ARTICLES ON OTHER SUBJECTS

Ethical Diachronicity, Metaethical (Non-)Factualism, and the later Wittgenstein

Carl Humphries

Abstract Discussions of moral luck, exceptionalism, and ethical watersheds raise the question of what it would mean for our ethical commitments to exhibit, in an axiologically non-trivial way, a diachronic character. This would render a particular evaluation applicable, by virtue of its content, only at certain times and not others. It would also make whether or not there happen to be cases we can point to at a given time and for a given domain contingent on facts about what antecedently occurred in the world. I explore this first by considering how the issue relates to the metaethical division between factualists and non-factualists, and then by examining Wittgenstein's distinctive line of thinking, in *On Certainty*, about how framing commitments and empirico-factual beliefs combine in ways that change over time. I conclude that theorising about ethical diachronicity in such terms leads to a problem of self-referentiality, but argue that while such an approach entails a certain "throwing away of the ladder" of philosophical analysis, this need not leave us with nothing to say. There can be a meaningful consideration of putative cases of ethical diachronicity in other ways, via personal histories and fictional narratives.

Keywords ethical diachronicity; ethical watersheds; metaethical (non)-factualism; moral exceptionalism; moral luck; Wittgenstein

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1. INTRODUCTION

Taken together, the topics of moral luck, exceptionalism, and ethical watersheds all seem to raise a larger philosophical question about whether our ethical commitments can, in some axiologically non-trivial way, possess a constitutively diachronic character. At its simplest, this would mean that a particular evaluation, in virtue of its content, applies only at certain times and not others. Yet it may also be taken to imply something more, which is that whether or not there are examples in play at a given time for a given domain could conceivably be a function of what changes have or have not occurred up to that time, such as would bear in an axiologically non-trivial way on that same area of evaluative concern (or, indeed, on reality as a whole). The present article aims to explore the implications of this feature by seeking to consider how ethical diachronicity thus construed shows up relative to the debate in metaethics between those who take evaluations to emerge as direct entailments of facts and their practical implications, and those who take them to manifest something separate from these that frames our understanding of their significance. I shall argue that it proves problematic for both kinds of metaethical approach, and that given such difficulties, it makes sense to consider how it relates to the later Wittgenstein's broader conception, in *On Certainty*, of how framing commitments and empirico-factual beliefs combine together irreducibly in ways that change over time. I will then consider the challenges the latter idea faces when we seek to apply it in this area.

Section 2 of the article outlines reasons for thinking that moral luck, exceptionalism, and the possibility of ethical watersheds represent plausible yet distinct examples of ethical diachronicity. Section 3 begins by stipulating a minimal axiological non-triviality constraint as a conceptual basis for distinguishing between evaluatively non-trivial and trivial cases. It then explores, with reference to the distinctions between fundamental and non-fundamental value and between intrinsic and extrinsic value, whether ethical diachronicity can be plausibly construed as axiologically non-trivial in factualist or non-factualist metaethical terms. Section 4 considers the thinking of the later Wittgenstein, especially as expressed in his "riverbed analogy" in *On Certainty*. I raise an objection, which is that because that conception cannot itself be usefully endorsed in this context as either just a (non-factual) framing commitment or a (non-framing) factual one, what it asserts will apply to itself, generating a variant of the Tractarian problem of self-referential propositional assertions. This means that invoking it to shed light on diachronicity (in ethics) will carry the implication that its own validity is similarly diachronic. Finally, in Section 5, I draw a conclusion

from this, which is that it entails a certain "throwing away of the ladder" of philosophical analysis but nevertheless need not leave us with nothing to say: there can be a meaningful consideration of cases of ethical diachronicity in other ways, via personal histories and fictional narratives.

2. Moral Luck, Moral Exceptionalism, and Ethical Watersheds

Responding, in a postscript, to a collection of articles discussing the problem of moral luck as previously outlined both by himself and by Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams writes:

> The most important source of misunderstanding . . . was that I raised, as I now think, three different issues at once. . . . The third . . . is that of retrospective justification, and this is the widest, because it can arise beyond the ethical, in any application of practical rationality. It is the question of how far, and in what ways, the view that an agent retrospectively takes of himself or herself may be affected by results and not be directed simply to the ways in which he or she deliberated, or might better have deliberated, before the event. (Williams 1993, 255–56)

It is precisely this issue that Williams then proceeds to elaborate further, in terms that suggest that the misunderstandings he perceives to have occurred in relation to his own earlier formulations can in large part be put down to the failure of his interlocutors to grasp this particular aspect of his concerns:

> We may say that it is natural enough to be upset if things turn out badly, for oneself or others, as a result of one's action—in that sense, to regret the outcome—but that self-criticism rationally applies only to the extent that one might have avoided the outcome by taking greater thought or greater care in advance. Reflection will then naturally turn toward asking when it is true that one might have avoided the outcome: and this reflection may eventually lead to skepticism. But the question I wanted to press comes before that reflection. It questions, rather, a presupposition of dividing our concerns this way. The presupposition can be put like this: as agents, we seek to be rational; to the extent that we are rational, we are concerned with our agency and its results to the extent that they can be shaped by our rational thought; to the extent that results of our agency could not be affected by greater rationality, we should rationally regard them as like the results of someone else's agency or like a natural event. (Williams 1993, 256)

Williams holds this idea to be "very importantly wrong," and states that his own examples should be read as seeking "to press the point that, in more than one way, my involvement in my action and its results goes beyond the relation I have to it as an ex ante rational deliberator" (Williams 1993, 256).

These statements call to mind an element within Williams' account that may well have been downplayed, if not ignored, by many of those engaged in developing their own positions regarding moral luck—especially where the focus is on its relation to the Control Principle. It is noteworthy that in issuing them he is drawing attention in a quite specific manner to the temporal aspect of what, on his view, it would mean to fully grasp the problem. His point, as I read it, is that even after—supposing this to be achievable—the troubling implications of moral luck for our understanding of morality itself have been worked through in one way or another (and with one outcome or another), there will remain something about the diachronic relation in which an evaluatively engaged human individual stands to their own past decisions and actions, along with their consequences, that runs counter to the supposed ultimate purpose of morality as a system, at least as Williams himself critically construes the latter.

