Philosophy, Ethics and Dialogue

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Here, I examine the nature of ethical dialogue from the point of view of its foundations in the critique of the dominant, disinterested conception of ethics, relating this to my 20 year experience corresponding with students taking courses with Pathways to Philosophy, including a prisoner on Death Row, Texas, USA. Ethical dialogue, where we seek the best outcome by our collective lights, is contrasted with activity in the business arena, where traders are assumed to be acting from purely self-interested motives. The role of philosophy as an activity of seeking, in the words of the metaphysician F.H. Bradley, 'bad reasons for what we believe on instinct' is examined from the point of view of our practical interest in learning how to engage in ethical dialogue, as well as the need to defend the theory of ethical dialogue against rival views. From the standpoint of theory, the ethics of dialogue is the conclusion of a three-part dialectical argument involving the refutation of solipsism and the subsequent refutation of anti-solipsism. Looking at ethical dialogue from the standpoint of praxis, it appears that learning ethical dialogue is more like learning to dance than learning an intellectual game like chess. It can't be taught from a book. One learns ethical dialogue by engaging in ethical dialogue. One consequence of this radical conception of ethics is a new version of the problem of *akrasia*. You have the knowledge and the will, but fail ethically because of your practical inability to engage the other person in ethical dialogue.

Part I

On 10th December, 2003, Thomas Bartlett Whitaker, his roommate Chris Brashear, and a neighbour, Steve Champagne, carried out an ingenious plan to murder Thomas Whitaker's father, mother and younger brother. The Whitaker family had gone out to dinner to celebrate Thomas's graduation from Houston State College. However, the story about the graduation was a lie. When the Whitakers returned to their home in Sugar Land, Texas, Brashear, who was lying in wait, shot and killed Thomas Whitaker's mother and brother. He shot, but failed to kill, Thomas Whitaker's father, Kent. Brashear then shot Thomas Whitaker in the arm. Brashear fled the scene with Champagne, who was waiting outside in a getaway car. (Whitaker, T.B. 2012)

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Hospitalised on a morphine drip, Kent Whitaker sensed that he had an important decision to make:

> I realized that God was offering me the ability to forgive, if I wanted to take advantage of it. Did I really want to forgive this guy? I know the Bible says we are to forgive those who hurt us. I know God tells us that vengeance is his, if he chooses to dispense it. I have even heard secular health professionals say that forgiveness is the most important thing people can do to heal themselves. But did I really want to forgive, even if God was offering a supernatural ability to do so?

> In an instant the answer sprang full-grown into my mind. My heart told me that I wanted whoever was responsible to come to Christ and repent for this awful act. At that moment I felt myself completely forgiving him. This forgiveness astounded me, because earlier I had experienced feelings of incredible sadness and intense anger – even the desire to kill the person responsible with my own hands. Little did I realize just how important my decision to forgive would be in the coming months. It would change everything. (Whitaker, K. 2009)

In 2010, I received an email from Tanya Whitaker, Kent Whitaker's second wife. She and her husband wished to book the Pathways Moral Philosophy Programme (Klempner 1997) for 'our son' Thomas, a prisoner in the Polunsky Unit, Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I had never heard of Thomas Whitaker. It had been big news in the USA, where Kent was interviewed on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Thomas duly completed his programme over the subsequent months. By this time, I knew the whole story. Thomas Whitaker had quickly come under suspicion from detectives investigating the murder case. On the run in Mexico, Thomas was finally arrested in September, 2005, and was extradited to the USA where he stood trial at Fort Bend County, Texas. He was convicted and sentenced to death for First Degree Murder in March, 2007. Subsequent appeals have so far failed to reverse the Court's decision.

Thomas's essays on philosophy were thought-provoking, but also disturbing, in the bleak picture they painted of the Polunsky Unit. This was a young man of considerable intelligence and intellectual curiosity. Yet most young men would not have done what he did: a conundrum which I never came finally to resolve. Thomas finished the programme and was awarded his Pathways Certificate in November, 2010.

