativities concern the moral, intellectual, and physical capacities of the agent. For example, it may be the moral responsibility of a strong and healthy male to physically interfere when a mugging is in progress, although a frail and senile elderly woman would have no such responsibility. Moral responsibility is also relative to circumstance as well. A doctor has the moral responsibility to treat someone in distress, but a child does not. Truth and morality are obviously relational concepts, so it is equally obvious that they have relativities. For example, truth is relative to both facts and discourse, and morality is relative to both the capacities of the agent and the circumstance he finds himself in.

Unhealthy relativism is unable to distinguish right from wrong, science from superstition, rational judgement from capri-

cous belief. It insists that if a society, sub-society, or individual believes that an action is the right thing to do, then it really is the right thing to do it. The failings of moral relativism as a world-view are fairly easy to identify:

1. Moral relativism justifies intolerance as much as tolerance, since intolerant societies cannot be evaluated.
2. It entails that reformers are always wrong because they object to prevailing norms.
3. It makes morality solely a tool of power because power structures determine social norms, thereby removing the legitimation for both law and civil disobedience: it gives us no framework from which to judge how power should be used.
4. It relies on simplistic notions of both individual and society, ignoring the fact that no individual inherits the values of just one group and that there are many variously sourced voices within an individual.
5. It frequently implies a crude majoritarianism ("the majority is always right"), which clearly offends our intuitions about social justice to minorities.
6. It entails that we would not only have to refrain from evaluating the behavior of others (from corrupt politicians to Hitler), but we would be unable to evaluate our own behavior, other than to recognize that it is conforming or deviant: conscience would atrophy.

Given these failings, why would anyone want to embrace relativism? One reason is that many see it as the only alternative to a moribund principle-based ethics. Principle-based ethics locates the criteria of legitimation in an abstract domain, whereas cultural meanings and social norms inhabit a concrete domain. Despite valiant efforts by modern philosophy to establish connections between the two domains, their blank unlikeness makes the failure of legitimation and the problem of moral relativism inevitable. On such a model, ethics as the theory of right practice is an oxymoron: the prepositional 'of' has no reference. Not until the criteria of legitimation are anchored in a concrete understanding, one which recognizes its source in culture and history while

acquiring the capacity to make authoritative judgements on that culture through a self-knowledge which carries its own warrant, will the problem of relativism be laid to rest.

Another reason is that, in popular rhetoric, moral relativism has become identified with the current political ideal of uncritical pluralism which has largely replaced (or lessened in importance) older ideals of commonweal, social order, and racial, tribal, or cultural identity. This laudable inclusiveness has consequences for social meaning which, once the rhetorical underbrush has been cleared away, are somewhat less than desirable. In a pluralistic society, for example, many find it difficult to draw the distinction between authority and democratically sanctioned brute force. Also, a pluralistic tolerance often masks an inability or unwillingness to face structurally entrenched failures in social planning. Different conceptions of what is right in particular cases often reveal large-scale differences in visions of social good. Without a method of discernment which can navigate these differences, a vicious loop of inactivity results in which the understanding of particular right awaits upon social norm, and social norm awaits upon understanding of particular right. The solution of diluting both individual ethical understanding and social norms to their lowest possible level has so far been shown to be of only limited value.

The Theoretician's Dilemma

Independent of the problems of authority and discernment implicit in the problem of relativism, a broader problem of application is inherent in principle-based ethics, a problem that has been often lamented but rarely clearly identified. I call this problem the theoreticians's dilemma, adapting a term from Carl Hempel. In a famous article on the philosophy of science, Hempel examined the problem of the purpose of theoretical terms in scientific explanation and prediction.[8] Theorizing seems to generate a paradox. The terms and principles of a scientific theory serve the purpose of establishing intelligible connections among observational phenomena. But if this is possible, then it must also be possible to dispense with such interpretive theoretical entities and replace them with laws linking observational antecedents directly to observational consequents. The theoretician thus seems caught in a classical dilemma:

If the terms and principles of a theory serve their purpose they are unnecessary, as just pointed out, and if they don't serve their purpose they are surely unnecessary. But given any theory, its terms and principles either serve their purpose or they don't. Hence, the terms and principles of any theory are unnecessary.[9]

In ethics, *because* it deals with practice rather than observation, the problem becomes more acute. When we attempt to bring abstract moral theory to bear on concrete ethical situations, we often find ourselves faced with a dilemma: the more precise and comprehensive our theory of the principles involved in concrete situations of choice and decision, and the more thorough our characterization of the reasons why these principles should be followed, the less relevant and applicable our theory becomes, both to the exigencies of the situation and to the actual motivations of the persons involved.

