The Fragility of Ethics

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"In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego."

Iris Murdoch

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Preface - Philosophy as Therapy

> [I]t is, rather, essential to our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand.[1]

Having finally finished my thesis it is important to note that in the course of it nothing new has been said. This does not, however, detract from the hard work put into writing it, rather, it puts that work into perspective. For in *many* cases the aim of philosophy is *therapeutic*, *not constructive*. What we want is not to learn something new, but to understand what is in plain view, since what is in plain view is what we often seem not to understand – especially when doing philosophy.

To start off it will be helpful to briefly discuss what a satisfactory treatment of a philosophical problem of the therapeutic kind looks like. A satisfactory treatment of such a philosophical problem is a treatment which makes clear *why the problem is capable of gripping us*, while nevertheless *unmasking it as an illusion*.[2] Of course it matters that philosophical problems are capable of gripping us, we should not try to downplay this fact but instead take these problems seriously. However, what makes them capable of gripping us is solely our lack of understanding of what is in plain view. Therefore, taking philosophical problems seriously requires, not learning something new, but rather unmasking them as being illusions.

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[1] Ludwig Wittenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009) §89 (1st ed. 1953).
[2] John McDowell, *Mind and World*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), xi (1st ed.).

The philosophical problem I have focused on in my thesis is what I call the *fragility of ethics*. The fragility of ethics is the problem of how to cope with the fragility of *ethical confidence*, that is, our confidence that our ethical outlook gets things right and thereby makes us better persons. The central question is whether human selfishness is a threat to such confidence. Now in accordance with what I said above, a satisfactory treatment of the problem of the fragility of ethics makes it clear *why the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order, is capable of gripping us*, while nevertheless *unmasking it as an illusion*. In the end, though, I can only hope that my treatment of the problem is in fact satisfactory. For even though I'm talking about something in plain view, what is in plain view is what I often seem not to understand – especially when doing philosophy!

The only thing that remains then is to express my thanks. First of all, to Joel Anderson for being a helpful and supportive supervisor. Secondly, to Dawa Ometto and Julia Hermann for sacrificing their no doubt precious time to help me. And last, but certainly not least of all, to my mother for being there, but also for helping me in *innumerable* different ways. Without all these persons my thesis would not have been the way it is. Whether that is a good thing I leave up to the reader to decide.

Jesse Sekreve, November 15 2014

Introduction - The Fragility of Ethical Confidence

"In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego."[3]

Can we ever trust our ethical convictions so that truth is achievable in ethics? There are moral skeptics who argue that a psychological explanation of our ethical convictions undermines the possibility of those convictions being true.[4] But such skeptics are wrong. We can *sometimes* trust our convictions and so truth *is* achievable. My defense of that claim, however, will be novel and somewhat untraditional. I will have little to say about the moral judgment philosophers these days like to go on about. Without saying anything to the detriment of the hard work of those philosophers, there are good reasons for choosing this different approach, as will become clear later on in this chapter. In contrast, I will say something about what I call *the fragility of ethical confidence*. The central question of my thesis will be: *Is human selfishness a threat to ethical confidence?* I will argue that human selfishness is *not* a threat to ethical confidence. The fear is that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could *never* be in order. But this fear is nothing more than an illusion, because *if* the character one has developed is virtuous, then one has come to possess *the virtue of humility*, and this will allow one to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. As will become clear later on in my thesis, my understanding of the virtue of humility is heavily indebted to the work of Iris Murdoch.

[3] Iris Murdoch, "On God and Good", in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1971), 99.
[4] See Richmond Campbell, "Moral Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/moral-epistemology/.

Now the point is simply that there is *nothing compulsory* about this fear. So what I'm doing in my thesis is merely countering the bad reasons for supposing that it *would be* compulsory. This amounts to a limited and piecemeal defense of the idea that ethical confidence *may* be in order and that truth *is* achievable in ethics.[5] This is briefly the position I will defend in my thesis. In the rest of this chapter I will explain more extensively what I mean with the fragility of ethical confidence.

Central to my thesis is the notion of 'ethical confidence'.[6] I will understand ethical confidence as our confidence that our ethical outlook gets things right and thereby makes us better persons. An ethical outlook I understand as the whole of one's ethical convictions and also as how one applies those convictions.[7] Ethical convictions in turn are convictions which pertain to one's views about how one should live one's life such as that, excluding exceptional circumstances, keeping your promises is right and breaking them is wrong. To talk about getting things right is to acknowledge the epistemic dimension of an ethical outlook. It is not a matter of anything goes here, but rather, one ethical outlook may be better than another. The fundamental idea is that of *perfection* so that what makes a certain ethical outlook better than another is that it makes us better persons than we are right now.[8] Ethical confidence is something we have to different degrees and which may or may not be in order. Some people are more ethically confident than others and some may be too ethically confident, while others

[5] I take this formulation from McDowell. See McDowell, "Responses", in *Reading McDowell - On Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 300.
[6] I appropriate the notion from McDowell. Whether I use the notion differently than he does I will not decide. See McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", in *Mind, Value and Reality*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 194.
[7] The same thing applies to the notion of 'ethical outlook'. See note 6.
[8] See Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection", in *The Sovereignty of* Good, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1971).

may not be ethically confident enough. Understood in this way the notion of 'ethical confidence' is a psychological one. This allows us to say with Aristotle that ethical confidence is a virtue. It is the mean which is opposed to the excess that is *ethical conceitedness* and the deficit that is *ethical insecurity*.