Subsequently, I discovered the following page on a blog, 'Minutes Before Six', which Thomas shares with several Polunsky inmates:

I mentioned recently that I had found a really great set of philosophy correspondence courses from a site in England. I took the one on Ethics ('Reason, Values, and Conduct'), because I began to feel that a better understanding of the subject would maybe help me to understand how I allowed myself to fall apart the way I did, and become such a mess and a failure. The course is guided by... Dr Geoffrey Klempner (author of *Naive Metaphysics*), and I cannot recommend this program enough. In it, Dr Klempner espouses the value of an ethics of dialogue, a sort of midway point between the positions of the solipsist and the disinterested. I really liked that his system did not fit into the preconceptions I had about ethics being a field straddling a spectrum with the deontologists on one end, and the utilitarians on the other. One of the central points to an ethics of dialogue is that moral discourse exists between an 'I and a thou' (taken from a phrase associated with Martin Buber). In other words, when you and I come together to discuss whether or not I committed a moral wrong... we both have to start from a point of actually respecting the other, of allowing the possibility that our dialectic will change our views. (Whitaker, T. B. 2010)

Whether, as his father Kent had believed, or hoped, Thomas Whitaker became an ethically better person for having undergone the experience of studying Moral Philosophy with me, I am not in a position to judge. His understanding of the theoretical issues was stimulated and, hopefully, deepened. Perhaps, as the blog entry suggests, he also learned new strategies for negotiating the ethical challenges presented by daily life in the Polunsky Unit.

The extract also gives a pretty good overview of what the ethics of dialogue is about. Moral philosophy has been fatally stuck on the alternative of the self-interested and disinterested standpoints. We all know, or are expected to believe, that the 'right' decision is the one that ignores subjective or personal preferences in favour of what could be seen as the correct action from the impartial standpoint – whether calculated on the basis of maximum utility, or generated from a deontological principle, such as Kant's categorical imperative, or derived in some other way. The starting point for an ethics of dialogue is that there is no such impartial view. There is no fixed point for ethics: only the shifting dynamic between individual persons in relation with one another.

It is a truism that one ought to be prepared to change one's view in response to reasoned argument. Otherwise, you merely have two people talking past one another. The ethics of dialogue isn't just about making that simple point. The claim goes deeper: it is that there is no ethical truth other than the truth *we* create by our joint efforts, no objective standard but the one we set, or discover, for ourselves. In the Pathways Moral Philosophy Programme, the case is made for an objective foundation for dialogue ethics in the 'authority of the other to correct my

judgments'. The other person is not like a thermometer or spyglass, a tool which I use for gathering knowledge. The question of the limits and fallibility of my powers of judgment is not up to me alone to judge. In ethical dialogue, I recognise an authority that objectively exists for me, as my authority exists for you, rather than one that you or I merely grant for this or that purpose. However, objectivity, in this case, does not mean a *theory* that can be used to decide any ethical question. The only people who can do that are me and you, I and thou.

How do you reach an ethical judgment through ethical dialogue? According to the ethics of dialogue, there is no special class or category of judgments known as 'ethical judgments'. Every judgment is an ethical judgment: just because it is achieved through a process which is in its aim and practice, inclusive of all those affected. As the ideal of inclusion is open-ended – because also of the sheer fact that people themselves can change, and not just their 'minds' – there is no point where you can get to say, 'this is the ethical truth of the matter.' The focus of ethical dialogue is on the process, guided by good will and openness, rather than on the outcome. To proponents of traditional ethical theories, this is perhaps the hardest proposition to accept. To believe in the objective necessity for ethical dialogue does not entail belief in the existence of 'objective moral facts' – whatever those may be.

For the last 20 years, my intellectual life has largely consisted of meetings and dialogue, through email and postal correspondence, with individuals who share my passion for philosophy. I believe that all dialogue is essentially ethical dialogue; and that dialogue, that is to say ethical dialogue, is fundamentally different from trade or *quid pro quo*, the activity that defines the business arena. As I state in my conference presentation, 'Truth in the business arena',

> In ethical dialogue, it is axiomatic that one tells the truth, while all other rules of conduct have to be argued for on their merits. In the business arena, it is axiomatic that one does not steal, while all other rules of conduct have to be argued for on their merits. (Klempner 2014)

In ethical dialogue, the question should not arise whether I am seeking to tell the truth – by my lights. It is implicit in the fact that I have opened myself up to you, as you have to me. By contrast, in a commercial transaction, there is always room for such a question. In the business arena, honesty has a cash value.

