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Introduction: On William Blake, Nature, and Mortality

The Beautiful Vision

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.[1]

This first puzzling quatrain which introduces William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* is widely known. The other 128 lines of the poem, less often quoted and very rarely transcribed in full, comprise sixty-four rhyming couplets, mainly in the form of two-line proverbs. Here Blake imagines a world in which cruelty and insensitivity are abhorrent, and offences against wild creatures have terrible consequences.

The consequences that Blake asks us to envisage are not natural disasters but moral ones:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all heaven in a Rage.

A dove-house fill'd with Doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.

A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.

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[1] William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1–4.

A horse misused upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human Blood.

Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain doth tear.

A skylark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.

The Game Cock clip'd & arm'd for fight
Does the Rising Sun affright.

Every Wolf's and Lion's howl
Raises from Hell a human soul.

The wild Deer wand'ring here and there
Keeps the Human Soul from Care.

The Lamb misused breeds Public strife
And yet forgives the Butcher's Knife.[2]

Although the structure of the formulae makes it look as though Blake is appealing to consequentialist considerations to discourage cruelty ('You'd better not do this, or that might happen'), the nature of the consequences shows that, for Blake, morality is not shored up on a foundation of self-interest or utilitarian benefits. When he suggests, in lines 15–16, that some cherub ceases to sing whenever a skylark is wounded, he is not citing something else that is harmful besides the offence to the skylark, such that if there are no cherubim we need not worry about skylarks. Rather, he is pointing to the inherent offensiveness of the deed: it is harmful because to kill a skylark *is what it is* to silence one of the cherubim. We have to learn to see it as such, in order to see what kind of offence is committed in cases of wanton cruelty to wild things. With his simple-minded 'penny proverb' formulae, Blake tries to persuade us to see things from the point of view of 'heaven': to be enraged by what puts heaven in a rage, to take delight in what is delightful to heaven itself.

Blake's poem does not seem to offer the kind of persuasion that would convince a philosophically minded person to change his or her views. There is no attempt to show *why* we should see the death of a skylark as tragic; nor does Blake tell us what is the source of the absolute external judgement of value implied in the claim that something 'Puts all heaven in a Rage'. He does not explain how he knows this for a fact, nor what kind of fact it is. It is hard to see how these proverbs could be effective against someone who took a more grudging view of the value of non-human lives, or who thought that right action was to be judged by the calculation of overall utility, not by some postulate of heaven's anger. If we look for argument in Blake's vision, it is lacking.

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[2] William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 5–24.

But that is not to say that there are not other forms of persuasion, besides academic arguments, that are also philosophical. One might, in fact, want to say that some apparently non-rational techniques are more suited to engineering the kind of change of outlook that Blake is interested in producing. Sometimes it is more effective to resort to poetry or story-telling in order to offer a way into an alternative viewpoint. Yet the reader who clings to argument and rational debate is in danger of remaining blind to such alternatives—blind largely because of those very blinkers that refuse to see what can only be shown and not proved.

Blake asks us to bring our moral sensibilities into line with some absolute standard, the viewpoint of heaven. Moral sensibility, he suggests, involves having our emotions in good order, which means being enraged, offended, and upset by things by which we should be enraged, offended, and upset, and delighting in what merits delight. Indeed, surely Blake is right that moral vision consists in seeing things as offensive when they are offensive, and as wonderful when they are wonderful. But we need to be brought to see which things are wonderful, and, if there is a truth out there about which things are wonderful, and it is not up to us, then moral vision will demand a kind of cognitive awareness of some truth, and an alignment of our sensibilities with the sensibilities of heaven (to use Blake's picturesque language). In other words, correct emotional responses will include a response to or recognition of real values, something objective about the events or circumstances that are to be judged. The emotional response involves an evaluative judgement, a kind of cognitive awareness of something: namely, the genuine offensiveness, or beauty, of the things in question. Hence we might want to say that moral judgements involve emotional responses with cognitive content,[3] though that content need not be propositional, as I hope to show in Chapter 4.[4]

Blake clearly envisages that moral attitudes will follow once we learn to see things aright. If we come to see things as worthy of care, we shall care for them as such. Indeed, surely that must be so: to care for something just is to find that its concerns matter to us. Blake points us to the hunted hare, the wounded skylark, and the badly treated horse, and asks us to see the difference between kindness and cruelty, between humane and inhumane kinds of killing, and between justifiable use and unjustified abuse. These are sensitivities that do not appeal straightforwardly to natural features of the creatures in question, for the person who is content to leave the lamb to starve, or to whip the horse to death, perceives exactly the same biological specimen before him as the person who decries such action. Blake asks us instead to see how other moral agents (heaven and the angels, providence and the personified moral welfare of the community) react with horror at such deeds. Only by learning to react with horror like that can we become humane people.

Moral learning, then, is not to be equated with scientific or biological learning, since the facts we need to master are not simple facts of biology. Blake's humane vision clearly does not dawn when we master a new set of value-free truths about biology, or if we master a set of maxims to prescribe or limit action (even if Blake's formulae sometimes look, unhelpfully, like maxims to memorize and act upon). No utilitarian or consequentialist persuasion can ever bring one to see the world in the way Blake urges us to see it, unless one has first learnt to value (or decry) certain kinds of consequences. So moral development, we might say, will be about learning what to value, which consequences to decry, what to weep for, and what to love, not about calculating the net results of some *already given* values.