That supposed purpose, we should remind ourselves, is, for Williams, to answer to an impulse we tend to have to think of our evaluative relationship to instances of our own rational moral agency in the sort of practical-ethical terms that would be appropriate if we were viewing such matters from some kind of abstractly rational and impersonal ("God's-eye") standpoint. Williams' own aim, by contrast, is to stress the integrity and continuity of the evaluatively engaged, yet temporally situated, human individual in terms that insist on acknowledging a meaningful relationship between ex ante and ex post perspectives on instances of practical moral decision making. In particular, because the consequences of our past actions can, and sometimes do, turn out to be at odds with what we envisaged when we decided to act in the ways that resulted in them, we find ourselves confronted by facts about our own past agential involvements that we ourselves can still feel compelled to "own." Moreover, this is so even though it has since become clear to us that the evaluative significance they carry bears traces of one form of contingent determination or another. Indeed, it would seem that for Williams, the assertion of such a relationship to our own agential pasts as being in some way important to our wider (both psychologically and meta-evaluatively motivated) sense of what it means to be an evaluatively involved human being is key to showing just why the conception of morality he is criticizing should be regarded as problematically simplistic.

In short, then, by reintroducing into our picture of moral agency a conception of human beings as evaluatively engaged in ways that cut across the divisions associated with a narrow focus on ex ante rational deliberation, Williams reminds us that there is an irreducibly diachronic dimension of evaluativity in play in human affairs. And this is not just a matter of highlighting, as he would see it, the overly rationalistic character of certain familiar sorts of account of ethical decision making when viewed from this particular angle. The point is also being made that this dimension goes beyond what can be satisfactorily accommodated in analyses of moral luck insofar as these concentrate on the implications—be they sceptical or not—for the status of rational ethical decision making and agency viewed in exclusively ex ante terms.[1]

This specific line of thinking finds a strong echo in the analysis of claims of the sort normally characterized as appeals to moral exceptionalism. The issues and controversies surrounding the latter arise because we, or at least some of us, tend to find it prima facie acceptable for certain individuals or groups to be treated as subject to forms of moral accountability of an attenuated or amplified kind relative to the standard normative criteria operative in the community, once circumstantial considerations of an appropriate kind have been determined to be in play. As with moral luck, it can be argued that the element responsible for disrupting the stability of how our evaluative frameworks map on to actual cases is something that risks entailing scepticism about the very possibility of meaningful moral evaluation, and that there are, therefore, good reasons to want to counter this: for example, by showing that it remains consistent at some level with a pragmatically qualified adherence to a systematically normative conception of moral accountability.[2] However, just like with that issue, it can be argued that pursuing this sort of mitigatory approach will not suffice to reconcile it with the abstractly impersonal ("God's-eye") standpoint

1. For example, one might think that the sense of arbitrariness brought into view by the notion of moral luck is open to significant mitigation—say, by an appeal to a more contextually conditioned account of moral accountability and practical-epistemic competence, or by arguing, like Pritchard (2005), that the whole phenomenon concerns luck of an epistemic rather than a substantively ethical kind. This would suggest that by making certain conceptual adjustments we can defuse the suspicion created, of there being grounds for legitimate scepticism about the overall coherence of our notion of moral accountability. The above clarifications offered by Williams convey the thought that there is an aspect of his concerns, central to his own account of ethics, that remains untouched by such considerations.

2. Due to the lack of any serious philosophical discussion comparable to that surrounding moral luck, this possibility has to be taken as implicit in what our informal understanding tells us about how such analogous lines of argument might unfold.

on morality Williams seeks to put in question, or with the aspiration towards an ultimately just world that he takes to motivate the latter.

This is because the idea that claims to moral exceptionality represent something other than a wholesale collapse of our evaluative frameworks into something purely descriptive (such as would then threaten to entail sceptical reductionism about ethical matters) implies a meta-evaluative stance.[3] Such a stance, applied by us to a putative bearer of moral valency, makes reference at one and the same time to how, from the standpoint of ethical evaluation, things currently look, given that certain exceptionality-generating circumstances have indeed arisen, and how they would have appeared to us had no such circumstances come into play. It is just because we judge the evaluation we would have made under the standard conditions to be inappropriate under the actually obtaining ones that a claim to exceptionality is realistically entertainable. This means that there is a further level of evaluation in play that only comes into the picture in response to the fact of the actual circumstances being the ones that obtain, but there is also—as a necessary accompaniment or foil—the counterfactual scenario according to which no such second-order evaluation would have come into play at all, as the first-order framework of evaluation would have been sufficient by default to generate an adequate evaluative perspective on its own.

What is significant here is that what defines the connection between these two scenarios is the obtaining-or-not-obtaining of some set of facts about what happened, corresponding to what needed to happen—from the point of view of causal sufficiency—for the non-standard circumstances to now obtain. In this instance (as distinct from cases of moral luck), the demand for a squaring up of these two perspectives lies not in any understanding of what it means (psychologically and evaluatively) to be-and-have-been an agent whose actions have acquired a significance now above and beyond that prefigured at the moment of ex ante rational decision making. Instead, it lies in the realization that anyone accepting such a claim to moral exceptionality is implicitly committed to also embracing a causal story: about how, in some particular case, a course of events unfolded whose outcome was that the ethical considerations informing our evaluations shifted away from being straightforwardly normative (in default terms). Our understanding of our present evaluative situation thus makes ineliminable reference

3. This surely also holds true for Williams' position on moral luck: he is not appealing to a notion of trans-temporal personal or agential integrity merely out of respect for brutely psychological facts; rather, it is because he assigns a greater value to operating as a human being in terms that fully acknowledge this feature than to the alternative.