As said before, there are moral skeptics who argue that a psychological explanation of our ethical convictions undermines the possibility of those convictions being true. In explaining why such skeptics are wrong I will focus on a discussion within moral epistemology that resolves around so called *Psychological Debunking Arguments*. Such arguments are supposed to show that our ethical convictions are unjustified. The basic structure of such arguments is as follows:

1. Causal premise. S's conviction that p is explained by X.
2. Epistemic premise. X is an off-track process.
3. Therefore, S's conviction that p is unjustified.[9]

Let me try to explain these premises. To start off with, one might wonder why the mere fact that S's conviction has a causal explanation would mean that the conviction is unjustified. After all, *all* convictions have causal explanations and so that in itself doesn't show that these convictions are unjustified. To understand this we need to focus on the epistemic premise. What matters is whether the conviction is formed by an off-tracking rather than a truth-tracking process.[10] If X explains S's conviction and X is an off-track

[9] Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments", in *Nous 45:1 (2011)*, 106.
[10] This is only problematic if one believes that in principle ethical convictions are truth-tracking (objectivism). If one believes there are no truths for ethical convictions to track then there is of course also no problem here. See Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments", 112.

process so that it is not in any way related to the supposed truth of p, then the fact that X explains S's conviction means that the conviction is unjustified.[11] This, however, should not be confused with the wholly different claim that the conviction that p *itself* is unjustified. Rather, it only means that S is unjustified in holding that conviction.[12] Let me try to give an example. Imagine the case of a mother who is self-servingly biased. Now imagine that she has the conviction that everything her son does is admirable and that she has this conviction simply because she could not stomach the possible realization that her son might turn out to be less admirable than she had hoped. Debunking this conviction would go as follows:

1. Causal premise. The mother's conviction that everything her son does is admirable is explained by a self-serving bias.
2. Epistemic premise. A self-serving bias is an off-track process.
3. Therefore, the mother's conviction that everything her son does is admirable is unjustified.[13]

This argument shows the mother's conviction to be unjustified and it is an example of how the debunking of a single conviction would go. But where would such debunking stop? Now of course the answer to that question depends on how pervasive the off-track process really is. However, we can imagine that it might be hard to resist the extension of such debunking to encompass *the whole of our ethical convictions*. As such, we can imagine a kind of *global* psychological debunking argument that is meant

[11] Ibidem, 105-106
[12] Ibidem,107-108.
[13] Ibidem, 111.

to apply, not just to a single ethical conviction, but to our ethical outlook. What makes such an argument not wholly implausible is the fact that our cognitive lives are plagued by all kinds of self-serving biases.[14] In my thesis I want to focus on only one of those biases, but a very pervasive one at that, namely that of human selfishness.

The self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive, since human beings are naturally selfish. At least that is what I will assume in my thesis, I will not argue for it. Still, it seems to me that this assumption is relatively unproblematic and quite obviously true. In this I follow Murdoch: "I assume that human beings are naturally selfish[.] [...] That human beings are naturally selfish seems true on the evidence, whenever and wherever we look at them, in spite of a very small number of apparent exceptions."[15] However, such talk about human selfishness should not be misunderstood. It's not just about being selfish in the sense of wanting a bigger share, as in wanting a bigger piece of the pie. Rather, it is about a self-serving bias to be inclined to make an exception of ourselves. We are prone to give ourselves special treatment, because we often think of ourselves as more important than others and as warranting some kind of special concern. We are inclined to see reality, not as it really is, but as how we want it to be. Or as Murdoch very eloquently puts it:

> The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. [...] One of its main pastimes is daydreaming, It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass

[14] See Daniel Kahneman, "Can we trust our intuitions?", in *Conversations on Ethics*, ed. Alex Voorhoeve, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[15] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1971), 78

> through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolations, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self. I think we can probably recognize ourselves in this rather depressing description.[16]

It is important to note here that the claim that human beings are *naturally* selfish should not be confused with the wholly different claim that human beings are *always* selfish. The former claim merely states that human beings are *inclined* to be selfish, while the latter claim states that they are *compelled* to be so. The latter claim, unlike the former, amounts to a kind of universal egoism[17]. That I'm not defending universal egoism should be obvious, since that would make the central question of my thesis redundant.