Although Kent and Tanya Whitaker paid for Thomas Whitaker's philosophy programme – a transaction conducted in the business arena – my dialogue with Thomas was an ethical dialogue. It was not trade or negotiation, but a meeting between an 'I' and a 'thou' in Martin Buber's sense (Buber 1959). Perhaps one of the most interesting features of ethical dialogue, illustrated in the quote from

Whitaker's blog, is that when someone has experienced dialogue in this sense and with this intention, they learn to do it with others. The practice of ethical dialogue is contagious. Perhaps this is what the early Christians understood, when they followed their simple rule of brotherly and sisterly love.

Part II

As a Jew married to a Roman Catholic, I learned about the ethics of dialogue long before my philosophical inquiries brought me to that point. The catalyst was a Good Friday church service which I attended with my late wife, June. As I recount in the Editor's Note to Issue 100 of *Philosophy Pathways*, (Klempner 2005) for Jews, Good Friday has particularly bitter associations – historically, it is a time that Jews learned to especially fear, as attacks on the alleged 'killers of Christ' rose to a peak.

> What did I expect? The service was sombre, moving. There were no words of hatred. Instead, I felt the reverberations of the intense sense of unity of the congregation as they pondered a two thousand year old historical incident which defines their faith. Then the priest delivered a sermon which I shall never forget.
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> The theme of the sermon was peace and justice. In the Middle East, then as now, all the talk was of 'peace with justice'. But justice demands that the guilty be punished. And who would there be left, the priest asked rhetorically, who did not have some part in the guilt? Yet how can there be peace without justice? The New Testament teaches that peace can only be achieved through forgiveness and reconciliation. That was Christ's message to humanity. We cannot, and should not forget. But we can forgive and beg for forgiveness.
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> That experience was formative for me. Years later, when I wrote 'The Ethics of Dialogue' and 'Ethical Dialogue and the Limits of Tolerance', (Klempner 1998a, 1998b) it was the spirit of that sermon that I tried to recapture. One cannot be fully human and lack a sense of justice. Yet the ethical demand to open up to this particular other, to strive to grasp how things appear from the other's perspective, however painful that may be, is higher than blind justice. (Klempner 2005)

F. H. Bradley notes in the Preface to his metaphysical treatise, *Appearance and Reality*, that 'Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct.' (Bradley 1897) As it seems to me now, it was not so much instinct as experience – sometimes painful, 'racked and riven by painful adjustments and renunciations on both sides', as I wrote in 'The Ethics of Dialogue' (Klempner 1998a) – that led me to an implicit understanding of the nature of ethical dialogue for which I subsequently sought philosophical justification. The point, however, is that the need to offer such justification is by

no means otiose for the would-be philosopher. It is instinct again – or perhaps experiences that go back to early infancy – that drive the philosopher to seek reasons and justification, where those not gripped by the questions of philosophy are content merely to assess practical benefits and get on with their lives.

In the Pathways Moral Philosophy Programme, I describe the case for an ethics of dialogue as the outcome of a three-stage dialectical progression. The first stage of the dialectic consists in the case for transcendental solipsism: the theory that the ultimate description of my experience, my life, can be given from a single standpoint of the Kantian 'transcendental ego'. In this view, other persons are merely 'characters in the story of my world'. The second stage of the dialectic consists in the refutation of solipsism. The attempt to maintain a view of the universe as essentially being 'my world' breaks down, because my attempts to attain truth are ultimately no better than trying to use a measuring tape to measure itself. This is the upshot of Wittgenstein's case against a private language. 'One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right".' (Wittgenstein 1972, para 258, 92e)