to two possible worlds: one in which no meta-evaluative stance is needed, which itself did actually obtain prior to those events, and one in which a meta-evaluative stance is called for, which has since come to actually obtain in their wake. What relates these, then, is a diachronically constituted difference between the state of things ex ante and ex post. This differential relation hinges on the events themselves, whose character may be presumed to be contingent, since if it were not so we would have problems explaining why it was not already prefigured in the default ethical framework itself.[4]

One apparent difference between what moral luck theorists and proponents of moral exceptionality are dealing with is that while the former tend to focus on how luck enters into our assessment of actions with reference to their consequences, and thus to imply, as a minimum, some sort of qualified commitment to metaethical consequentialism, the latter are subject to no such constraint. This is because it is the consequences of antecedent events (rather than of actions or practical decisions) that are responsible there for exerting a diachronically disruptive influence on what would otherwise presumably amount to a stable ongoing evaluative scenario. However, this contrast is illusory. Moral luck in its circumstantial form need not be thought of as specifically tied to the ways in which the vagaries of chance can impact on our moral assessments of the consequences that our actions turn out to actually have had: it is entirely plausible to think of them as also affecting the significance we are prepared to attach to character traits, or to actions in and of themselves. After all, circumstances may indeed conspire to make it the case that a character trait first takes on one valency and then another, as when there is a transition between peace and war. Equally, actions regarded as good or bad at a given time without any reference to their actual or expected consequences might—just like the cases of simply intending to act that they may be taken to be expressions of—conceivably show up with an altered valency at other times, given changes of a sufficiently structural sort to the larger human situation in play.[5]

4. When it comes to how such a story should be conceptualized from the standpoint of wider philosophical concerns about how causal explanatoriness works when taken to bear specifically and exclusively on events in the past, we have at our disposal an illuminating precedent in the Finnish logician G. H. von Wright's formal model of how certain modal valencies (necessity, impossibility) can be thought of as on some occasions emerging diachronically. While there is insufficient space to explore this here, it is worth noting that what is striking about this model is that it is in principle consistent with, and arguably also lends support to, a position that holds such stories to be only retrospectively intelligible (see: von Wright 1984).

5. A fuller elaboration of this line of metaethical argument would of course be desirable here, but is precluded by considerations of space.

For the sake of the present discussion at least, such considerations may be taken to imply that what we are dealing with in both of the above cases are forms of ethical diachronicity that need not be seen as linked to any specific metaethical stance of the sort that would identify the underlying locus of ethical value exclusively with actions themselves, the character traits they reveal, or their consequences. Where metaethics is concerned, that then allows us to focus on a different dimension of concern, this being the debate over how ethical evaluations and commitments are to be construed relative to facts and their practical consequences.

Before proceeding further in that direction, I wish to point briefly to the third area in which ethical diachronicity potentially arises as an issue, which concerns the idea of ethical watersheds. I have in mind cases where, at least on a certain reading of their putative significance, our entire structure of evaluative commitment is forced to undergo sudden or gradual change of a radical and/or systemic kind, and where this occurs in conjunction with developments in the world that, if they could have been anticipated earlier, would presumably have led to the necessary adaptations to our overall set of commitments already having been made "in advance of the fact," so to speak. This idea may well strike us as familiar on account of its being presupposed in certain ways of interpreting historical events of note, especially where the latter are taken to present humanity with dramatically new ethical challenges (e.g. the development and use of WMDs, the employment of modern technology and logistics to facilitate the genocidal mass-extermination of human beings, etc.).

On the other hand, such cases raise a difficult issue, since in many instances not everyone will agree that the events in question constitute such a watershed, and whether they do so or not is also frequently influenced by whether, or how far, they take their own lives to have been directly or indirectly impacted by what has occurred. Moreover, this point is one that we surely meet with to some extent in the previous cases of putative ethical diachronicity addressed here, too. For example, a group of persons living their lives in a way that happens to be more or less insulated from the sorts of action that might, by their very nature, be taken to wrongly assume that no unforeseen ethical significance will arise further down the line, arguably have less of a reason to acknowledge moral luck as a serious issue in ethics than others, and those whose own lives have unfolded in a wholly uneventful way to date are likely to struggle to see any intuitive sense in the idea of moral exceptionality, at least compared to those who have actually undergone life-changing experiences of a morally significant kind themselves. To the extent that

this may be taken to be a common feature of the various scenarios we are considering, it suggests that where ethical diachronicity more generally is concerned, whether or not there are examples we can actually point to (as in play at a given time for a given domain) could well be a function of what changes have or have not occurred up to that time, such as bear either on that specific area of evaluative concern or on reality viewed in a more all-encompassing evaluative light.

3. Ethical Diachronicity and the Minimal Axiological Non-Triviality Requirement: Some Metaethical Implications

That the ethical valences we are inclined to attach in one way or another to human conduct are subject to ongoing adjustment to reflect changes of circumstance seems, from the viewpoint of axiology, to be obviously, though not necessarily non-trivially, true. What is not clear, in particular, is how such valences might come to be altered in ways that would count as structurally significant, in the sense of reflecting more than mere changes of degree (of evaluative salience or force). Naturally, no one would deny that human evaluative priorities shift as certain considerations come more clearly into view while others drop away, as more or less pressing or vital. The challenge posed by the concept of ethical diachronicity, I would suggest, rather lies in making sense of the thought that, as a minimum, the very ordering that defines our values could somehow be responsive to events (or other kinds of happening) that we take to be contingent, and which we are committed to thinking of as uncontroversially helping to make up the factual realm.[6] The difficulty this creates for the proponent of factualism as metaethical stance is that to say that the occurrences in question are contingent seems intuitively tantamount to saying that they do not in and of themselves embody precisely the sort of underlying order—be it something about the natural world or not, and be it factually constituted or not—that could plausibly be taken to define, motivate, or ground our substantive ethical concerns and any systematic relations internal to these. At the same time, I will argue below that the distinctions we are most familiar with when it comes to attempting to formulate a conception of just

6. The thought here is that it cannot be enough to just point to cases where, over time, it transpires that we are somewhat more engaged ethically by X and somewhat less so by Y, where these correspond to distinct or competing yardsticks of value or criteria of ethical evaluation (i.e. "values"). Appealing to just that sort of variability will make it hard to dispel the suspicion that what we are dealing with are no more than changes evinced on the surface of our lived experience of our own evaluative engagement—an "axiological epiphenomenon" of sorts, in which evaluative salience simply tracks subjective shifts of attention and awareness.

such an ordering show up as problematic in the present context, given such a minimal axiological non-triviality requirement.