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[3] The cognitive content of emotional judgements has been the focus of a number of recent studies, including work on ancient thinkers, Stoics in particular. For scholarly work on what the Stoics' position was, see Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and for a defence of cognitivism on the Stoic model, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). There is a risk, however, which is particularly evident in Nussbaum's treatment of this question in relation to animals, of taking it for granted that the requisite cognition must be a propositional attitude, and hence must be implicitly structured as a proposition, so that in order to ascribe emotions to animals one must attribute the same propositional beliefs to them as would found the corresponding reaction in us. In Nussbaum's case, these are cognitive appraisals of the significance of something *vis-à-vis* one's own goals and projects. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. I, ch. 2. See further below, Ch. 4.

[4] To my mind the account that Nussbaum gives of the cognitive processes involved in the animal's appraisal of the situation stretches credulity. When I use the terminology of 'seeing', such as 'seeing' a certain action as offensive, I do not mean to imply that a complex proposition is involved. In order to observe offensiveness in a situation, one does not need to think 'x is offensive', or even 'this is offensive'. One reacts to the offensiveness: one judges it disagreeable—much as one might react to a noxious smell, burning heat, or a dazzling light, only in this case the offensiveness will be morally painful, not physically painful. A certain kind of discernment of a property deserving a negative response (at the cognitive rather than the behavioural level) just is what it is to judge that something is offensive. See also Ch. 4, n. 12.

In moral judgements, then, nature seems to be the object of our attention, not the subject of it. Nature itself does not tell us what to value—by 'nature' here I mean the kind of information about the natural world that goes into biological taxonomy, and the results of empirical experiments on animal psychology and behaviour.[5] Different observers, and different communities of observers, see the natural objects around them in one way or another: some see them as a resource to exploit; others see them as a gift to love and cherish. Neither of them seem to be making a factual mistake about the natural capacities of the objects they are observing. Nothing in the biology can tell us that one of those attitudes is a more accurate estimate of what is before us, laid out for our attention, because what is there can, in fact, be treated either way. There is nothing about a mortal human being that ensures that we cannot enslave her, rape her, take her livelihood, or murder her children. On the contrary, without some artificial precautions, she is wholly vulnerable to all those things and more. Nature provides no protection against such atrocities. That is why they are so common. And that is why so much legislation and social engineering is expended on trying to minimize the risks. Equally, there is nothing about lambs that makes them immune to abuse; nothing about foxes that makes it impossible to set dogs upon them, or to tear them limb from limb for fun.

Yet when we look upon those kinds of cruelty and abuse, we often use the language of necessity and impossibility. 'You can't do that to an innocent person,' we say. And then we try to justify that claim by drawing attention to some quasi-empirical biological facts about the innocent creature whose suffering we find offensive. 'She's a rational being'; 'It feels pain'; 'They have a potential for self-awareness'. The reasoning looks odd. For it appears that we are trying to appeal to value-neutral natural features, things that biology could discover, as though things like that could provide answers to questions about what we should or shouldn't do to our fellow creatures. Given that nature makes rational beings just as vulnerable to cruelty as others, and given that it is clear that creatures that can suffer are naturally more vulnerable to suffering than things that cannot suffer, what mistake are we making when we try to say that you *cannot* inflict suffering on a creature that is capable of suffering?

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[5] I am invoking a simple-minded contrast here between nature (external, objective facts about the natural world independent of human value judgements) and the value-laden attitudes to them that are fostered by art, literature, and human culture. Perhaps this distinction begs the question, and it may be that we do not have any access to such supposedly 'objective facts'. We may also wish to dissociate ourselves from any such ideal of objective science seeking objective facts (so we may have a value-laden attitude to the project of discerning value-free facts about nature). But my claim is not (I think) seriously disturbed by these worries. My suggestion is that the attitudes fostered by art and culture are not dictated by external objective facts of nature, but are a way of seeing those facts and placing value on them. The fact that these attitudes are, in a certain sense, up to us does not, however, prevent them from being objectively right or wrong. But they are right and wrong in a different way from the way in which our beliefs about biological facts may be right or wrong. The latter could be corrected or confirmed by recognized methods of empirical research; the former could not (but could, in some cases, be rectified by reflecting on a poem such as Blake's, for instance).

In one sense perhaps we are making some mistake, at least when we try to take this limping attempt at justification to be something that it is not. When we decry cruelty with words like 'cannot' we are typically asking the hearer to come to see the world as we do (for in *our* world, perhaps, it is true that one *cannot* do that: 'cannot' because of a range of psychological and moral constraints, for one is personally incapable of, say, choosing to inflict suffering on another creature gratuitously, and one cannot do so without remorse, or without failing to adhere to the things that matter most, and so on). So we express our horror in the terms that come naturally to us: we describe the offensive action as an impossibility, and we think that our vision is obvious and is written unmistakably in the nature of things—because it seems to us to be a correct expression of how things naturally are. And just as Blake asked his hearers to see that heaven was angry and to learn to feel angry in the same way, so we ask our morally insensitive fellows to acquire the sensibility that is expressed in our outcry 'You can't do that!'. If we think that it is genuinely the case that the other person can't do it, of course we are mistaken, because they can do it, and they are doing it. They do not feel the horror and will not feel the remorse, and they are not failing to uphold any of their own personal values or commitments. In a kind of factual sense, it simply is not true that they 'can't do that', in the way it is true for ourselves.