I will explain now what I mean with the fragility of ethical confidence. Let me try to illustrate that fragility with an example. Imagine the case of John who has the conviction that, excluding exceptional circumstances, keeping your promises is right and breaking them is wrong. Now imagine that John has made a promise to his friend, Elizabeth, to help her move. However, when the time has come for him to act he is presented with a dilemma. John has always admired some famous person and now he has the once in a lifetime opportunity to meet him or her. But meeting him or her means that John would be unable to help his friend. So he has to decide whether he should keep or is allowed to break his promise. Now of course John is convinced that keeping your promises is

[16] Ibidem, 79

[17] See Robert Shaver, "Egoism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/egoism/ for more about egoism.

right and breaking them is wrong but this only applies to normal circumstances. Formulated as such, John's dilemma is this: "Is this an exceptional circumstance so that I'm allowed to break my promise?" Now of course depending on how we further fill in the details of the story we might well be able to formulate an answer to that question. The point is, however, to recognize that in answering this question there is ample opportunity for John to be self-servingly biased. Imagine that John were to argue that this is in fact an exceptional circumstance so that he is allowed to break his promise. Would he then be making an exception of himself? This is a hard question and what is important is that this type of questions is not uncommon. It is precisely the prevalence of such questions that makes it so easy to doubt that our ethical outlook gets things right and thereby makes us better persons. For it is the prevalence of such questions that makes goodness elusive and so hard to find. Therefore, ethical confidence is fragile and the problem is how to cope with this fragility.[18]

In the next chapters I will focus on different ways of coping with the fragility, but first it is important that I say a little more about the fear I'm trying to unmask. I'm unmasking the illusion of the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order. This fear arises naturally from a reflection on our moral life. For it is an overblown awareness[19] of the fragility of ethics and the pervasiveness of the self-serving bias of human selfishness. It amounts to an ethical insecurity of such proportion that it sees every degree of ethical confidence as a

[18] I hope I have succeeded here in alluding to a familiar problem. However, "It is frequently difficult in philosophy to tell whether one is saying something reasonably public and objective, or whether one is merely erecting a barrier, special to one's own temperament, against one's own personal fears. (It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher: what is he afraid of?)" (Murdoch, "On God and Good", in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 70-71)

[19] In itself such awareness *may* be a good thing. Although I see no reason to suppose that lacking such awareness is always to count as a deficit.

form of ethical conceitedness. What is the origin of this fear and why is it problematic? The fear has its origin in a kind of misanthropy, an overly pessimistic view of the nature of human beings. “One need not be an enemy of virtue but only a cool observer, who does not take the liveliest wish for the good straightaway as its reality, to become doubtful at certain moments [...] whether any true virtue is to be found in the world.”[20] Such misanthropy presents universal egoism, while it is in fact a highly controversial psychological theory, as educated common sense. The answer as to why the fear is problematic is threefold. *First*, it goes against the virtue of *hope*. Hope is a virtue because human beings are often inclined to believe that all is lost even when they have no way of knowing that it really is.[21] We should always be wary about taking a leap into defeatism, seeing as how doing so could very well make us unable to find any goodness at all.[22] *Secondly*, what is problematic about it is that it is a non-compulsory influence on our thinking that presents itself as compulsory. Phenomenologically speaking we ordinarily regard it an obvious fact that human beings are not *always* selfish. This fear needlessly puts a strain on such thinking.[23] *Thirdly*, *but also most*

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[20] Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals”, in *Immanuel Kant - Practical Philosophy*, trans. Marie J. Gregor, 12th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 62 (1st ed. 1996). Such misanthropy is also found in the work of Kant. But Kant of course also recognized, apart from the phenomenal self, the noumenal self. It is the noumenal self that is able to overcome the selfish compulsions of nature through a moral freedom provided by the Categorical Imperative. From this we can start to see an interesting historical development. For what happens when the noumenal self is regarded as a mere fantasy (see Helen Steward, *A Metaphysics for Freedom*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115) and we get left with solely the phenomenal self? Then it almost seems, but quite wrongfully so, as if universal egoism is in fact educated common sense.

[21] See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74n.

[22] Kahane, “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments”, 117.

[23] A very important but also hard question is who the ‘we’ and the ‘our’ refers to in this context. While I cannot tackle that question here I just want to point out that when I talk about the fear and its strain on our thinking, I’m *not* doing an empirical claim, as if I were noting some statistically significant fact. Rather, what I’m talking about is how that fear influences a way of thinking that is a reflection on the *human life-form*. (See Michael Thompson, “The Representation of Life”, in *Life*

importantly, what is problematic about it, is that it leaves us devoid of ethical confidence. Goodness is a source of energy and without this energy we lose the focal point of our attention and become paralyzed. About this Murdoch rightly says: "It is a psychological fact, and one of great importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps [...] the idea of goodness itself."[24] Now this is the reason that I have chosen for a different approach in my thesis. 'Goodness' is not just a predicate that applies to some of our moral judgments, but rather refers to a certain quality of consciousness. It is a state of consciousness that makes us feel empowered and moves us to act when this is required. This shows us what is at stake when we try to explain why moral skeptics are wrong. We feel compelled to do so, not because of some peculiar philosophical interest, but because we want to defend the source of our energy from harm.[25]

Let me conclude this chapter with a short overview of the line I will follow in my thesis. In the chapter *Second Nature* I will explain John McDowell's way of coping with the

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and Action – Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Thompson, "Forms of Nature: 'first', 'second', 'living', 'rational' and 'phronetic'", unpublished manuscript.) I'm aware that all this is controversial. I just want to prevent the misunderstanding that I'm doing an empirical claim. Not surprisingly Wittgenstein is also usually misunderstood in the same way when he claims that philosophy can only describe ordinary language (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §124). Contrary to what some philosophers think this is not a belief in the sacrosanctness of everyday language, but rather a way of making the bearing of our life-form on our thinking explicit. See Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy", in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[24] Murdoch, "On God and Good", in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 54-55.