On the one hand, we have the distinction between what counts as axiologically fundamental and what does not, which involves thinking of value in terms similar to those employed in certain other domains of philosophical inquiry, such as metaphysics and epistemology. This, of course, is prima facie meaningful if we are already committed to a version of the metaethical factualist position that holds that value directly reflects forms of ordering in the world that are taken to be uncovered in these other domains. However, what tends to count as motivating the equivalent distinction in the latter is precisely a paradigm of fundamentality that associates the fundamental with the unchanging (or unchangeable)—be it metaphysical essence or an ideal of unconditional epistemic certainty—and the non-fundamental with the changing (or changeable). To embrace such a distinction in the present context is therefore tantamount to simply asserting that what is of primary or paramount importance, where value is concerned, is just what is given as part of a structure of evaluative commitment that can be synchronically articulated, and what is of secondary importance is just what is only comprehensible with reference to diachronic considerations. Yet the effect of this is surely to close off further debate about the role of ethical diachronicity by tying our conception of value to a structural paradigm that already entails that it can only ever have a certain sort of limited order-conferring significance. It therefore creates a scenario in which someone in possession of a metaethical stance that takes value to be directly aligned with the fundamental/non-fundamental distinction in some other area of philosophy can feel quite confident that putative examples of ethical diachronicity of the sort canvassed above will present no serious challenge to their metaethical commitments, since the very fact that they pertain to matters of diachronic rather than synchronic ethical intelligibility will be taken as sufficient to indicate that they cannot be of anything more than secondary importance. Conversely, someone not entertaining such a stance but nevertheless in the grip of this same paradigm will be faced with the seemingly intractable question of what it means that they do *not* see value as being ordered in this kind of way. Yet it might well turn out to be the case that there *is* something about the diachronically articulable dimension of value that itself would justify rejecting a metaethical stance that relies on this paradigm. In that case the distinction between what counts as axiologically fundamental and what does not will need to be radically rethought if it is still to have any bearing on such matters. Such considerations suggest that as it stands, this simply cannot be the right

distinction to invoke as a basis for determining how, and in what fashion, ethical concerns that are diachronically rather than synchronically intelligible might be said to figure non-trivially in human affairs and human life.

On the other hand, seen from the perspective of metaethical factualism, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value, which frequently figures as a structurally significant notion when discussing how our various sorts of axiological commitment are conceptually organized relative to one another, hardly takes us further in this regard. Following Rønnow-Rasmussen (2002, 6–17), we may understand this at its most rudimentary level to be a conflation of two conceptually distinct distinctions, one of which concerns whether or not something's having a value is derived from something else's having a value, while the other pertains to whether its value is a function of its own self-standing character or of relations in which it stands.[7] This then gives us two conceptual pairings: the distinction between non-derivative and derivative forms of non-relationally constituted value, and that between non-derivative and derivative forms of relationally constituted value.[8]

For the distinction between non-derivative and derivative forms of non-relationally constituted value to serve as a point of reference for making sense of any role that facts might play in defining, motivating, or grounding our evaluative concerns in some axiologically non-trivial way, there must be a plausible way to coherently map cases of that distinction onto facts of one sort or another: in short, a factual correlate of the distinction itself. The problem here is that the sole plausible contender for fulfilling such a role is the distinction between facts that necessarily hold true of some putative bearer of value and ones that only do so contingently. But where does this get us? After all, to say that a set of facts obtain necessarily for some bearer X is to say that the description of X made true by those facts retains that status rigidly across all possible worlds. And this is just tantamount to saying that we cannot comprehend its truth value ever changing or its ever having changed. That, then, surely implies a commitment to a synchronically rather than diachronically articulated understanding

7. Each of these distinctions is, of course, potentially subject to extensive qualification from the standpoint of first-order formal-axiological theorising, as Rønnow-Rasmussen's discussion itself makes clear. However, for reasons of space I can only operate with this very basic formulation here.

8. I avoid Rønnow-Rasmussen's terminology of "final" and "non-final" value here, as it is vulnerable to being misinterpreted as carrying temporal connotations. These risk obscuring the discussion of diachronicity that is the focus of the present article.

of what makes it the thing or phenomenon it is, and if that is so, it is hard to see how it could help cast light on notions of ethical diachronicity.

The situation seems a little different, to be sure, when we turn to the other version or sub-variant of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value. For the distinction between non-derivative and derivative forms of relationally constituted value to serve as a useful point of reference here, what we need is an appropriate account of the difference that certain relations can make. This will have to be one possessing sufficient clarificatory power with respect to the axiological considerations in play while also being consistent with the thought that the obtaining or non-obtaining of such relations is a diachronic rather than a synchronic affair.