Yet perhaps we shall still want to say that there is a sense in which they 'can't do that' and get away with it, because there is something seriously missing in their understanding of the situation. Nor do we leave it, when we see that the other person has no scruples where we have scruples. Like Blake, we then go on to try to persuade the person who does not share our sensibilities to come to see the vulnerable creature as something to care for. Perhaps this can best be done by the kind of expressions that Blake provides, expressions that show that the sensitivity required is to the *moral evaluations* that are missing—heaven's verdicts about what matters—not to some supposedly objective empirical facts of nature, or to some naturally harmful consequences that haven't been assessed correctly. But by default, and through lack of poetic understanding, we often find ourselves tempted to try some more pragmatic appeal. We resort to a naturalistic form of argument. We try drawing attention to features that we think might weigh with those who are blind to moral considerations: we try to appeal to consistency—for instance, to the idea that one should treat alike things that have like capacities. We try to force people to concede that if they treat other human beings in a decent way, that must be because of what human beings are by nature (rational, or sentient, or whatever). And then we try to get them to reason to a similar consideration for other creatures that share some of the same capacities. We delude even ourselves into thinking that it is because of some natural abilities that we take such things to be precious, and that our fellow humans deserve care (or 'have rights') in virtue of being something naturally special—sentient, self-conscious, or rational, say.

In that project, too, we must surely be mistaken. Why should we think that the value of a human being derives from his or her rationality, for instance? Surely there is nothing especially noble about rationality as such—far from it. Where it exists at all, rationality is often a source of deeply unpleasant and cold insensitivity, or of unyielding pig-headedness. Such obstinate rationality stands to be condemned and despised, not admired or prized. It is often those times when emotion, intuitive empathy, and generous sensitivity triumph over rational calculation that human nature reveals its better side—though that is not to say that every intuitive or empathetic response is a fine one. Nor, evidently, does a person's value derive from any other natural feature of the individual, whether it be looks or physique or intelligence. Such things are not intrinsically valuable in themselves—at least not in the way that would be needed for them to make their possessor an object of unconditional moral respect—, [6] while their instrumental value is invariably morally ambiguous, since they may be put to good or evil uses. Yet, to the eyes of affection, all these things may come to seem beautiful, even wonderful and fine. When such gifts are properly appreciated, and properly used, they become valuable (in the hands of the one whose gifts they are, and in the eyes of the one who sees the world aright).[7]

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[6] It might be tempting to think that good looks, a fine physique, and intelligence are aesthetically pleasing in themselves, so that it would be as great an evil to have the world devoid of such fine things as to have it devoid of small blue butterflies or the works of Vivaldi. But the issue here is not whether intelligence is, *ceteris paribus*, a good thing in itself, but whether it makes the individual or species that

So what we are really trying to do, in bringing another to share our moral viewpoint, is to teach him to see value where we see value, to pay attention to what we find merits attention, and to direct his care and love towards what we find worthy of care and love. Frequently we—both philosophers and ordinary unpretentious folk—try to do this by pointing to uncontroversial facts in nature that we think are the things that justify our take on the world. We do this, first, because we take it for granted that our evaluation of things can be read off in their very nature (for that is how it seems to us), so that we suppose that someone who accepts the relevant biological facts must accept the moral truths that seem (to us) to follow from them. And second, we suppose that someone who lacks moral vision will learn to see what matters by being directed to look again at things that already count as important for him (such as facts of biology, say, or utilitarian consequences, or self-interest). Yet it is probably just this false evaluation of what matters that most needs to be shifted, not reinforced by suggesting that it is factors such as those that underpin our own evaluations, if there is to be a shift in the person's moral outlook.

Suppose we have a beautiful vision of the world. We cannot bring someone whose vision of the world is a grudging one to see it as a thing

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possesses it intrinsically superior, not just instrumentally (as the necessary means for preserving the beauty and intelligence that would otherwise be lost), but as an end in itself.

[7] I have not mentioned the capacity for speech here. Raimond Gaita identifies the capacity for speech, equated with the possibility that things might go deep or have some meaning for us, as the crucial mark of human life, which makes someone a limit on another's will. (This is a theme in both Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) and many of his other writings, including *The Philosopher's Dog* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).) This focus on speech may be an attempt to pick something that is more obviously morally relevant, and more clearly valuable, than the candidates mentioned above. But I think that, in so far as it has anything to do with the capacity for speech as such, it suffers from the same problems as the other candidates—in particular the moral ambiguity of its uses; while if it is not about speech as such, but about what (often or sometimes) goes with a capacity for speech, then the identification of speech as the criterion of value seems to rely upon a more basic idea: namely, that some of the deeper sides of human experience are morally significant. This does not, however, give us a natural moral division that coincides with the species boundary between humans and other kinds. On Gaita's emphasis on the significance of the capacity for speech, see Alex Segal, 'Goodness beyond speech', *Philosophical Investigations*, 27 (2004): 201–21.

of beauty by re-describing it in terms of that grudging vision. For then it will just be the same grudging and valueless world that he inhabited before; then, as before, the things that attract his attention will be the same pointless things, without grace and without beauty. Perhaps, then, poetry and art, rather than science and argument, are the kinds of things that can change our sense of which features of the world demand our attention and our love.