[25] It doesn't help here to point out that a deflationary understanding of goodness would still be available, that is, it doesn't help to link goodness solely to the satisfaction of our own preferences. For the fact of the matter is that we are capable of an idea of goodness that is independent of such preferences and once we are capable of such an idea anything less than that is less than what is required. I cannot but agree with Murdoch when she says that "[t]he ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates value by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong." (Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 95).

fragility of ethical confidence. In the chapter *The Self-serving Bias of Human Selfishness* I will focus on the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order. In doing so I will also explain Immanuel Kant's way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence. In the chapter *Moral Principles* I will argue that moral principles cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook. In the chapter *Unmasking the Illusion* I will explain my position more extensively. In the chapter *The Virtue of Humility* I will argue that possessing the virtue of humility is the only way to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. And finally, in the chapter *Our Moral Life* I will sketch the consequences of my preceding considerations for our moral life.[26]

[26] I have done my absolute best to find all the sources for the ideas discussed in my thesis. However, I may have forgotten to mention a few. If this were to be the case I hope the non too glaring cases will be seen as an honest mistake and not as an intellectual dishonesty.

Second Nature

In this chapter I will explain McDowell's way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence. I understand this way of coping with the fragility as a kind of common sense starting point which is why I focus on McDowell. However, it is important to first briefly focus on what McDowell claims is a peculiarly modern threat to ethical confidence. To be clear, that threat is completely different from and unrelated to the threat of human selfishness that I focus on in my thesis. However, without a brief discussion of this threat McDowell's position will not be intelligible. Now the purported threat comes from a *naturalism of disenchanted nature*. With the rise of the modern natural sciences a different conception of nature became commonplace. According to this conception of nature, nature is a *realm of law*, a disenchanted realm devoid of any meaning whatsoever. A naturalism of disenchanted nature equates nature as the realm of law with nature *as such*. But this equation makes ethics seem something mysteriously extra-natural, because, as something essentially meaningful, it is hard to see how ethics could be part of nature. It makes it seem as if ethical confidence could not be in order unless it could somehow be grounded in the independent facts of the realm of law. So for example, breaking a promise could indeed be called wrong, but only if this conviction could somehow be grounded in the independent facts about what human beings need to do well.[27] This threat, however, McDowell claims, is nothing more than an illusion. The illusion arises because we needlessly constrict our conception of nature. It is

[27] Unfortunately, McDowell never really gives an example of the position he is attacking, but his target seems a kind of naturalistic scientism or at least some form of reductionism. See Soran Reader, "New Directions in Ethics: Naturalisms, Reasons and Virtue", in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 3*, 343-348;

unmasked when we see that there is nothing compulsory about equating nature as the realm of law with nature as such.[28] Or as McDowell puts it:

> In my view there is a disenchanted conception of something. […] What it is a conception of is reality in so far as it can be made intelligible by the methods of the natural sciences – not the natural as such, as we can be confused into supposing. […] The point is that the realm of law must not be allowed to usurp the position of the natural.[29]

Now once we resist equating nature as the realm of law with nature as such we open up the alternative of a *naturalism of second nature*. As said before, it is precisely this equation that makes ethics seem something mysteriously extra-natural. However, if we resist it this opens up the conceptual space to also regard ethics as a part of nature. Our ethical outlook is not our *first* nature, since we are not born with it. But nevertheless it is part of nature, because it is our *second* nature, which means that we acquire it as a part of our natural history through our upbringing as human beings.[30] Or as McDowell puts it:

> [S]econd nature acts in a world in which it finds more than what is open to view from the dehumanized stance that the natural sciences, rightly for their purposes, adopt. And there is nothing against bringing this richer reality

[28] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 70-78; McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", in *Mind, Value and Reality*, 177-182.
[29] McDowell, *Reading McDowell – On Mind and World*, 269.
[30] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 70-78; McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", 177-182.

> under the rubric nature too. The natural sciences do not have exclusive rights in that notion; and the added richness comes into view, not through the operations of some mysteriously extra-natural power, but because human beings come to possess a second nature.[31]

Now the important point to grasp is McDowell's claim that it is an illusion to think that ethical confidence could not be in order unless it could somehow be grounded in the independent facts of the realm of law. For this claim invites the question as to what *can* assess whether ethical confidence is in order. In answering that question McDowell takes inspiration from Aristotle who claims an ethical outlook is meaningless for those who have not had the proper upbringing. Aristotle says:

> [I]n order to listen appropriately to discussion about what is fine and just [...] one must have been well brought up. For that starting point is *that* it is so, and if this were sufficiently clear to us - well, in that case there will be no need to know in addition *why*.[32]

According to McDowell, Aristotle's point here is precisely to insists that ethical confidence needs not be grounded in anything and so that our ethical thinking is autonomous in that regard. Accordingly, only second nature itself can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. "Whether confidence is in order or not is for second nature itself to assess, exploiting whatever materials for critical reflection are available:

[31] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", 192.
[32] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe and ed. Sarah Broadie, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1095b5.