It's a point that I have struggled to explain with generations of Pathways students. The transcendental solipsist neatly skips over the obstacle set by Kant's Refutation of Idealism (Kant 1929). As Kant states, the objects in 'my world' are necessarily *identified as* objects located in space. This is Kant's 'empirical realism'. Where the transcendental solipsist diverges from Kant is in dispensing with any notion that there exists anything beyond the world of spatial appearances – a noumenal world, as Kant believed – in effect, reducing the world to a mere story that I make up as I go along, my own dream. The dialectical gap that separates Wittgenstein's argument against a private language from Kant's refutation of idealism defines the standpoint of the *anti-solipsist.* There is no more meaning to the term 'I' than 'an other to others who are other to me'.

However, this is where we reach the third stage in the dialectic. I am *not* just 'another person'. Language may not give me the means to state 'what more I am' (according to Wittgenstein's argument, it cannot), but what I cannot state is nevertheless *given as a task*, as Kant himself would have put it: that task is set by the fact that *I am the one asking the question*. I am the one asking – not God, not some impartial judge on high – what to do when faced with *this* particular situation, *this* particular other who is standing in my way, or who calls out for my help. The starting point for an ethics of dialogue is thus a deepened sense of our own unique subjectivity, not conceived as a Wittgensteinian 'private object' but, rather, as an existential given. To be a human being, that is to say, an *agent*, is to be faced with the question: what must *I* do?

Although the route taken is somewhat different, I believe that the outcome of the dialectic I have described coincides with the view of Emmanuel Levinas on 'the other' (Levinas 1979). The theory of anti-solipsism coincides with what Levinas would describe as the misguided attempt to 'thematise' the other, making the other just another entity which one encounters in the world, an attempt which sees, or attempts to see, I and the other as merely 'two of the same' – failing to grasp the profound otherness of the other.

On the subject of dialogue, one could write an essay on the various failed attempts – some of them comic – by philosophers working in the analytic and phenomenological traditions to come to a mutual understanding of the different ways in which they approach the central questions of philosophy, or even what they conceive those questions to be. Suffice it to say that Levinas is extraordinarily difficult for a philosopher trained, as I am, in the analytic tradition. I would not like to say, with any great degree of confidence, that my view of the grounding for an ethics of dialogue coincides with Levinas's view of the other, but it is, at least, close.

Ethical dialogue is something to value, for its own sake and also for its benefits. The challenge for ethics has always been the challenge of the other, even when this was not explicitly recognised: for it is ultimately the challenge of showing that I owe due consideration not just to persons within my narrower or broader circle – my family, or my co-religionists, or my fellow countrymen – but to every human being, every 'other'. The question, however, is the philosophical basis for this claim. If the basis is *not* the disinterested view, then that has important consequences. I am not equally bound to every conscious being in the universe. All conscious beings in the universe are equal in respect of their being 'other', but some, those with whom I am engaged in ethical dialogue, necessarily have the more immediate claim to my attention.

Part III

Philosophical practitioners are fond of quoting Epicurus: 'Empty is the argument of the philosopher which does not relieve any human suffering.' The meaning of the quotation is less often really understood. Philosophers are not wise men or women who have some special gift of ethical vision, or the ability to offer useful practical advice. Philosophers *argue*. That's what they do, what they are trained to do. Epicurus was a philosopher who understood this. The challenge is to see how sheer argument – as contrasted with empirical investigation of the world, or technological innovation, or merely experience and diligent practice – can ever help anyone do or achieve anything of value.

If all philosophy can do is tell us what we already know, or believe, what use is philosophy? As a philosopher, I have a view about ethical dialogue. That is something I have learned from experience, but it is also something I have reasoned out, defended, honed and refined through a process of dialogue with others who share my interest in foundational questions. Only because that view has been reasoned out does it have any special claim to consideration.

In the second decade of the 21st century, it is by no means accepted that philosophy has any use at all – if it ever had. My baseline defence of philosophy has always been that the sole justification for my doing philosophy is that I need it. The sole justification for our doing philosophy together is that we need it.