True Values and Relativism

Suppose we hear what Blake has to say, and thereby come to see the world as a thing of beauty, deserving of care. Suppose we feel that we have grown out of the grudging values of self-interest and externally imposed obligation, and come to a more mature perception of what it is to act in a humane way. So we have changed one set of values (the grudging values we used to endorse) for a new set of values, Blake's beautiful vision, the ones he ascribes to 'heaven'. Is there no more truth to our new, humane attitude than to the grudging one we held when (as we see it now) our moral vision was undeveloped? Is value simply relative to the perceiver, so that our sense that we have changed for the better is nothing but our current preference for what we now believe is good? Is our commitment to the genuine and exclusive truth of heaven's moral vision just an illusion? Perhaps there is no neutral reason to prefer that beautiful vision, that cares because it sees in the object of care a thing of joy, and to prefer it over the grudging vision of utilitarian or deontological outlooks? My answer to these sceptical questions is 'No', because there is a kind of second-order evaluation here, which is not vulnerable to the charge of relativism, although there might remain a sceptical doubt as to whether we could prove that the caring outlook is superior to someone who does not already see that it is so.

This needs some clarification. We have two levels of moral judgement involved. At the lower level we ask, for instance, whether the welfare of farm animals overrides considerations of profit, and we find that some individuals see farm animals as fellow creatures and objects of care, so that it is natural to conceive of their welfare as a matter of moral significance that can limit the extent to which we use them for profit, while others see farm animals as an investment in resources for a factory production process, so that welfare is a consideration only in respect to the risk of diminishing profits when the animals are below optimum health. These two attitudes seem to stem from alternative assessments of the motives and values that should weigh with us in deciding what to do, and they don't seem to be settled by appeal to the biological facts, such as what kind of conditions cause an animal distress.

But there is also a second level of moral judgement, a judgement about which assessment of the motives and values that should weigh with us is the better (or right) one. Here we can attempt to stand back and ask which of two outlooks is better. At this point we are not judging from within a particular outlook, but trying to adjudicate between different outlooks. Of course, one might hold that one is never in a position to do that, or that when one does so, one is in no position to show that one's adjudication is correct—and in particular, that there is no way to prove, to someone who does not already endorse the better outlook, that one's favoured outlook is better. Once again it seems that poetry and stories will be the only way to bring someone else to see why a certain outlook is missing out on something of real value, or that another one is more perceptive of what really matters. Nevertheless, even if this fact cannot be shown in terms that could convince a scientist, a philosopher, or anyone who hates poetry, it is at this level, I am suggesting, that there is indeed a truth to be known that is not relative to a perceiver.[8]

In this way there need be no hint of relativism in the *evaluation* of the true moral vision—that is, in the second-order evaluation of which outlook is the better one. Even though holders of the true moral vision see value where others do not see it, even when they have been brought to see all the relevant empirical evidence, it may still be better to see it there than elsewhere. The location of moral value, I am suggesting, is in the outlook of the person who has a developed moral vision: in his perception of things under a certain description that others do not share (and are the worse for not sharing). One take on the world is better than another: the finer description is a better one, the humane attitude is a better attitude—morally better. If others do not see the world as precious, that is a misfortune for them, even though they have made no mistake about how the world is and looks for them. They have, however, missed out on what is most crucial in life.

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[8] That is to say, some things that do matter to us perhaps shouldn't matter to us. Other things that don't matter to us perhaps should. This is not to say that the things that should matter to us do, willy-nilly, matter to us, even though we are not aware of it and act as though they did not (though that would be one way that we might sometimes want to explain things—as, for instance, Socrates explains it in conversation with Polus in the *Gorgias*). It is to say that some people genuinely do fail to attach any significance to some things, when those things should be among the most important if their lives are to have any genuine meaning.

That last paragraph may seem obscure or opaque. To clarify what I mean, it may help to compare the situation with regard to appreciation of music or art. If one comes to an unfamiliar genre of art with limited critical awareness, or with preconceptions from another field, one may be initially unable to see which features in the unfamiliar work are salient in passing judgement on its merits. We may disapprove of the work for the very features that a more educated critic admires. The critic's task is to bring his public to see the work in a new way, so that the features that make it great strike one as admirable, not distressing. Thus the critic finds himself drawing attention to features that were already there to see (or hear) in the work when it was first encountered, but by re-describing them and encouraging a new outlook, he persuades the viewer to alter his attitude to those features and to revise his evaluation. It makes sense to suggest that when we learn to appreciate Tavener's music, we discover what it is about it that is superb (not that we have a private value system in which things that have no intrinsic value come to look valuable to us), and that when we come to a humane appreciation of the world around us, we discover what it is about nature that is precious (not that we adopt a private value system in which things that have no intrinsic value come to look valuable to us).[9] To miss out on that is to miss out on something worth understanding, though it need not involve failing to notice any physical feature of the work of art, or of the objects of biology. I mean something of the same sort when I say that those who miss out on the better moral outlook miss out on something that is most crucial, something most worth understanding, in life.