including, so long as they stand up to Neurathian scrutiny, concepts that are part of its specific cultural inheritance."[33] To explain how second nature can assess whether ethical confidence is in order McDowell invokes the metaphor of Neurath's ship. Our position is similar to that of sailors on the open sea who need to repair their ship. The wind is foul, the sea runs high, there is no land in sight to dock at and so the option of a complete overhaul is not available. The only thing the sailors can do is to continuously make small repairs. The significance of this metaphor is the similarity with respect to our situation of assessing whether ethical confidence is in order. There is no solid ground and also no possibility of a complete overhaul so the only thing we can do is assess whether parts of our ethical outlook hold up in light of the other things we take for granted. The only thing we can do is subject our ethical outlook to our own reflective self-scrutiny.[34]

However, according to McDowell, while part of Aristotle's point is to insist that our ethical thinking is autonomous, at the same time he doesn't even consider the possibility that someone could come to doubt the ethical outlook that he himself takes for granted. This shows Aristotle's immunity to the peculiarly modern threat to ethical confidence we discussed earlier but it also shows a propensity for smugness for which we should correct. We should recognize that there is a continuous obligation to reflect. McDowell says:

> Of course the fact that a thought passes muster so far, in reflective examination of a way of thinking from within, does not guarantee that it is

[33] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", 194.
[34] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 78-80, 84; McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", 188-195.

> acceptable. The way of thinking, including its implicit standards for self-scrutiny, may have hitherto unnoticed defects, such as parochialism or reliance on bad prejudice. But we can only make honest efforts to eliminate the sorts of defects we know our thinking risks, and perhaps to expand our conception of ways things might go wrong, so as to be on guard against other potential sources of error. The best we can achieve is always to some extent provisional and inconclusive, but that is no reason to succumb to the fantasy of an external validation.[35]

According to McDowell, it is only by subjecting our ethical outlook to our own reflective self-scrutiny that we can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. Now if the outlook can sustain such scrutiny that is at least *some* reason for supposing that we have gotten things right. But of course one's ethical outlook might be subject to bad prejudice and hitherto unnoticed defects and there is nothing we can do about that except make an honest effort to weed out such mistakes. There is nothing we can do to validate the results of our assessment once and for all and so the results of such assessment are always provisional and inconclusive. As such, there is no end to the endless tinkering of our moral life.[36]

[35] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 81-82.
[36] Ibidem, 80-84; McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", 188-195.

The Self-serving Bias of Human Selfishness

In this chapter I will focus on the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order. In doing so I will also explain Kant's way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence. In the previous chapter I focused on what McDowell claims is a peculiarly modern threat to ethical confidence. Now McDowell seems to be under the impression that the only purported threat to ethical confidence comes from a naturalism of disenchanted nature. Although he never actually claims that, neither does he do anything to distance himself from the impression. He only ever talks about the threat of a naturalism of disenchanted nature and doesn't even mention the possibility of there being other threats. But this impression is mistaken. For while the threat of a naturalism of disenchanted nature is peculiarly modern, there is another purported threat, which, because of its close connection to the human condition, is as old as humanity itself. I'm talking about the threat of human selfishness. McDowell says nothing about this threat and I think this is a mistake we should correct. Still, these differences should not be misunderstood and so an important question is how my position differs from that of McDowell. I think there is in fact *no* difference at all. However, because McDowell never mentions the self-serving bias of human selfishness it is almost as if he mistakes reflective self-scrutiny for goodness.[37] Reflective self-scrutiny *can* amount to goodness, but only, as I will argue later on in my thesis, when one has come to possess the virtue of humility.[38]

[37] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 101.
[38] See McDowell, "Virtue and Reason", in *Mind, Value and Reality*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 72-73. There it's clear that McDowell is duly aware of the importance of the virtue of humility.

Now according to McDowell, it is only by subjecting our ethical outlook to our own reflective self-scrutiny that we can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. But the results of such an assessment are always provisional and inconclusive so that there is no end to the endless tinkering of our moral life. However, if we grant that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive, mere reflective self-scrutiny seems insufficient. What seems problematic is being able to recognize those parts of our ethical outlook that get things right and thereby make us better persons and those parts that do not. And what also seems problematic is being able to tell whether any proposed change to an ethical outlook counts as an improvement or as a deterioration of it. The skeptical question is this: "If we grant that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive, how can we ever be sure that our ethical outlook gets things right and thereby makes us better persons?" What seems to make this question urgent is that we know plenty of examples in which reflection can go horribly wrong. Think of people who hold biased convictions, say racist ones, and for which reflection merely serves to reinforce those biases. The worry is that we seem unable to formulate an answer to the skeptical question. To further flesh out this worry we should distinguish between two problems: that of *complacency* and that of *wherewithal*.

> The first problem is that of *complacency*. A complacent agent, in the sense intended, would lack any awareness of defects, or potential defects, in her perceptions; she would never see the need to revise or even inspect them (think of someone who never senses that he or she is spelling words incorrectly). The second problem concerns an agent who recognizes the need to critically check or revise her perceptions, but who lacks the

> resources to do so (think of someone who senses that he or she is misspelling words but lacks a dictionary). Call this the problem of *wherewithal*.[39]

The first problem is that one would simply take for granted one's ethical outlook and give little attention to the fact that one might get things wrong. The second problem is that one would put in an honest effort and acknowledge the fact that one might get things wrong, but nevertheless would lack the means to do anything about this. Is the worry expressed earlier about the skeptical question then a problem of complacency or wherewithal?