In the case of instances of moral luck, it seems fairly intuitive to say that what occurs is that we encounter cases of emergent value or disvalue of a relational sort, which come about due to contextual changes—changes that unfold in ways that bear, unexpectedly, on the ex post significance of an action's consequences or its intrinsic character, or on that of the agential character traits it discloses. In short, some novel relations are taken to have emerged between what counts as "having-been-done" at a level that reflects a comparatively more straightforward construal of the action or conduct involved on the one hand, and certain additional emerging considerations on the other. The latter are such as to demand to be reflected in a more highly context-dependent relational construal of what it is, of agential and ethical significance, that is taken to have occurred, and this new composite phenomenon consisting of the original (relationally constituted) action and its relations to the new context is found to carry a new valency according to our evaluative standards. But even here it is not quite the case that the very ordering that defines our values has turned out in such cases to be diachronically responsive, in the sense of being responsive to events that we take to be contingent. What actually seems to have taken place is just that some new relational facts have come into play, that elicit a distinct evaluative response from our overall structure of evaluative commitment just because the sum of relevant facts of that sort is now different from what it antecedently was.[9] Indeed, viewed from the perspective of meta-ethical factualism this would imply an inexplicable division between two sets of relational facts fulfilling somewhat different functions. On the one hand, there will be those that serve to define, motivate, or ground our initial

9. It is not that the same set of facts now carry a different significance as such, where this could only plausibly be explained as issuing from a change in the underlying ordering principle informing our evaluations.

or default evaluative concerns in relational terms, and on the other, there will be those that constitute relational input of a novel, situationally specific kind. The difficulty will be that in the absence of some essentialist commitments (of a factually articulable kind) that cannot simply be assumed for the sake of theoretical convenience, we have no reason not to think of both sets of relational facts as obtaining contingently. This then makes it hard to explain why one set count as constitutive of a default evaluative position, but the other only as coming into play on the back of novel developments. (A related point seems to hold where ethical watersheds are concerned: it remains mysterious why a certain totality of contingently obtaining facts manages to sustain a stable system of evaluation even as significant changes continually occur in the world, whilst another, brought into actuality by some radically unforeseen new development, requires that the system itself be radically reconstituted.)

This leaves us with cases of purported moral exceptionality. It seems to me that advocates of moral exceptionalism tend to construe these intuitively in one or other of two distinct ways: either as historically unique happenings that just happen to have affected some people more than others, or as cases in which there is some reason to think that an exceptionality-conferring context has arisen for a given individual or group because of who they are, given their particular (and in some cases uniquely specific) life-history up to that point.[10] In both sorts of case we are dealing with some sort of notion of differential exposure to contingently occurring events in the factual realm, the difference being whether the source of this differential dimension is located in how human beings happen, as a matter of "pure" luck, to stand relative to certain events and outcomes, or in something that, in spite of being contingent in its own terms, has somehow come to define those people themselves (i.e. a historically disclosed structure of concerns specific to them that confers a distinctive identity and meta-evaluative status, from which a changed configuration of possibilities for the moral evaluation of behaviour then follows). The difficulty for the metaethical factualist is that under either scenario such cases will present themselves as individually unique constellations of factual commitment, making it hard to see how they can be seen as anything other than implicationally inert where any normatively action-guiding evaluative considerations are concerned. They may tell us that what we took to be an ongoing set of regularities in respect of human behaviour and factual knowledge,

10. Of course, that distinction may not be a hard and fast one, and raises deep and complex philosophical questions itself.

capable of generating action-guiding normative output, is now superseded by events. But the very uniqueness either of those events themselves or of their effects on a particular group or individual, or the sheer specificity of that impact when viewed as having come to be further defined by its place in some particular life-history or other, would not seem to be the sort of thing that could be expected to generate ethical implications capable of carrying over (normatively) into contexts of ongoing human engagement.

The above considerations make it hard to see how one could avoid embracing the non-factualist metaethical stance as the only remaining way to keep the distinction between non-derivative and derivative forms of non-relationally or relationally constituted value intelligibly in play. The thought here would be that by saying that this distinction only applies at the level of deontic modality—in the form of claims to the effect that X conveys an "ought" only because Y does, whereas Y does so in and of itself—we are not making any kind of alethically modal claim. The suggestion is that it is precisely the alethic character of such claims that requires them to be understood as obtaining in an unchanging and therefore synchronically modal fashion.

Yet this switch to a non-factualist metaethical stance then faces its own problem. This is because in talking about ethical diachronicity we are typically (if not invariably) talking about shifts of evaluative commitment and understanding that occur in response to factual developments in the world, not self-generated shifts arising in a kind of "free-floating" way within frameworks of irreducibly non-factual commitment themselves. The issue here, then, is that this kind of non-factualist stance makes the idea of facts playing some sort of causal role in bringing about such shifts of understanding at an axiologically non-trivial level unintelligible. If we stipulate that in order for ethical diachronicity to be axiologically non-trivial it must at the very least involve significant demarcatory changes pertaining to where the boundary separating non-derivative from derivative forms of non-relationally or relationally constituted value falls, then it is hard to see how factual developments could be invoked in any useful way to shed causal-explanatory light on how it came to be the case that these demarcatory determinations shifted, given that the latter are understood to be separate from the realm of facts.

That makes it seem like we are then committed by metaethical non-factualism to a rejection of the distinction between non-derivative and derivative value in any contexts or domains where we would wish to say that ethical diachronicity is operative. But such an outcome does no more than land us on the other horn of a dilemma whose first horn was the metaethical factualist scenario explored above, in which a proper maintaining of this

same distinction was found to leave no intelligible room for axiologically non-trivial ethical diachronicity itself. It would thus appear that while factualism tells us that we can only keep this distinction in play by ruling out ethical diachronicity, non-factualism tells us that we can only keep ethical diachronicity in play at the cost of rendering that same distinction problematic (in the sense of its being mysterious from the point of view of causal explainability).

4. Wittgenstein on Framing and Diachronicity

Given the challenges arising for such metaethical stances, it makes sense to consider the potential applicability to this area of the later Wittgenstein's distinctive—though somewhat sketchy—conception of how, more generally, framing commitments and empirico-factual beliefs combine together in ways that change over time. The latter forms an element within his very late line of thinking about scepticism and its limits in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969). Its appeal in the present context lies in the thought that it seems to furnish a stance resistant to characterization in metaethical terms as either straightforwardly factualist or non-factualist.