Concrete situations lack the clean lines of principle. They do not reveal of themselves the place or manner in which principles are to be applied, nor what form they are to take. How, then, are we to know how (or whether) a principle is to be applied in practice? Do we appeal to theory or to practice? If to theory, we seem quickly to arrive at a vicious regress: in order to apply a principle to practice we need to have a principle of application, but to know which principle of application to adopt in practice we need a further principle. And so on. Are we then to appeal to practice, as those who are fond of something they call "common sense" would recommend? But now we are faced with a dilemma. Practice is already theoretically informed, whether we are conscious of it or not. The ethical equivalent of scientific explanation is conscious reflection on how one's principles apply to one's current situation. Even those who believe that moral behavior is largely a matter of the exercise of good habits acquired via childhood conditioning would still, for the most part, be less than sanguine about abandoning their thought processes while they are engaged in actions—especially those actions which take a long time to complete, are ethically complex, and tend to recur.

Let's use the following example to illustrate this dilemma. Suppose a soldier fighting in Vietnam has been brought up to believe that it is wrong to kill another human being, but he also believes in a general sort of way that in some circumstances this principle may be abrogated. To what kind of thinking could he

appeal for help in resolving his moral uncertainties in the context of his current situation? To gain concrete relevance he might decide to lower the level of abstraction of his principle and give it substantive form and qualification. For example, 'do not kill' might be modified to 'if you are a soldier fighting in the jungle do not kill your enemy unless not doing so involves reasonable risk of endangering a mission of reasonable importance or future mission of such importance.' Relevance is gained but at the cost of much of the original principle's universality and justificational authority. On the other hand, the soldier might make a theoretical choice to maintain the original principle and attempt to derive concrete guidance from it by purely formal procedures of inference. Adopting a radically pacifist stance, he would refuse to admit circumstances which might morally require him to kill. The universality and justificational authority of the principle would be maintained, but at the cost, presumably, of both immediate relevance and much of the concrete psychological appeal to interests which forms so large a part of our motivation to action. While some might applaud a pacifism-at-all-costs stance, it is difficult not to treat such a strategy as overly rigid formalism in other cases (as when the principle 'do not lie' is considered in the concrete situation of choosing how to answer the Gestapo officer who has asked you the location of your Jewish sister).

The theoretician's dilemma brings to light how principle-based ethics fails to unite principle, situation, and motivation in the required way. On the one hand, if the principle is given too much substantive content, it loses its universality and hence its ability to command our (theoretical) reason, insofar as this is guided by requirements of consistency and completeness. On the other hand, if it is given too little substantive content, it loses its intelligible threads of connection with concrete situations and hence its ability to command our (practical) will. A principle-based notion of moral understanding thus gives a significantly incomplete picture of the rationally integrated moral agent. If we fail to will *in concreto* the principle which our reason has determined to be right (the moral failing labeled weakness of the will) or fail to acknowledge as our own a desire which runs contrary to principle (the moral failing labeled self-deception), then such an ethic has few psychological resources to turn to other than the dubious comforts of self-accusation and repression. Yet the fault may sometimes lie not with ourselves but with our theory. I

believe that the theoretician's dilemma is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that principles hold the key to moral understanding. Another touchstone must be sought.

These kinds of problems have usually led philosophers to invoke some other ability to explain how we make the transition from theory to practice—usually some version of the notion of 'practical reason.' A purely principle-based ethical theory such as Kant's treats investigation of the theory-practice relation as something which falls outside the scope of ethics proper (the investigation into the meaning and truth of moral principles) and relegates it to the domain of casuistry (the study of how and when principles are to be applied in practice).[10] As a consequence, practical reason itself (i.e., moral choice) necessarily remains opaque to reflective understanding. Utilitarianism, which is principle-based in its conception of the right but not of the good (this latter being apprehended by an irrational sympathy), permits a more intelligible but less moral conception of practical reason. The tradition which began with Bentham's hedonic calculus of pleasure and evolved into the complex inter-personal utility comparisons of contemporary decision theory became more and more transparent to critical judgment but less and less descriptive of the genuine operation of moral understanding in the practical realm. Kantian and utilitarian appeals to practical reason are therefore not *solutions* to the theoretician's dilemma, but a re-naming of their inability to explain the connection between intellibility and moral motivation.