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[9] The first of these looks like a classic case of what Raz calls the social dependence of value, such that one has to become an aficionado of the genre in order to appreciate which items in that genre are good of the kind. Then it would not be dependent upon a private value system, but one shared by those who understand contemporary music, in which certain techniques come to look valuable—and to be brought to see those things as valuable would be to enter the practice. But it seems unhelpful to hypostasize values as though they were metaphysical entities brought into being by social practices (or, in some cases, existing independently of any social practice) rather than focus on the practice of valuing, and ask which evaluative practice is the superior one—which Raz tries to address by appealing to further values such as freedom or the 'value of people' that are not merely within a social practice but are somehow independent and serve as the standard against which we judge the generic values. Joseph Raz, *The Practice of Value*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, The Berkeley Tanner Lectures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 33–6. This is perhaps an attempt to explain what I am here calling the superiority of one practice of valuing over another, but cashing it out with reference to more of the mysterious entities called 'values', this time values that exist independently of any valuers.

Against Human Flourishing

When I say that such moral blindness misses out on what is most crucial in life, do not think that I mean anything to do with what is called 'human flourishing', or with any human goals—as though we were to suppose that humanity or human life were something naturally worth valuing for its own sake. I do not mean that the better vision is better for pragmatic or utilitarian reasons. It is better because it is more noble, more admirable, finer, more beautiful, and *because it sees a beauty that is really there*. These are moral virtues not pragmatic ones. If this appears like a virtue-based account of the locus of moral value, it must nevertheless not be assimilated to those popular but debased forms of Aristotelianism that assume that the measure of virtue is determined by whether it contributes to a successful human life—or, indeed, to any other kind of project that is to be assessed by non-moral, pragmatic, criteria of 'flourishing'.

Typically, a virtue-based account of moral value will have problems with some kinds of self-sacrificial virtues, if the explanation of their merit is supposed to be found in a simple-minded pragmatic notion of human flourishing. By contrast, I have no wish to explain away the sacrificial nature of genuine altruism.[10] For my purpose, an attitude counts as a noble one if it is a thing of beauty, and it may be a thing of beauty even if its effects upon the agent's own life, or indeed her own species, might be devastating; even if it entailed the destruction of her world and of all her worldly projects.[11] Indeed, that is precisely when it is a thing of beauty. Morality may be at its most beautiful when it is wholly and ungrudgingly self-sacrificial. Human flourishing may be—should be—the least of its concerns. So if we need to package my proposals with some classic doctrines, I suspect that it is probably better to drop my account of what makes for moral goodness not into the Aristotelian carton, but into one marked 'Platonism'; for such moral vision involves seeing a beauty and a goodness in things that others see as worthless—a beauty and a goodness that are a vestige of the goodness and true beauty that we all long to realize in ourselves and in the world. And once things are seen in that light, they become the objects of passionate devotion, and the attempt to preserve and realize the vestiges of beauty among the things of this world is then a matter of extreme altruism. For the Platonist, virtue involves total attention, taken to extremes, and not the moderate self-interest characteristic of contemporary Aristotelianism.

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[10] Aristotle explains self-sacrificial altruism at *Eth. Nic.* 1169^{a}18–29, including death for a good cause at ^{a}25. As I read it, this does not try to reintroduce self-interest as the motivation for apparently self-denying actions, but rather explains how the well-motivated person can coherently choose the fine but self-destroying action, because what is fine presents itself as an overriding goal. The fine action is what motivates the virtuous person beyond any other more tangible benefit.

[11] It will not, of course, destroy the one dearest project: namely, that of acting for the best, choosing the noblest way. Rather, I am thinking of the person who goes to a self-sacrificial death, or chooses a hard way of life, with deep regret, even despair, for what they and others dear to them will lose as a result. Compare Sophocles' portrait of Antigone (lines 801–943).

Perhaps it sounds surprising to talk of *seeing a beauty that is really there*. If the beautiful vision is one that sees a beauty and preciousness that is really there, and this is one of the things that makes this vision better than the one that fails to see the beauty in things, why is it not a natural fact or feature in the world that is perceived? My point is that our perception of the world is partial, and structured by evaluative commitments; it is a kind of favouritism. When we focus on good qualities at the expense of weaknesses, or on positive features at the expense of negative ones, these qualities are not more correctly perceived than the negative qualities that the grudging agent sees: each of us looks out at the world and sees it with a selective focus. The question then is: which selective focus is morally superior, the one that reveals the prejudices of love or the one that reveals the prejudices of callous self-interest? Neither is superior in factual truth value, as regards the natural features of the objects observed, but one is true to something like a moral truth—that love is a better attitude than callous self-interest, for example.[12]

Mortality

Others before me have tried to formulate a position along these lines, and indeed I am not the first to explore these questions in relation to the supposed ethical significance of the divide between humans and other animals, and to use that as one of the tests against which to put theory on trial.[13] My purpose in this book is not to address other recent thinkers directly—or, at least, not to do so at great length or in great detail—but rather to turn back to the dead philosophers of the ancient past, so as to distance myself somewhat from the constraints of the current debates and to think with a clearer head. Conversion, I suggest, can be achieved better by returning to square one and retracing the way we first came, but picking out a clearer path to a different end, rather than by repeatedly checking just the last set of false turnings at this end of a long and seductive wrong road.

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[12] A selective preference for seeing goodness and value in others may sound naïve and gullible if it is applied in situations where there is evil and corruption. I do not mean to say that this vision will turn a blind eye to corruption: on the contrary, it will be as passionately offended by evil and ugliness as it is devoted to beauty and goodness.