Wittgenstein's remarks set out to explore a diverse range of instances of non-epistemically constituted forms of certainty manifested at the level of our beliefs, of the kind commonly referred to now as "bedrock certainties" or "hinge commitments." These present themselves as putatively fact-stating empirical propositions, but their real function within the context of our involvement in some given form of life or other is, Wittgenstein suggests, often quite different, in that it is essentially regulative—or, to use his preferred term, "grammatical." We embrace them as unquestionably valid, but not because we judge them true either in the manner of the elementary epistemic commitments considered fundamental by proponents of atomistic foundationalism, and also not because of their role in any holistically conceived coherentist structure of purely epistemic commitment. Instead, the thought is that we do so because the constraints thus imposed on what may be considered a legitimate object of empirico-factual epistemic commitment are required to be in place as a precondition of (and in this sense part of the necessary framework for) our being involved in certain ways of going on with our lives, acting and reacting as we do. Whilst the exact implications of Wittgenstein's conception have been much debated, it seems uncontroversial to point out that such ways of living—or "forms of life"—manifest their significance in, amongst other things, the scope and force of the structures of evaluative commitment we are able to sustain in the contexts they furnish, and in the consequent impossibility

of imagining a comparably worthwhile life for ourselves without such regulative commitments being in place.[11] In effect, we hold certain commitments that, when propositionally expressed, resemble factual ones, but our doing so is motivated by non-epistemic considerations. It is required if we are to satisfy the conditions under which a certain way of living, acting, etc., becomes possible for us—one that also happens to be the one we are actually involved in. This sort of validation can also be construed in explicitly axiological terms: we might say that the non-derivative value we ascribe to a given way of living, acting, etc., from the standpoint of our actually being inextricably involved in it is passed on to any commitments of this kind, just inasmuch as these are presupposed as regulative (for us) in that same context of involvement.

Now, a significant feature of the later Wittgenstein's notion of bedrock certainty is the idea that this is subject to temporal evolution in the light of human circumstances in ways distinct from, but interconnected with, the processes of epistemic revision to which our empirically accountable and putatively factual commitments are subject.[12] We may first note how, in a general kind of way, he seems open to, and is explicit about, the possibility of our concept-using practices being subverted by contingencies emerging in the surrounding world:

> Certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game. Indeed, doesn't it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts? (Wittgenstein 1969, § 617)

At the same time, he expresses sympathy for the view that there are structures of commitment that must be understood as constituted holistically in a certain kind of way, such that within them any potentially revisable factual claims form only one element, as when he writes that:

> I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house. (Wittgenstein 1969, § 248)

11. This implicitly evaluative dimension is more explicitly conveyed in his remarks on the nature of religious belief from the 1930s, which prefigure this overall line of thinking on his part (see Wittgenstein 1967).

12. That distinctness is perhaps most evident in his somewhat scattered remarks pertaining to the notion of world-picture (*Weltbild*). For insightful reconstructive analysis of the latter, see Schulte (1988).

What these two statements would seem to jointly imply is the idea that changes to the facts involved may, in certain circumstances, translate into changes with regard to the very concept-sustaining practices we are prepared to adhere to—and so, by extension, also to the surrendering of certain bedrock commitments that belong to those same holistically constituted structures, even if their role there was a regulative rather than an empirico-factually descriptive one.

It is natural to consider this in the light of Wittgenstein's well-known sequence of remarks in *On Certainty* featuring his "riverbed analogy." These would seem to be aimed at conveying the idea that the demarcatory boundary between what is open to revision in the way associated with our empirically revisable propositional commitments on the one hand, and what is immune or resistant to that sort of revision in the way associated with our regulative commitments on the other, itself changes, and in a manner consistent with there being a continuously graded rather than sharp distinction between the two kinds of status:

> § 96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.
>
> § 97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.
>
> § 98. But if someone were to say "So logic too is an empirical science" he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.
>
> § 99. And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited. (Wittgenstein 1969)

Before attempting to determine the implications of this for our present concerns, it is worth noting another potentially relevant feature of his approach. This, though, has received significantly less attention than the above, and requires for its exposition two additional elements to be brought into view.

The first is his apparent running together of intrinsically different sorts of propositionally expressible belief in his account of how factual and grammatical elements coexist in the context of such holistic structures of commitment. For example, in the following remark, he offers a list of examples of the sort of propositionally formulated commitments that, as he puts it, "stand fast" for him:

> I believe that I have forebears, and that every human being has them. I believe that there are various cities, and, quite generally, in the main facts of geography and history. I believe that the earth is a body on whose surface we move and that it no more suddenly disappears or the like than any other solid body: this table, this house, this tree, etc. If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me. (Wittgenstein 1969, § 234)

Wittgenstein's suggestion, as I read it, is that while these are propositions whose potentially fact-stating content would otherwise allow for them to be, at least in principle, individually open to doubt and revision (under appropriate epistemic circumstances), the fact of their belonging to a larger structure of commitment obtaining en bloc at the level of his lived (and practice-constituted) engagement with the world suffices to accord them a collectively non-revisable status as immune to doubt. If they are each individually presupposed by that larger structure of commitment, then questioning one or other of them will involve stepping outside of the latter, leaving all others potentially exposed as well. That, in turn, will engender an artificially inflated form of scepticism, at odds with the practice-constituted reality of human life.

It has been argued by A.C. Grayling that some of his examples along these lines invite the accusation that he is guilty of conflating two distinct kinds of proposition, whose inherent relations to the issue of epistemic revisability stand in sharp contrast to one another in a fashion at odds with what the riverbed analogy purports to describe (see Grayling 2008, 130–31). The thought here is that while some of these, given their content, by their very nature express genuinely empirico-factual commitments, others function intrinsically in the regulative kind of way that Wittgenstein himself characterizes as "grammatical," their purpose being invariably to help sustain a certain internally coherent body of empirico-factual beliefs. The temptation here—to which Grayling, in my view, has succumbed—is to rush to impose a strictly epistemological reading on the

contrasts in play.[13] This can prevent one from noticing a more straightforward (or, at least, less theoretically implicated) sense in which two different sorts of commitment are indeed being placed on the same level. The point is that some of these statements pertain to matters that, in the particular form in which we actually hold them to be the case (and quite apart from whether we do so for the sake of their factual or their regulative significance, or something in between), have only come to obtain over time, and in the wake of events that need not have occurred but did, while others by virtue of their content are required to refer to unchanging features of reality.