Neither of these appeals to a practical reason, I believe, provides an adequate solution to the theoretician's dilemma. The Kantian notion is ultimately obscure and lacking an adequate moral psychology. To say, as Kant does, that practical reason is a reason that motivates the will, without providing an adequate psychology of that process, is unenlightening. The utilitarian notion of practical reason, while certainly not obscure (being simply a procedure for calculating maximal satisfaction of given values) leaves those values without a rational evaluation procedure of their own. And the utilitarian appeal to sympathy as a source of moral motivation, although it appeals to some as a healthy admission of the limits of theory, too easily turns into a comfortable agreement to stop thinking—which does not sound so comfortable when one considers how often such amiable ignorance so leads to apathy, aimlessness, and violence. The concept of sympa-

thy simply places moral motivation in a black box within the psyche. Appeals to practice mean little if it is recognized that practice has only two options—to be enlightened by understanding or not to be so enlightened. The horns of the dilemma remain firm.

The revival of interest in virtue-based ethics over the last two decades has brought with it a more promising notion of 'practical judgement' deriving from Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*.[11] It is more promising because it is not principle-based. Aristotle distinguished the various domains toward which rational understanding directed itself according to the purpose for which such understanding was pursued. This was the basis for his distinctions between theoretical, practical, and productive understanding. Theoretical understanding (*theoria*, view or vision) was pursued for its own sake. Practical understanding (*praxis*, the speaking and acting together of human beings) was pursued for the sake of action. Productive understanding (*poiesis*, craft-skill) is pursued for the sake of making. (Making is distinguished from acting in that it pursues an end outside of itself).[12] Because action involved both rational and nonrational parts of the soul, the understanding appropriate to it could not achieve the excellence of the wholly rational part (*sophia*, theoretical wisdom), but only the excellence of the partly rational part (desire plus appetite), *phronesis* (practical wisdom or prudence). *Phronesis* is a 'deliberative desire' which at the same time discovers concrete ends as well as relates those ends to available means.[13] Yet Aristotle is notoriously silent about the details of the moral psychology of deliberative desire, and his reliance on a natural teleology of human ends to provide the test of *phronesis* places great strain on its relevance to a contemporary world which has abandoned the physics of final causality and become much more aware of the diversity of human goals. Part of the task of rehabilitating virtue ethics has been accomplished by Alasdair MacIntyre's relativization of virtue to practices in *After Virtue*. Virtues, for MacIntyre, are not excellences of the human species per se, but those character traits necessary for accomplishing the goods inherent in certain practices which have stood the test of time.

Another part of the task, I believe, is to provide the missing moral psychology and *that* will require a re-examination of Aristotle's overly narrow treatment of the imagination. (I shall return to this later.)

THE MARK OF THE ETHICAL

How necessary, really, is the notion of principle to the task of ethical understanding? Modern ethical theories have treated it as central, locating the mark of the ethical person in the degree to which he or she submits his or her will to a particular kind of rule. In the case of utilitarianism this is a substantive rule of benefit to persons in general, in the case of Kantian ethics it is a rule characterized by formal features of its manner of representation to the mind—namely, universality derived from the conception of law itself and categorical necessity derived from the recognition that it is addressed to a being possessed of a will (i.e., a being capable of acting according to its conception of a law). Moralities of principle provide, it is argued, an objective description of the ethical field. Concepts of right and wrong primarily apply to a certain kind or class of thing which can be captured by lawlike statements—namely actions. These are treated as part of the objective furniture of the universe in the sense of being logically independent of descriptions of the empirically experienced mind or self. Such a description leaves the thinking and experiencing subject out by design, thereby gaining purity, but at the cost of point.