Nevertheless, we might permit ourselves a brief diversion by way of Raimond Gaita's reflections upon mortality, which will, in due course, take us back to Blake's gentle vision with which I started this chapter. In chapter 3 of *Good and Evil*, Gaita emphasizes the place that ordinary expressions of horror, disgust, and appreciation have in conveying the depth and seriousness of genuine moral understanding.[14] He exposes the inadequacy of the suggestion (typically made on behalf of Kant) that we might re-express what is deep in our appreciation of other human beings in terms such as 'treating them as rational beings'.[15] To show what is missing in such a reduced moral vocabulary, Gaita reflects on a passage from Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part One,* which had previously been used as an example by Alan Donagan in *The Theory of Morality*.[16] The question here is whether Falstaff, in *Henry IV Part One*, displays respect for even the most worthless among his fellow men, according to the Kantian motif of unconditional respect for rational beings. Donagan identifies Falstaff as a Kantian; Gaita disputes Donagan's Kantian reading of the passage and suggests instead that Falstaff expresses pity and fellow feeling for the worthless rascals in his charge. Each thinker sees in Falstaff an exemplar of the perfect moral attitude to one's fellow human beings. I shall dispute both readings, and instead suggest that Falstaff is as cynical as Prince Hal about the value of his recruits. Yet that cynicism is also a kind of realism about the worth of human life.

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[13] The works of Cora Diamond and Raimond Gaita are probably the most well known and closest neighbours to my project in terms of their philosophical position (see e.g. Cora Diamond, 'Eating meat and eating people', *Philosophy*, 53 (1978): 465–79, repr. in *The Realistic Spirit, Representation and Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 319–334, and Gaita, *Philosopher's Dog*). Martha Nussbaum and Stephen Clark have (like me) used ancient material as a source of enlightenment (e.g. in Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, and Stephen R. L. Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)); but I shall intermittently mark my general disagreement with their respective positions on a range of issues in what follows. In addition, Daniel A. Dombrowski has written both about Stephen Clark's contribution (*Not Even a Sparrow Falls: The Philosophy of Stephen R. L. Clark* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 2000)) and on the ancient material directly (*idem, Vegetarianism: The Philosophy Behind the Ethical Diet* (Wellingborough: Thorson's Publishers, 1985)).

[14] Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 24–42.

[15] The chapter also criticizes the inadequacy of the utilitarian project to reduce moral language to talk of utility and harm, but my focus here is on Gaita's discussion of Donagan's Kantian reading of Falstaff.

[16] Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 240.

In the passage from Shakespeare, Falstaff, who has recruited a band of worthless rascals by conscription to fill the empty ranks in time for the forthcoming battle, declares to Prince Hal that the men are good enough for the purpose:

> FALSTAFF. Tut tut; good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder. They'll fill a pit as well as better. Tush man, mortal men, mortal men.[17]

Donagan cites Falstaff's speech with approval, because he observes that Sir John is defending the value of his assembled band of scarecrows and beggars against Prince Hal's verdict that they are worthless and good for nothing. Donagan wants to contrast Falstaff with Prince Hal, as regards their attitude to the recruits. The Prince (Donagan insists) 'is a man of self-esteem: securely convinced that his plan of life is worth carrying out and confident that he can carry it out; and he accurately registers that Falstaff's scarecrows have no plans and no confidence', and hence he has no esteem for them.[18] Donagan sees in Falstaff's response ('Tush man, mortal men, mortal men') a rather different attitude, which does not dismiss the men just because they have no life plan and no self-worth.

Perhaps Donagan is roughly right about the Prince, though we might want to put it more baldly. The Prince is interested in the recruits only as a means to an end. He accurately registers that Falstaff's scarecrows are untrained and incompetent as soldiers, and he considers them worthless for the immediate purpose. By contrast, Donagan would have us believe, Falstaff, though he likewise has no great esteem for his men, thinks that even his dishevelled rascals are at least that: mortal men. For that reason alone, he thinks, they merit respect in Falstaff's eyes: 'Yet, for all his misdeeds, Falstaff respects other human beings as he respects himself, irrespective of esteem. Respect in this sense has no degrees.'[19]

So, Donagan implies, whereas Prince Hal sees no good in men for whom he has no esteem, Falstaff, a good Kantian at heart, respects the men despite their inadequacies. Hence he ticks Hal off for failing to see that a human being, a fellow mortal, must always be granted respect just for that. This Kantian message Donagan reads into that one phrase 'Tush man, mortal men, mortal men'.

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[17] Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part One*, IV, ii. 71–3.

[18] Donagan, *Theory of Morality*, 240.

[19] Ibid.

In his discussion of the passage, Gaita disputes Donagan's Kantian interpretation of Falstaff, and replaces it with one of his own. On Gaita's reading, Falstaff's response is not a Kantian respect for rational beings, but an expression of pity and fellow feeling.[20] Gaita, like Donagan, holds Falstaff up as the model of a moral agent, a man who sees in even the scum of mankind an object of pity and fellow feeling. Once again, following Donagan, he locates this accent of pity in the characterization of the poor fellows as 'mortal men'. We can grasp how Gaita must have heard that phrase in his mind when he says, 'To speak this way of "mortals" is to speak in the accent of pity, and this accent is both expressive and constitutive of a sense of human fellowship.'[21]

To be sure, Gaita is again right (as was Donagan) to see that Sir John is momentarily defending the value of his recruits against Prince Hal's disgust. But the example was sadly ill-chosen in the first place, whether as an illustration of Kantian respect for rational beings or as an illustration of Gaita's ideal of pity and fellow feeling. Only a moment before, in his soliloquy before the entry of the Prince on the scene, Sir John had been expressing the very same estimate of the worth of these wretched men as the Prince is now uttering to his face. That is, of course, the passage to which Donagan alludes when he observes that Falstaff has no esteem for these men. So his cynical retort to the Prince now, when challenged about the poor quality of his recruits, is to observe that the men are only being recruited as cannon fodder ('good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder'), and hence the worthless rascals that he has assembled are as good for that purpose as any finer soldiers. There is no question here of ultimate respect, or of pity: Sir John is assessing their instrumental worth, just as much as Prince Hal was. But, Sir John wrily observes, in the circumstances the requirements are minimal: the recruits need only be the kind of thing that can be thrown into a communal grave ('They'll fill a pit as well as better').