Different persons have different kinds of need. There is not just one reason for coming to philosophy, but many:

> You can philosophize for sheer enjoyment. Or because you want to change the world. Or to develop and hone your mental powers. Or out of insatiable, childlike curiosity. Or because your very life depends upon it. I have had the privilege to have known students – a few exceptional, but all of them interesting – who have exemplified each of these goals and ideals. And I understood perfectly where they were coming from, because I could see a little bit of me in there too. The joys of philosophy are, or have become, for me the joys of dialogue. If and when I escape back into my solitude, I shall take all of this with me. (Klempner 2003)

If, despite the most thorough soul searching, despite everything I or others can say to kindle your interest in foundational questions, you cannot find that need within yourself, then nothing will persuade you that philosophy is a worthwhile activity. I have heard the opinion expressed that all university departments of philosophy could close down tomorrow without any impact on the intellectual life of the nation. Philosophers are good at inventing rationalisations for beliefs everyone already holds – like the existence of an external world, or the need to uphold ethical values, and when they're not doing that, they debate problems which no-one understands, whose solutions no-one cares about. As someone who has devoted his life to philosophy, this is a hard thing to accept, but I do accept it. I acknowledge that the words I am writing now are only for those who care about philosophy. Which is not to say that I would not be prepared to make the most determined and earnest attempt to get the sceptic to see the point of philosophy. Dialogue is of little value, if the only time you can engage in dialogue is in conditions that are favourable to mutual understanding and enlightenment.

Re-reading the above quotation, it is interesting to me now that I was prepared to countenance the possibility, even as far back as 2003, that at some point I would

'escape back into my solitude'. Four years earlier, I had stated:

> You can do philosophy in solitude, as Descartes amply demonstrated. You can carry on a lively dialogue with yourself. Yet in soliloquy one vital ingredient of the philosophical enterprise is missing. For all our best attempts to communicate, philosophical vision is always something essentially idiosyncratic, peculiar to each and every individual. Perhaps because philosophy is so much a struggle with language, or against language, you always seem to *see* more than you can *say*.
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> In philosophical dialogue, we can never get completely clear about our disagreements and differences, because we never get to the point of being about to state what precisely it is that each of us believes, or the difference between our respective standpoints. There is always more, in the background, that one struggles to articulate. Yet in the search for a meeting point, something new is created that is neither yours nor mine – something neither of us could have created by our own unaided efforts – the dialogue itself as it takes on an independent life of its own. (Klempner 1999)

To those persons who don't get what philosophy is about, it is difficult to explain how there can be positive value in *not* knowing one's way about, in 'seeing' things that despite one's best efforts one fails to 'say'. I'm not just talking about the person of 'plain common sense' as he or she used to be called, but notable figures like the celebrated physicist Stephen Hawking, in his recent intemperate attack on the philosophy of science (Norris 2011). Then again, so many academic philosophers from the English-speaking analytic tradition seem to betray the very same prejudice. The value of philosophy is precisely in the way it achieves clarity, they would say. There's no disagreement about the value of seeking clarity. However, to quote the title of a notable philosophy collection from the 1960s, edited by H.D. Lewis, 'Clarity is not enough' (Lewis 1963).

As I am a philosopher, I would still want to achieve clarity about the underpinnings of ethical dialogue, even if it were universally agreed that this is the correct way to characterise ethical relations. As it turns out, in the world of the 21st century we know that the reverse is the case. Hypocrisy, bigotry and fanaticism are the rule, and genuine ethical dialogue the rare exception. I would like to understand why, and perhaps, by my efforts, potentially reduce the human suffering that this causes, but I also recognise that this is a process without a final destination. One understands more, one understands ever more deeply, but the task of philosophical understanding can never be completed.