I hope that my explanation of McDowell's way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence makes it obvious that it cannot be a problem of complacency. For if the worry expressed would be an accusation of complacency it would make more fuss than is warranted. If one puts in an honest effort one can hardly be accused of being complacent. Such an accusation would be disingenuous. The problem, if there is one, is one of wherewithal. One might put in an honest effort and acknowledge the self-serving bias of human selfishness, but nevertheless might lack the means to avoid it. There is always the possibility of doubt so that we can imagine that, even in the cases in which we seem absolutely sure of the contrary, we are *always* self-servingly biased. So the worry amounts to the fear that we lack the means to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness altogether. It amounts to the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order.

[39] Bridget Clarke, "The Prospects for Critical Moral Perception", in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher – A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 234.

Let me try to spell out this fear a little more formally as a kind of global psychological debunking argument:

1. The self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive;
2. We lack the means to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness;
3. Therefore, the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and ethical confidence could never be in order.

This is the skeptical argument that the worry about the skeptical question leads to. Now it is important to see that everything hinges on the second step of the argument. We have already assumed that the first step is correct given our assumption that human beings are naturally selfish and the conclusion of the argument obviously follows from the first and the second step. The important question then is whether we really lack the means to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness.

It is a concern with such a lack of means that drives Kant to suggest another way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence. Now it is because of the fact that Kant is duly aware of the self-serving bias of human selfishness, that I focus on him. However, my interest in him is not historical, but rather, systematic. Kant is a common source for a way of thinking which, *in first instance*, also shares the fear that we are unable to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness.[40] The fundamental motive of this way

[40] Now I cannot go into this extensively since that would only divert from the purpose of this chapter. However, to prove that Kant is indeed such a common source I want to briefly focus on the work of Barbara Herman. She also argues that we need an independent check on our ethical outlook. This way of thinking comes to the fore in her article "Making Room for Character" (Barbara Herman, "Making Room for Character", in *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, ed. S. Engstrom and J. Whiting, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University

of thinking is that of *purity*. Human beings are messy and their thinking is often a muddle so that there is little hope of them getting things right on their own without some guidance. Philosophy plays an important role in providing such guidance, since it is philosophy which is supposed to undo the messiness and clear up the muddles. We *can* avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness but only by invoking an independent check on our ethical outlook. It is philosophy that needs to search for such an independent check. Let me now try to explain what searching for such an independent check amounts to.[41]

To understand Kant's way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence we need to understand the transition he proposes from common moral reason to a philosophical understanding of it. Why would we need such an understanding? For people are usually not in doubt about the general direction in which real goodness lies, nor are they completely unable to recognize true evil, so what can philosophy possibly do here?[42] One could imagine a virtuous peasant, someone who gets things right intuitively but is unable to say what it is exactly what he or she gets right. What would be wrong with such a person, why do we need anything more than common moral reason? Kant says:

Press, 1996)). There, in the last part of her essay, she focuses on the phenomenon of moral perplexity. She argues that because there are cases which our ethical outlook is not immediately prepared for to deal with, we should prefer a flexible characterization of our moral life. She thinks a Kantian perspective provides such flexibility because of the distinction it makes between interest and desires, on the one hand, and motives, on the other. The former, unlike the latter, are non-moral in first instance, but can be moral insofar as they answer to "the deliberative requirements of rational principle." (Herman, "Making Room for Character", 55) Although Herman doesn't explicitly say it, what she means is that interests and desires are motives insofar as they answer to the Categorical Imperative. For Herman then, in accordance with Kant, we must subject out ethical outlook to an independent moral principle like the Categorical Imperative.

[41] Kant, "Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals", 59-60.

[42] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 97-98.

> There is something splendid about innocence; but what is bad about it, in turn is that it cannot protect itself very well and is easily seduced. [...] The human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which reason represents to him as so deserving of the highest respect - the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name happiness. Now reason issues its precepts unremittingly, without thereby promising anything to the inclinations, and so, as it were, with disregard and contempt for those claims, which are so impetuous and besides so apparently equitable (and refuse to be neutralized by any command). But from this there arises a *natural dialectic*, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity - something that even common practical reason cannot, in the end, call good. In this way common human reason is impelled [...] to go out of its sphere and to take a step into the field of practical philosophy[.] [...] So there develops unnoticed in common practical reason [...] a dialectic that constrains it to seek help in philosophy[.][43]

Kant describes here very eloquently the self-serving bias of human selfishness. What drives us from this path of acting for the sake of duty is the natural dialectic that arises between duty and inclination in which human selfishness drives us towards favoring the

[43] Kant, “Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals”, 59-60.

side of our inclinations. This is why we need philosophy, it needs to formulate the independent moral principle clearly and precisely that shows us the way to keep such selfishness in check. The principle in question is of course the Categorical Imperative. But how could the Categorical Imperative help us to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness?[44]

The Categorical Imperative states that: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should be become a universal law."[45] Now how does this help us? According to Kant, the Categorical Imperative helps us to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness because it can recognize those parts of and proposed changes to an ethical outlook which embody the impartial demands of reason and those which stem from the natural inclination to make an exception of ourselves. To avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness we only need to ask ourselves whether our proposed conduct is consistent with an impartial perspective, that is, whether it could be willed as a universal law. If one's desire or interest destroys itself when willed as a universal law, it is not consistent with such a perspective and that means that in that case one is making an exception of oneself. Kant gives the example of making a promise. If one were inclined to break one's promise because it would be advantageous to do so one should wonder whether this could be willed as a universal law. The answer is "no" of course because if everyone would break their promise when it would be advantageous to do so the whole practice of making promises would break down. In that way acting contrary to the Categorical Imperative means acting selfishly. As such, it is only by subjecting our ethical outlook to an independent moral principle like the

[44] Ibidem.
[45] Ibidem, 57.