For this purpose, Falstaff grimly observes, the only relevant qualification is that one be mortal, fit to die. Hal's desire that the recruits should have been finer specimens is pointless. 'Tush man,' says Sir John, 'mortal men, mortal men.' For him too they are just a means to an end, material to fill a pit. Their mortality is what makes them suitable for that purpose. So Falstaff's defence of the value of these rascals is not an expression of unconditional respect for the rational being as an end in itself, but an observation that any human being, however unprepossessing, can always be used as a mere means to something, if only because, being mortal, he can be killed for some end.

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[20] Gaita, *Good and Evil*, 27.

[21] Ibid.

Both Donagan and Gaita move too quickly from their recognition that Falstaff is defending the value of his miserable recruits, on the grounds that they are at least mortal men, to supposing that his—Falstaff's—defence is an expression of *their own* personal commitment to the unconditional worth of a human being, no matter how disreputable. That is, Donagan reads there, in Falstaff's exchange, a recognition of those wretches as other rational beings who also die; Gaita reads there an expression of pity and an unconditional limit on our will, though he resists the idea that 'rational beings' adequately captures the kind of attitude that he has in mind. Both thinkers equally fail to enter into the spirit of a conversation that is entirely alien to the moral outlook of either thinker, in so far as it is a conversation premissed upon the unscrupulous assumption (shared by both characters in the play) that the recruits are simply there for one quite unromantic purpose, to die in the Prince's campaign against the Percies and Owain Glyndwr. They are being assessed for their suitability much as cattle might be assessed for their fitness for breeding or slaughter.

It is ironic that it is precisely because Falstaff's men are mortal that they are not a limit on another's will in any sense at all. Hal and Falstaff are entirely free to send these hopeless mortals into battle, and to feel no remorse for that action at all. Human beings, like other animals, are vulnerable, and they can be abused without any sanctions.

Yet there is, nevertheless, something to be said about Falstaff's attitude, when we do succeed in entering into the spirit of his cynical response to the Prince. Perhaps, if we were to read Gaita in a more generous spirit, we might think that this was how he found an accent of pity there. For Falstaff might be said to be reflecting upon the horrors and pity of warfare—reflecting on them bitterly and cynically, but reflecting all the same—in the observation that the men he is recruiting are, after all, destined shortly to be tossed into the firing line and then into the grave, and that when matters stand thus, there is indeed no difference between a fine and brave, well-equipped and well-trained soldier, on the one hand, and, on the other, some wretched piece of humanity that had no hope besides the desire briefly to escape the gallows. I doubt that we should say that Falstaff pities his men. In fact, he surely despises them, and he intends to use them as 'food for powder' without regret. But he does see the truth about the pointlessness of such human lives, and he sees the futility of wars that waste lives, especially if they waste lives that had some promise (as these ones, thankfully, have not).

We might say that Falstaff's attitude is one of pragmatic expedience, and that he lacks any moral conscience regarding the wastage of these unprepossessing lives. That attitude, I would imagine, is not one that is likely to endear him to us. Engagingly, however, he does avoid exalting humanity into some special place of honour, as though just any human life were somehow precious and pitiful, just because it was human. His attitude to his recruits is that they are precisely worthless, but that since he has a worthless end in store for them, it is no pity whatever that they should be sent that route.

Why should we think that human life is of some supreme and overwhelming value? Is it because human achievements are (sometimes, or often, say) of great value? The Kantian, like Gaita too, must resist that claim, since it invites the utilitarian response that if the value of a human life is instrumental, measured by its chances of yielding great achievement, then a life that has no such promise of achieving anything great is of no value at all. So Gaita is surely right that the moral response cannot be respect for something splendid about human nature, but must be more in the form of a kind of pity, for humanity's smallness, its frailty, and its inadequacy for the tasks that it sets itself, and for the moral demands that are so far beyond its abilities. Had Falstaff been moved by moral scruples, he would perhaps have pitied those men—as one would also pity other small, unprotected creatures destined to be sent to their deaths for the sake of someone else's futile ambitions to power—and he would have sensed that their lives posed an unconditional limit on his will. But that is to see things in a moral light, and nothing can or could conceivably force Falstaff, or any other potential moral agent, to grant that things are so if they do not yet see that they are so. For the attitude that feels pity at sending such men to their deaths is just one view, perhaps one that is more noble and more selfless than the view that it matters not a bit, given how hopeless their lives are. But it does not emerge just from seeing what a human being is like. Nothing in life as such commands our pity, and human life is generally pitiful more for its vain pretensions and hopeless delusions of grandeur than for its spectacular pre-eminence at anything particular.