The relevant lesson here is that independently of whether a particular propositionally formulated commitment is taken to be performing a putatively fact-stating or a regulative role, its intrinsically synchronic or diachronic character can be on display, thanks to the nature of its ostensibly asserted content. Thus, for at least some propositions, even when figuring in larger contexts of commitment that are such as to entail, on Wittgenstein's account, a grammatical mode of functioning, we can be aware of the synchronically or diachronically articulated character of the truth conditions that will be in play in other contexts in which they might also show up—ones where their role approximates more closely to that of conveying a straightforwardly empirico-factual claim.

The second element that needs highlighting requires that we take note of another aspect of Wittgenstein's approach with implications for how we should construe him as addressing issues connected with diachronicity. This is his exploration of what it would mean to take up the imaginary standpoint of an alternative-reality scenario, where what is imagined is my having come to have commitments at variance from the ones I actually have now, and where this development is not merely a product of some epistemically conditioned shift in my beliefs about the world, but rather marks a response I have quite naturally had to the coming-to-obtain of some radically new facts:

> What if something really unheard-of happened?—If I, say, saw houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause, if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words; if trees gradually changed into men and men into trees. Now, was I right when I said

13. I think that there are broader reasons to be suspicious of such an epistemologically focused interpretative approach where the later Wittgenstein is concerned. However, these lie beyond the scope of the present article.

> before all these things happened "I know that that's a house" etc., or simply "that's a house" etc.? (Wittgenstein 1969, § 513)

The point of this, made explicit in the remark's final sentence, is that it allows us to ask whether I would still then recognize these (my currently indubitable commitments, and, along with them, the larger practice-defined structure in virtue of which they have this status) as having been legitimately held to be indubitable by me. Although Wittgenstein poses the question, he does not seek to answer it. Yet the mere asking of it suffices to highlight a significant point of contrast with the remark discussed earlier (§ 234). Whereas it follows clearly from that set of examples that Wittgenstein is prepared, in the relevant contexts and/or circumstances, to endorse contingently coming-to-obtain facts as "standing fast" and playing a role in the constitution of the larger structures of commitment that give sense to the notion of bedrock certainty, in the hypothetically posited reality (in § 513) of a present whose own historical past includes contingently obtaining facts different from those of our own actual one there seems to be no compulsion to assert that an equivalent commitment obtains.

Combined with the first element, the juxtaposition of diachronically distinct scenarios that this second element brings into view seems relevant because it makes possible an approach that, in principle at least, would allow one to properly register the evaluative implications stemming from differences pertaining to temporal perspective. That is to say, it opens up a space for taking seriously the following thought: that the idea that our certainties—be they evaluatively significant or not—might be susceptible to change over time amounts to something quite different when what is to be thus thought of as changing has changed, from what it amounts to when what is to be thus thought of as changing has not actually done so. In the former case, we will inhabit a specific position with respect to temporal standpoint, located ex post factum relative to the relevant instance(s) of such change, whereas in the latter there will be no such specifiable temporal standpoint.[14]

14. In modern philosophy, appealing to tense as a basis for temporally perspectival conceptions of meaning and value is a characteristic of thinkers associated with existentialism, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. However, I myself am not seeking to suggest that Wittgenstein was an existentialist of sorts—only that these specific remarks, taken in combination, imply a principled openness to the role that temporally perspectival forms of intelligibility could play in making sense of our changing evaluative commitments. Williams' focus on how temporal perspectivity and agent integrity interact in the context of moral luck, by contrast, owes a clear debt to Nietzsche.

Wittgenstein's line of thought, as encapsulated above all in his "riverbed-analogy" remarks, is arguably not best understood as offering a novel theoretical stance on the problem that drives the metaethical debate between factualists and non-factualists. Rather, it dissolves that problem by showing that the distinctions regarded by both parties to the dispute as basic and incontrovertible and sharply defined—between what is constituted as certain and unchanging or uncertain and changing in factual (and epistemological) terms and what is so with reference to its performing a regulative (framing) function in Wittgenstein's "grammatical" sense—turn out when properly contextualized in relation to our lives not to be so. But the second aspect of his approach presented above serves to make clear on two levels that this dissolution is not premised on any implicitly synchronic understanding of the commitments involved, be they putatively factual or non-factual ones. Firstly, we can still read off from the ostensibly truth-conditional content of propositions whether they pertain to something that is articulated diachronically or synchronically, so this differentiating feature is retained even as their role shifts in a graded way between the extreme poles of epistemic and non-epistemic modes of commitment. Secondly, the other remarks discussed make clear that Wittgenstein is at least open to the thought that our deep-level commitments may sometimes be temporally perspectival—in the sense of our finding ourselves in situations where possibilities of commitment otherwise not thinkable become so, but only in light of events that, while they have occurred, need not have done so.

Viewed from a Wittgensteinian standpoint thus construed, the intractability of the issues raised by metaethical (non-)factualism as this relates to such putative variants of ethical diachronicity as moral luck, moral exceptionality, and ethical watersheds would appear to be a non-issue, reflecting an artificially imposed set of assumptions about the role of factuality in human understanding of the world more generally. However, while such an outcome may strike us as intuitively persuasive, it is by no means unproblematic.

Whatever illumination Wittgenstein is seeking to achieve (at a level not specifically pertaining to ethical matters) through his remarks about the nature of certainty is, I believe, complicated by the fact that if we interpret his remarks as intended to function descriptively as opposed to heuristically, they generate a problem of self-referentiality. It seems reasonable to think that this will also then carry through to the more specific ethics-related concerns in relation to which we have been seeking to determine their applicability. The point is that if the certainties that human beings rely on in their lives do indeed inhabit a realm of graded distinctions between

epistemic and non-epistemic variants, with the same propositionally expressible commitments sometimes shifting their own status from being located towards one end of this continuum to being closer to the other end, then where does this leave Wittgenstein's remarks themselves? Given what he appears to be asserting to be the case, his own remarks cannot themselves be assumed, on pain of inconsistency, to be either strictly or unchangingly factual, or to be performing a strictly or unchangingly framing role. What is their own status?