Categorical Imperative that we can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. The question, however, is whether this idea is plausible.[46]

[46] Ibidem.

The Role of Moral Principles

In this chapter I will argue that moral principles cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook. In the previous chapter I have explained Kant's way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence. According to Kant, we *can* avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness but only by invoking an independent check on our ethical outlook. It is only by subjecting our ethical outlook to an independent moral principle like the Categorical Imperative that we can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. This was Kant's way of blocking the second step of the skeptical argument I wrote about earlier. It is to insist that we *do* have means for avoiding the self-serving bias of human selfishness. But how plausible is this idea that moral principles can figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook?

Actually it is not very plausible at all. Philosophers like Kant have an overly romantic idea of the role of moral principles in our moral life. It is almost as if they think that moral principles apply themselves in some kind of mechanistic way. To see how misguided the idea of a mechanistic application of moral principles really is, we should briefly focus on McDowell's discussion of it.[47] There McDowell discusses Wittgenstein's considerations about the concept of following a rule. Now we tend to picture the following of a rule as a kind of psychological mechanism that literally keeps us on track by keeping our behavior from coming adrift. But this way of picturing it, is misguided. Say someone was following a rule such as "add 2" and he was continuing the series 2, 4, 6, 8, ... Now imagine that this person suddenly continued with adding 5 instead of 2. We would be inclined to say that his or her behavior has come adrift. But what is the

[47] See McDowell, "Virtue and Reason", in *Mind, Value and Reality*.

nature of such confidence? Certainly not the postulation of some psychological mechanism. For the behavior of the person in question is perfectly consistent with him or her following the rule of say “add 2, until 60, then add 5”. It might even be that this person itself was not even aware whether he or she was following this rule or the previous one. While this may sound like a skeptical argument meant to undermine confidence it should not be understood as such. Wittgenstein’s point is that the nature of our confidence is different than we tend to think it is. About this in the case of the competent use of words Cavell very eloquently says:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation - all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.[48]

[48] Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”, 52.

Wittgenstein's point is that the nature of our confidence is the fact that we share a common mode of understanding in the form of a shared life-form. It not a psychological mechanism, but our shared life-form that forms the nature of our confidence that our behavior does not come adrift. Now this is the important point to grasp, namely that moral principles do not apply themselves mechanistically.[49]

That does, however, invite the question of how we *do* apply moral principles. It is important to see that moral principles are abstract in themselves, they do not contain the grounds for their application within themselves, but rather require an interpretive effort to be made concrete and to be applied to particular situations.[50] This limits the role moral principles can play in our moral life, in the sense that they cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook. The idea that they can is not plausible, because moral principles are always *character dependent*, their application is mediated by one's character. A moral principle I understand as a general rule of conduct (such as 'help your fellow man') that helps us to identify the morally salient features of particular situations.[51] Now take for example the moral principle I mentioned just now that we should help our fellow men. Who exactly are my fellow men? The whole of mankind, the members of my community or only my close friends and relatives? The point to grasp here is that answering this question differently results in different features being morally salient, but more importantly that the answer I give is mediated by my character. This is

[49] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason", 57-65. I think our shared life-form also forms the nature of *ethical* confidence. But it will divert from the purpose of this chapter to go into this.

[50] Kant was of course aware of the fact that moral principles do not apply themselves, but, as far as I know, he never regarded this as problematic for the idea that moral principles can figure as an independent check. See Jürgen Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel's Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?", in *Moral Conciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 1st ed. (New York: Polity Press, 1992), 206.

[51] Bridget Clarke, "The Prospects for Critical Moral Perception", 230. It still remains an open question whether this is the right way of understanding moral principles. I will simply assume that it is, since I know of no other more plausible characterizations.

problematic for the idea that moral principles can figure as an independent check, because it means that their application must be mediated by one's ethical outlook. For one's ethical outlook is of course partly what constitutes one's character. But then moral principles cannot figure as independent check on our ethical outlook since they are themselves mediated by that same outlook. So the whole idea that moral principles can figure as an independent check falls apart once one leaves the abstract realm and returns to the concrete practice of the application of those principles. As such, the idea that moral principles can figure as independent checks is not plausible.[52]

It is important to keep in mind here the distinction between applying and observing a principle. Applying a principle is having the insight in what the principle asks of one in particular situations, while observing a principle is being motivated to do what a principle asks. So moral principles are character dependent in the sense that they only provide an insight to those with the appropriate character. With this distinction I distance myself from discussions about motivation, that is, about internalism and externalism. However, one may doubt actually whether there is such a big difference between insight and motivation. It seems to me that Murdoch is basically right when she says that "[w]e act rightly 'when the time comes' not out of strength of will but out of the quality of our usual attachments and with the kind of energy and discernment which we have available. And to this the whole activity of our consciousness is relevant."[53] If we take this idea seriously, there doesn't seem to be much of a difference between insight and motivation, since both are united in our consciousness.