Blake's Fly

In *Songs of Experience*, William Blake famously reflected with pity on the death of a fly he had squashed without thinking. The poem has puzzled commentators because in the second half Blake compares his own life to that of a fly, and seems to find nothing to human life that is more significant than the behaviour of the fly.

> Little Fly,
> Thy summer's play
> My thoughtless hand
> Has brushed away.
>
> Am not I
> A fly like thee?
> Or art not thou
> A man like me?
>
> For I dance
> And drink and sing,
> Till some blind hand
> Shall brush my wing.
>
> If thought is life
> And strength and breath,
> And the want
> Of thought is death,
>
> Then am I
> A happy fly
> If I live
> Or if I die.[22]

Is it still Blake speaking in the last two stanzas? If so, he seems to see no tragedy in death, and concludes not only that he is himself no different from the fly, but equally that there is nothing to be regretted in his death any more than in that of the fly. Yet the meaning remains the same if we read the last two stanzas as voicing the fly's imagined response, not Blake's own assessment.[23] For now, too, the fly assures us that his own (and therefore Blake's death) is of no consequence. For the loss of life, 'when some blind hand/Shall brush my wing', merely terminates thought, and in the absence of thought there is no sorrow or regret. What more is there to life? What is there in death? Death just is the end of this round of trivial behaviour: we dance, we drink, we sing, until death deprives us of all that. And the hand that does so is, we understand, blind: it is not the will of God; it is not significant. Our death is just as trivial as Blake's thoughtless brushing away of the fly.

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[22] William Blake, 'The Fly', from *Songs of Experience*.

Either way, the poem achieves its effect by reducing the significance of human life and human death. Blake deflates our sense of the value of human activity by comparing it with the fly's pointless activity ('summer play'), and he deflates the significance of human death by comparing it to the thoughtless squashing of an insect. The poem is at the same time compassionate yet unsentimental about the fly; it does not try to pretend that its death is a tragedy that calls for much lament. Yet at the same time it debunks a range of human delusions, delusions about consciousness beyond death, and delusions about the care with which God chooses the moment to call us home. Suppose that when we die, there is just a cessation of thought? Suppose that the moment of death is purely contingent? Then there can be no more to mourn in human passing away than there is in the case of the fly.

Read like this, the song which seems to start with such a sense of contrition for the careless treatment of the little fly ends up with a more realistic appraisal of the situation. The fly is, after all, unaware of any harm, and is not unhappy in its death. But the finished version of the fourth stanza leaves us with a question about the significance of human life and death, for we are invited to ask whether the difference between life and death is just the difference between awareness and lack of awareness, and no more than that.[24] The reasoning is hypothetical: if that is all there is to it, then I shall be as unconcerned about my death as a fly is about its death. But is that all there is to it? The question seems to leave room for the possibility that we might have projects that are more significant than mere summer's play—indeed, perhaps that we *should* aim for something greater than the achievements of a fly. But that is to say not that human life is unconditionally something fine and deserving of respect, or that all casual loss of human life is a disaster, but rather that human life has as little worth as the life of a fly unless we make something of it, something that would, after all, make it regrettable to die before one's time. It is open to us to feel compassion, pity, and regret for the waste of a life that was destined to achieve nothing. But we cannot be obliged to rate it higher, just because it was a human life, than the same life wasted by a fly.

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[23] For this suggestion, see David Wagenknecht, *Blake's Night: William Blake and the Idea of Pastoral* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 109.

[24] The first draft of the song (found in the Rosetti Ms) reads: 'Thought is life/And strength and breath…' without the 'If'.

Of course, Blake is not suggesting that we should pluck the wings off flies, or that we should look on while wanton boys play cruel games, comforting ourselves with the thought that the flies lack any conception of their death, and have no self-esteem and no plans.[25] Least of all is he advocating that we should think that way about human beings who lack a life plan and any sense of self-esteem. Rather, he is recommending a realistic limit on the meaningfulness of mourning the unpremeditated death of a fly—a constraint beyond which we would stray into sentimentality. And he is recommending a realistic shattering of our delusions about the relative value of human life—a constraint beyond which we would stray into anthropocentric pride.[26] The poem leaves no justification for cruelty or callousness in either case. But it does recall us to reflect on what, if anything, could allow us to congratulate ourselves for the superiority of our lives, or to feel that our death is something more dramatic than that of the fly.

One candidate, of course, might be our capacity for some deeper kinds of selfless love, including compassion towards our fellow creatures.[27]

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[25] Blake stresses the difference between wanton cruelty or mistreatment and justified humane employment of the lives and labour of the beasts, in *Auguries of Innocence*. Some of the relevant couplets are quoted above, but see also lines 33–4:

> The Wanton Boy that kills the Fly
> Shall feel the Spider's enmity.

[26] The popular term is 'speciesism', but since the associations of that term (and the analogies that go with it) are abhorrent to me, I shall repudiate it in favour of more traditional vocabulary that does the job better.

[27] Here I do not mean a mere genetic capacity, as though humans were naturally superior because they possess an innate capacity for learning to be kind, gentle, and affectionate. An unrealized capacity is nothing to be proud of. Indeed, an unrealized capacity for goodness is something to be ashamed of, if the opportunity to develop such sensitivities has been provided but rejected. So, as before, we should say that the locus of moral value is not in human nature, which has the capacity to be horrendously cruel, insensitive, and false, but in the moral attitude of one who makes the best of human nature—not by nature and not for show.