Part IV

How do you practice ethical dialogue? There is no 'how to' or recipe, but there is something that philosophy can say about its nature, which illuminates *what it is we are trying to do*. I hinted at this at the end of 'Ethical Dialogue and the Limits of Tolerance':

> ...two strangers when they first meet might pause before launching into conversation, weighing one another up, deciding through the mutual reading of expressions and postures who is to risk the first move. I cannot simply blurt out what is on my mind until I am reasonably confident that it will be taken in the right way. The principles at work here are not principles of philosophy, or any rational process of assessing 'rights' and 'wrongs'. They are the principles of game theory. (Klempner 1998b)

Here, game theory describes a practical ability that one can't simply learn by learning the theory. In this sense, ethical dialogue differs sharply from an intellectual game like chess. It is perfectly possible to become an excellent chess player without playing a single actual game of chess. You do this by studying books on chess theory, playing through the games of chess grandmasters. Of course, however good a chess player you are, you can get better by playing actual games. One of the things one learns is the psychological dimension; you play the player and not just the board. A good chess player knows, for example, when their opponent is beaten, even if the position is theoretically drawn, but no-one has, or ever will, become proficient in ethical dialogue by reading a book. You learn ethical dialogue by doing ethical dialogue with someone who is proficient in ethical dialogue.

A better comparison would be dancing. No-one would ever think of learning to dance by following diagrams describing where one places one's feet. Dance is something you have to feel your way into, a way of letting go which involves a different part of the self from the ratiocinating, intellectualising part. This is not to deny that once you have learned to dance, once you have that proprioceptive, ecstatic sense of how to move your body in that way, then you can without too much difficulty learn to read symbols on a page as actual bodily movements – as in the system of Labanotation, developed by Rudolf Laban in the 1920s.

However, certain consequences follow from this; consequences that will not necessarily be welcome. The most important consequence – which is suggested by the analogy with learning to dance – is that some persons will never be able to engage properly in ethical dialogue. Following through the analogy, they may simply suffer the mental equivalent of 'two left feet'. However, apart from the psychological hang-ups that affect a few random individuals, there is a more serious and more widespread obstacle: the obstacle of belief.

It is no accident that Western philosophy has championed the ethics of the disinterested view. It is characteristic of those who possess – or, rather, are possessed by – a strong system of beliefs, that they are all too willing to impose their belief system on others in the name of the disinterested view. One analytic philosopher who has seen this clearly is R.M. Hare. (Hare 1976) A 'fanatic', in Hare's sense, is not necessarily a potential terrorist or suicide bomber; it is anyone who has a belief about any value, which they wish to impose on others. Sadly, according to Hare, the only ethical theory which is consistent with the rejection of 'fanaticism' is preference utilitarianism, which Hare admits would have the theoretical consequence that,

> ...if the Nazi's desire not to have Jews around is intense enough to outweigh all the sufferings caused to Jews by arranging not to have them around, then, on this version of utilitarianism, as on any theory with the same formal structure, it ought to be satisfied. (Hare 1976)

In mitigation, Hare pleads that 'fanatics of this heroic stature are never likely to be encountered... [and] cases that are never likely to be encountered do not need to be squared with the thinking of the ordinary man.'

What leads Hare, a distinguished analytical philosopher, into this mess is his unquestioning loyalty to the principle of the disinterested view. My response to Hare's 'heroic' Nazi is *my* response, as I happily admit: 'You can go to Hell and I will do my utmost to send you there!' Deciding rights and wrongs from the imaginary view from nowhere isn't ethics but is an intellectual game that has no connection to the real world of persons engaged in ethical dialogue.

How do you dialogue with the 'heroic' Nazi? You don't. You reach for the nearest gun, or bomb, and that is the most important philosophical lesson concerning the ethics of dialogue. There are persons you can do ethical dialogue with. There are persons that it is worth trying, ever so hard, to do ethical dialogue with, but, if you fail despite your most earnest efforts, you are not under any ethical obligation to continue talking. Does that mean that every Nazi or would-be Nazi, or murderer, or rapist is beyond ethical dialogue? Not at all. The question of whom I, or we, can dialogue with, and when, is always a practical question that has to take into account our best judgment about the implications of doing so, for each of us individually, or together, or for society at large. And that judgment can change – or be changed.