The proposal offered in this book is that persons, rather than principles, should take center stage in our understanding of the ethical. We should not first seek to define the ethical through an Aristotelian 'division according to objects,' but seek a division according to subjects or persons. This does not mean that a person-based ethic abandons objective considerations, nor that it denies the importance of acting on principle. It does imply, however, that the abstract formulations of moral principle are incomplete at the level of our *understanding* of what constitutes right relations with other persons insofar as they are persons (not merely incomplete at the level of our ability to apply that understanding).

If we approach the ethical as, in essence, a feature of persons (rather than of kinds of actions or properties of principles), we find that we must look at ethical thought in a different way, since persons are not objects, or at least not objects in the usual sense of the term. Persons are representers of objects, subjective agents, and self-identifiers. They are also in an important sense processes rather than fixed entities (although they do possess some important long-term continuities such as character, personality, and self-

concept). Persons straddle the domains of subjectivity and objectivity. Persons have ethical objects (e.g., principles), but they are not themselves ethical objects. Persons resist objectification.

An ethics of persons has to begin by acknowledging some of the force behind the problem of relativism and the theoretician's dilemma. Ethical objects may show significant variance from person to person, culture to culture, situation to situation. And inferences from principle often fail to be determinative of particular actions in concrete situations. Are we then to despair and say that there is no such thing as right relation between persons? Or that right relations are whatever an individual or a society thinks they are? Or that there are objective right relations, but they have no rationally compelling appeal to concrete individuals? I don't think so, but an adequate reply will, I believe, require some significant reconfiguration of our cartography of the ethical. In particular, it will require a *rapprochement* between moral philosophy and moral psychology (especially the psychology of the self), the detachment of the concept of ethical rationality from that of scientific rationality, and the development of concepts able to serve as bridges of intelligibility and motivation between theory and practice.

Such pessimism as is generated by the problem of relativism and the theoretician's dilemma about the ineffectiveness of theoretical understanding in ethics stems, I suggest, from an unnecessarily firm attachment to the paradigm of *theoria* as the contemplation of timeless truths. As such, it is detached from the active practical life of the ethical person, from the structure of concrete motivation of persons in particular situations. But the ends of theory and the ends of practice need not be placed in such dire opposition. It is possible to treat ethical thinking as an evolving, historically grounded, and psychologically structured activity without either denigrating it as irrational or replacing the category of theoretical understanding with a mysteriously primitive notion of practical understanding. We might call such thinking "concrete reflection" and use it to refer to the more concrete kind of thinking that we do when we are engaged, not so much in the abstractions of ethical theory, but in circumstances of concrete choice and attitude.

The ideal of rationality appropriate to such thinking would be that of a maximal comprehension of the motives for our actions. This comprehension would of necessity include as an essential

component a dimension of self-understanding psychologically prior to the formation of principle. Such a reflection would include many of the standard elements of theorizing: inferring, analyzing, synthesizing, conjecturing, and interpreting. In addition, however, the self and its motivations will be seen to be caught up in these processes in a unique way. Certain distinctions common to ethical theorizing will be significantly absent—notably the categorical distinction between desire and obligation. When we derive a result (i.e., a choice or an attitude) in concrete moral reflection, we have not merely grasped that we ought to do something or believe something; we have determined that we want to do what we ought to do. Somewhere in our psyche, *is* and *ought* have coalesced. (Of course, a distinction could still be made between kinds or levels of desire, but this is no longer the categorical distinction defining the moral as it is in Kant's distinction between inclination and will.)

The concept of rational self-understanding invoked by such an ethic will need to include an account of how moral representations enter the self's dynamics of desire without loss of content, authority, or intelligibility. It is to this question that the theory of imaginative idealization is addressed. For it is through imaginative idealization that individuals come to make the foundational (although not necessarily unalterable) distinctions which constitute the structure of both their ethical interpretations and their ethical motivations. Ideals are envisionings of the self's good life, and they are products of imagination rather than the apprehension of the truth of principles. To say that our ethical desires are an imaginative product does not, however, cut them off from reality or rational scrutiny. By the end of this book I hope to have shown that imagination may also possess a genuinely theoretical role in the synthetic apprehension of ethical unities, and not merely the heuristic one of applying theory to concrete cases.