Such an outcome seems comparable in some respects to the problem of self-referentiality that shows up in this philosopher's earlier thinking at the level of propositions putatively asserting truths about the nature of propositional discourse itself (when construed exclusively as a logically perspicuous mode of representation of reality). What this led to in the *Tractatus*, of course, was a series of declarations, themselves outwardly propositional in form, about what can be shown but not said, about the limits of language and/or reality, and about the nonsensicality of certain sorts of proposition, together with the metaphor of ascending a ladder only to throw it away, with an implied endorsement of some sort of philosophical quietism.

In the case of our present area of concern, such problems of self-referentiality would seem to be further sharpened by the fact that we are dealing with a position whose concern is diachronicity as it relates to ethical matters. That is to say, applied to the debate about metaethical factualism and non-factualism as it relates to such putative cases of axiologically non-trivial ethical diachronicity as moral luck, moral exceptionality, and ethical watersheds, Wittgenstein would seem to be saying that not only what may count in one context as a (more or less) factual commitment of a synchronically articulated sort, but also what may do so (more or less) as one that is diachronically articulated, may, in another context, instead function (more or less) as a "grammatical" framing commitment. This would mean that what we take to articulate a temporally perspectival structure of evaluative commitment (more or less) manifesting a response to certain facts' having contingently come to obtain in one set of life-circumstances may be taken to express a (more or less) regulative presuppositional commitment in another. The difficulty this presents is that as a statement about the nature of value it, too, will appear problematically self-referential. Presumably, to coherently express a stance on how these different status options relate to one another it must not itself be an instance of one or other of them. And were the claim that our value-commitments exhibit such a variability in respect of their status to itself be subject to a similar form

of variation (between the factual and the non-factual, and with this between the temporally perspectival and temporally non-perspectival), then the question would arise of when to read it as expressing a second-order axiological commitment that counts in a given context as situationally (and so, in some strange sense, also factually) determined, and when to treat it as one that is itself an expression of regulative presuppositional concerns.

5. Throwing Away the Ladder

To the extent that one finds such a (Wittgensteinian) position plausible, it would therefore seem to indeed entail a certain "throwing away of the ladder" of philosophical analysis.[15] However, in contrast to the more absolute variants of quietism that come with certain readings of the *Tractatus*, I wish to suggest that this need not leave us with nothing to say. There can be, I think, a meaningful consideration of putative cases of ethical diachronicity in other ways, via personal histories and fictional narratives—especially where these exhibit content that possesses a specific relevance to the topic of how certain metaethical concerns might be thought to bear on our understanding of ethical diachronicity itself.

The clue to this lies in the philosophically troubling feature raised at the end of the Section 2. There, it was asserted that putative instances of ethical watersheds are liable to being contested, as there is no general consensus about when these have occurred—in that different individuals and groups will have varying perspectives on the significance of what has happened, given their varying levels of exposure to the events in question and their consequences. It was also argued that something similar holds true for cases of moral luck and moral exceptionality, inasmuch as individuals or groups whose own lives happen to have proved eventful in certain sorts of ethically disruptive way in some given domain are likely to be more open to acknowledging the possibility of further developments there, or in closely related areas, as carrying transformative implications for their existing patterns of moral assessment. As was noted, this makes the availability of actual examples a function of the changes that have (or have not) occurred as consequential in our individual or collective lives up to the time in question.

One response is to embrace this as an inevitable constraint imposed by the phenomenon of ethical diachronicity itself, and accept that all meaningful talk of instances of moral luck, exceptionality, and watersheds is bound

15. That is to say, a "throwing away of the ladder" specifically where the analysis of the metaethical challenges posed by ethical diachronicity in the form discussed here are concerned, and not a total rejection of philosophy as a mode of investigation.

to devolve onto appeals to experience that are in some sense dismissible as anecdotal, since they require us to draw on personal, or at least community-specific, histories. On such an approach, the significance of any such dismissal will be disarmed by the thought that rather than being a mark of theoretical vacuity, this is just what we should expect, given the nature of what is at stake in theoretical terms here. The phenomenon just is one that, if and when it occurs at all, will exhibit some element of irreducible, radical contingency. In effect, it forces one to choose between an affirmation of its ethical (and broader axiological) significance made from the standpoint of a temporally perspectival (*ex post factum*) mode of intelligibility, and a principled—but arguably potentially dogmatic—rejection of it as ethically and axiologically vacuous on grounds that can be presumed to be synchronically articulated.

Even so, a further dimension is, I believe, opened up by appeals to fictional narratives of the kind that we encounter—above all, but not exclusively—in literature. This, I should stress, is not the one that one might expect, given the role that philosophical work in this area has tended to play in contributing to contemporary ethical discourse. The latter, especially when following in the wake of Stanley Cavell's writings (see, e.g., Cavell 1979), has principally consisted in attempts to broaden our imaginative grasp of the varied possibilities of human ethical engagement via a descriptive approach focused on what particular human situations, and the forms of situatedness relevant to these, are themselves thought to reveal.[16] By contrast, I prefer to draw attention to how, on some occasions, fictional narratives bring ethical diachronicity more sharply into view by evoking suitable overarching contexts of intelligibility, where these go beyond what is specific to the lives and histories of particular persons or communities and, as such, may carry a wider resonance. They can do this when the narratives unfolded are framed by a larger cultural perspective or world-view that is in some way itself conducive to a grasp of what ethical diachronicity involves, rather than being one whose implicit value commitments make it structurally resistant to the latter. In this regard, and given also their broader historico-cultural significance, I would venture to suggest that the narrative structures of Homeric epic poetry would seem to represent an ideal case in point.[17]

16. For a general survey and wide-ranging discussion of this, see Hämäläinen (2016a, 2016b).

17. For an illustration of this, see the discussion of Homer's *Iliad* presented in Humphries (2024).

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