The same problem arises with the 'true believer', the religious fanatic. It is perfectly possible to be devout, to be serious about one's religious belief, without being a fanatic (Bayfield 2012). The fanatic, however, will not allow you to have beliefs that differ from theirs. They see it as an affront, a challenge which must be overcome before any meaningful dialogue is possible. There is no solution except practical

expediency: if you can't engage in ethical dialogue you can still negotiate on the basis of *quid pro quo*. That is to say, you can do business together. If you can't do business together, and you can't find a way to avoid one another, then the only remaining option is war. Annihilation of one's opponent, as the Nazis well understood, is the permanent possibility which underlies all other forms of human negotiation.

As a consequence of our ethical dialogue, we have ethical obligations towards conscious beings with whom we are unable to engage in ethical dialogue. Human infants and non-human animals have a claim on our attention that they are unable to argue for themselves. I owe it to you, my partner in dialogue, to continue to practise those virtues of attention and concern through whose mutual resonance dialogue is made possible, in the respect that I give to those temporarily or permanently excluded from the circle of human dialogue.

Part V

Whatever the reason – whether it be a psychological problem with relating to others, or the problem of fanaticism – an inability to practice ethical dialogue, according to the theory we have described, means that you cannot *be* ethical, period. In terms of logical structure, the point is the same as the one that was first acknowledged by aidoctrine, 'Virtue is knowledge' (Aristotle 1953). The akratic person *knows* what is the right thing to do, but cannot bring him/herself to do it. In the case of the ethics of dialogue, you can know what ought to be done, you can have the strength of will to act on your decision, but – perhaps through overpowering resentment, or fear, or aversion, or disgust – fail precisely at the point where it is necessary to engage the other in ethical dialogue.

Just as Aristotle grappled with the problem of *akrasia* as a serious challenge to a cognitivist view of ethics – the view that there is something in which, objectively, the possession of ethical knowledge consists – so the most serious challenge for an ethics of dialogue is the realisation that the persons who can engage in ethical dialogue are a proper subset of humanity in general. It may well be the case, that a limited form of ethical dialogue is possible within a community of fanatics. Perhaps those who practise it are not beyond 'saving'. If they can do ethical dialogue with each other, then there is a chance we can do ethical dialogue with them, but ethical dialogue can only exist in this limited form so long as its nature is not subjected to philosophical examination.

Is it possible to renounce all belief? As an atheist, albeit a Jewish atheist, I most certainly have beliefs. If God did exist, and I had a big enough gun – I would kill Him. If God exists, then He ought not to exist. That's what I believe. Human beings do not need God, or gods, meddling in our affairs. There is no reason,

supposing a Creator does, or did, exist, to be grateful for being created, or for any of the other supposed 'benefits' that such a Creator has imposed on humankind. Here, I follow Bertrand Russell's famous essay, 'A Free Man's Worship' (Russell 1917). In describing his 'tragic' vision, Russell, in turn, appeals to Nietzsche – a man of very strong belief, on my reading, who saw nihilism as the greatest threat to human civilisation.

Could I engage Tanya and Kent Whitaker in ethical dialogue? Of course. We could start by exploring the different meanings of 'love'. Christians profess to love all of humanity, but ethical dialogue teaches that an effort has to be made on both sides. Christian *agape* seems to me too general and unspecific, too closely associated with the metaphysics of the disinterested view; ultimately nihilistic. However, I could be wrong in my interpretation. Perhaps saying that every human being deserves 'love' is merely a colourful way of stating one's ethical commitment to be open to the other, so far as that is practically possible.

So the problem isn't really about belief, as such. It is a problem that anyone who engages in philosophical thought understands very well: the permanent possibility of being wrong, of having one's view of oneself, or of the world, overturned by considerations that you had not thought of and perhaps, on your own, were incapable of thinking of. That's why philosophers read the history of philosophy, which teaches over and over again the same lesson: If you think you understand, consider the possibility that what you seem to grasp is in reality a misunderstanding. If you think you know, remember all the times you 'knew', but what you knew was false.

It is possible, as a solitary thinker and researcher, as I stated above, to do all this for oneself, but much the better alternative is to do philosophy with others, not least because nothing is more conducive to preparing the mind – and the psyche – for true ethical encounter.

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