IMAGINATION'S FATE

Philosophers have tended to neglect the concept of imagination as a means of understanding the domain of the ethical. One reason for this has no doubt been the variety of conceptions of the imagination which have been developed over the centuries. The imagination is a notoriously difficult concept to define. A study of its

history reveals a complex web of conflicting meanings and distinctions. It is abundantly evident that the English word 'imagination' (as well as its other-language equivalents) has been used to refer to a multitude of distinct notions.[14] Even when a subset of more or less congruent meanings have been isolated, the concept has rarely been advanced beyond the typological level to that of genuine theory. And despite a contemporary revival of interest in the topic, it remains an essentially contested concept: no generally acceptable theory even of the main subsets of the concept of the imagination is presently available.

In ethics generally, the imagination has usually been discussed in the context of practical or applied ethics. Theoretical accounts of what it is about actions and persons that make them either ethical or unethical have tended to minimize the role of the imagination or pass over it altogether. This is clearly the case in Kantian ethics (see Chapter 3). Although Kant assigns an important if obscure place to imagination in theoretical understanding, he largely restricts its place in morals to the practical business of moral judgment (the application of principle to cases). Utilitarianism does indeed assign a much more prominent place to imagination, especially to sympathy theories of ethics deriving from the work of Hume and Adam Smith, but the question of whether this is a mode of understanding or a heuristic device is unclear (see Chapter 2).

Despite vigorous attempts by theoreticians, the concept of imagination has been difficult to dislodge. It plays too large a role in too many areas of human life to be easily banished to the realm of mere heuristics. Philosophers have conveniently passed the elaboration of the imagination over to poetry and literature, thereby providing this vital, if awkward, concept something of a home. This has been a joint program of thinkers who in their philosophical conclusions are often otherwise fiercely opposed. On the one hand, romantics and neo-romantics (such as Dilthey, Schleiermacher, Croce, Begson, and Collingwood) have encouraged the migration in the conviction that truth is made rather than discovered, and the poetic imagination is the ideal vehicle for this making.[15] On the other hand, positivists and neo-positivists, convinced that imagination has nothing to do with truth, have relegated imaginative thought to the 'emotive' realms of poetry and art in an effort to wash their hands of it once and for all. Again, from a rather different direction, critical theorists such as

Habermas and Apel, recognizing that imagination has a cognitive role as creative insight, tend to invoke literary models of understanding as opposed to formal (or 'conceptual,' or 'technical,' or 'instrumental,' or 'calculative'—the phrase varies with one's polemical target) models. In each model, moral judgement and sympathy pass beyond the pale of theoretical understanding into some form of social praxis.

The reason imagination seems to so many to be a literary-poetic activity, however, is that it is posed in opposition to a Platonic view of knowledge as the conceptual understanding of a reality possessed of form independent of the consciousness that apprehends it. According to this view, imagination is regarded as offering, at best, the bittersweet illusion of reality. This view, regarded by many today as rather old-fashioned, has its ancestry in Plato's depiction of the philosopher's journey as the escape from semblance toward true being:

> Such is the life of the gods; but of other souls, that which follows God best and is likest to him lifts the head of the charioteer into the outer world, and is carried round in the revolution, troubled indeed by the steeds, and with difficulty beholding true being; while another only rises and falls, and sees, and again fails to see by reason of the unruliness of the steeds. The rest of the souls are also longing after the upper world and they all follow, but not being strong enough they are carried round below the surface, plunging, treading on one another, each striving to be first; and there is confusion and perspiration and the extremity of effort; and many of them are lamed or have their wings broken through the ill-driving of the charioteers; and all of them after a fruitless toil, not having attained to the mysteries of true being, go away, and feed upon opinion [semblance].[16]

The delightfully bewitching images and metaphors of literature and poetry ought certainly to be cultivated, it is believed, not because they advance our understanding of what is real or right or good, but because of certain socially salutary effects on the habits of mind of the person so bewitched. This plea for a truce between philosophical truth and an essentially irrational imagination in a war which has been consciously fought since Plato, has received elegant statement in the work of P. F. Strawson:

> The region of the ethical, then, is a region of diverse, certainly incompatible and possibly practically conflicting ideal images or

pictures of a human life, or of human life; and it is a region in which many such incompatible pictures may secure at least the imaginative, though doubtless not often the practical, allegiance of a single person. Moreover this statement itself may be seen not merely as a description of what is the case, but as a positive evaluation of evaluative diversity. Any diminution in this variety would impoverish the human scene. The multiplicity of conflicting pictures is itself the essential element in one of one's pictures of man.[17]

The difficulties in applying universal principles amid the diverse concrete apprehensions of our world have also been well charted by Stuart Hampshire:

There are two faces of morality: the rational and articulate side and the less than rational, the historically conditioned, fiercely individual, imaginative, parochial, the less than fully articulate, side.[18]

And:

Moral conflicts are of their nature inelimanable. . . . The worth and value of a person's life and character, and also of a social structure, are always undetermined by purely rational considerations.[19]

Just as the pluralistic clash of value systems is inevitable and rationally unresolvable, so too must be the work of the literary-poetic imagination as it performs its task:

I am suggesting that it is the nature of imagination that it generally deals in conflicts and contradictions, in dubious meanings, and not in definite conclusions and in unambiguous assertions. The energy in any imaginative work comes from that destruction of single-mindedness which allows different interpretations at different levels. This ambiguity, and this absence of reliable tendency, was a principle ground of Plato's banishment of the poets and of his plea for censorship; this, and the fact that the imagination of the poet, musician, or painter plays upon the surface of things, and is unconcerned with their underlying rational structure.[20]

There is much that is sound in this position, particularly the call for tolerance, moral exploration, and the recognition that loyalties and commitments may sometimes be quite justifiably rooted in purely historical circumstances rather than in reverence for a

principle. But I think that it is ultimately mistaken. A truce arrived at in this way between imagination and reason, particularly in the domain of ethics, will not be adequate to either our theoretical or our practical interests. A separationist peace attained by limiting the work of imagination to the literary side of a literary understanding/philosophical understanding dichotomy will be as temporary as one obtained by placing the imagination on the practical side of a practical understanding/theoretical understanding dichotomy.[21] For one thing, it obscures the nonfictive capacities of the imagination. Literary understanding is capable of addressing and instructing our ethical perplexities in a fully cognitive manner. A novel or a poem can inspire our mind as well as our hearts.[22] Further, this pluralist emphasis on the imagination's ability to dislodge encrusted categorizations is only half the story. The other half is the constructive ability of the imagination to dispel illusory distinctions and differences, to discover new synthetic unities, and to rediscover old ones.

For philosophers to pass the concept of imagination over to poetry and literature is a premature abandonment of responsibility. We have been persuaded to do so because of a meta-philosophical difficulty generated by a principle-based conception of rationality. Namely, if philosophy is theoretical understanding, and if to understand something theoretically is to explicate the principles of its operation, and if imagination does not proceed according to explicated principles, then imagination and philosophy have finally nothing to do with each other. We find it difficult not to agree with Samuel Johnson's characterization of it as a "licentious and vagrant faculty." But the responsibility of evolving theory is to monitor its relation to practice. It would indeed be an arrogance of theory to attempt to explicate, in a practically reproducible way, the principles of operation of a process such as the imagination which is essentially nonreproducible. Nevertheless, although the activity of the imagination may be beyond the reach of theory in the sense of being replaceable by it, the relation of the concept 'imagination' to our other moral concepts is a legitimate and viable theoretical concern. It is an equal arrogance of practice to assume that an explicated concept of imagination cannot aid it. Such arrogance stems from the same radical divorce of theory and practice which has produced the ivory tower so much lamented today.

It is true that the attempt to disestablish the philosophical concept of an ethical imagination by placing all consideration of

it within the literature side of the philosophy/literature opposition *does* grant the imagination a quasi-ethical role, even in the form of an ethically neutral literary-poetic activity. In practice, it may have the positive ethical benefits of expanding one's moral horizons and perhaps of influencing one's character development in a salutary if subrational way.[23] But this fails to answer (except by saying that no answer is possible) the urgent questions which theoretical ethics must address if it is to continue as a legitimate form of human inquiry. The limits of tolerance are left undefined; the purely poetic concept of imagination fails to distinguish between ethical and unethical ideals and commitments, the problem of relativism remains entrenched (particularly as a pedagogical problem); and the connection between theoretical understanding and concrete motivation is again left unexplained.