[52] Ibidem, 230-231.
[53] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 92.

I want to quote now at length the example Bridget Clarke takes from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, since I think it perfectly illustrates the way in which moral principles are character dependent. Here is the example:

> A gentleman of the Dashwood family leaves most of his estate to his grandson, John Dashwood, who is already very well provided for. John's father, Henry, is distressed because the will overlooks three daughters he had by a later marriage who are not nearly as well off as his son. Henry learns that his own death is imminent before he can shore up the finances of his daughters. He therefore makes it his last request to John to look after them. The verbal indefiniteness of Henry's request is important to how the story unfolds. As John explains to his wife, Fanny: 'He did not stipulate for any particular sum […] he only requested me, in general terms to assist them, and make their situation more comfortable than it was in their power to do so'.
>
> John, we are told, is rather 'cold-hearted' and 'selfish' but nevertheless dependable when it comes to the discharge of his ordinary duties. Accordingly, he has every intention of making good on his promise to his father; indeed, he takes some genuine pleasure in the thought of fulfilling the promise generously. The only question is *what* exactly this requires. John begins with the idea that he will give his sisters £1000 each; he considers this a generous sum which he can easily spare. However, this plan does not meet with the approval of Fanny, who reasons that to give such a sum to the sisters and their mother would be to rob their own child in the interest of

> ‘mere half-bloods’. John sees her point and then proposes half of the original sum, which would mean £500 for each of his sisters. Fanny argues that this much is unnecessary, given that the sisters stand to receive an inheritance upon the death of their mother. John is again persuaded. After several more rounds of such deliberation John concludes that Henry Dashwood surely had not meant for him to give his sisters money at all; he had meant for John to provide them with neighborly assistance such as helping them move into a new house, and sending them occasional presents of fish and game. ‘I clearly understand it now’, John says, ‘and I will strictly fulfill my engagement by such acts of assistance and kindness to them’ – anything more would be ‘unnecessary , if not highly indecorous’.

Clarke’s example is of John Dashwood who inherits most of the estate of his grandfather. The will overlooks John’s three half-sisters so when Henry, John’s and his half-sisters’ father, is close to dying he requests of his son that he looks after them. But Henry does not say what he exactly means by that. Now in the end John horribly fails in applying the moral principle of ‘looking after’ which is relevant in this situation. It is not hard to see that what John ultimately intends to give them (neighborly assistance and occasional presents) is far off from what Henry, John’s father, had intended. Now this example is a perfect example of why moral principles are character dependent, since John’s (mis)application of the principle of ‘looking after’ cannot be seen as separate from his cold-heartedness and his selfishness. It is not that John sees what he should have done but that his cold-heartedness and selfishness prevented him from doing it. Rather, it is that through his cold-heartedness and selfishness John is unable to

recognize what he is supposed to do. He is unable to see that he is not doing what was asked of him. To be able to see this he would have needed to be a different person with a different character, he would have needed to be better than he is. For then he would have been able to see that he would not be robbing his own son if he gave his sisters £1000 each, that it is simply irrelevant whether they are only his *half*-sisters and that it is somewhat insensitive to not give his sisters £500 because they would get an inheritance when their mother dies. Simply put, John needed to have cared more about his half-sisters and the wishes of his father. In this sense moral principles are character dependent, they are mediated in their application by the one's character.[54]

If moral principles cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook then what role do they play? I will have little to say about that since the point of this chapter is mainly negative. But I do want to make absolutely clear that I'm not denying the importance of moral principles for our moral life. The point is not to insist that a moral principle like the Categorical Imperative is useless. However, it does seem to me that when talking about goodness, a moral principle such as the Categorical Imperative is of secondary importance. The fundamental motive underlying the Categorical Imperative is *reciprocity*. You should treat others like you yourself want to be treated and not do unto others what you would not like done unto you. However, this still involves the workings of the self. It seems to me that the essence of true *selfless* virtue is to see another's

[54] Bridget Clarke, "The Prospects for Critical Moral Perception", 232-233. Now it might be that there are also moral principles which are *character independent*. I know of no examples but also have no argument to exclude that such principles could exist. I will simply have to put this issue aside for now, but that means that the point I try to argue for in this chapter still remains somewhat provisory.

good as good precisely and only because it is his or her good.[55] Nevertheless, moral principles play an important role in identifying morally salient features of particular situations. So the only thing I'm denying is that moral principles can figure as an independent check, as if they were a foolproof way to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. This idea is not only wrongheaded, but it is even dangerous. For it would lose sight of the fact that in applying moral principles, precisely because such application takes interpretive effort, one can be once again self-servingly biased. The self-serving bias of human selfishness is not necessarily avoided when invoking a moral principle like the Categorical Imperative. This insight is important because it underlines a point I will make later on in my thesis. The fact that moral principles cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook shows the importance of the virtue of humility.

Now we can understand the role of moral principles in our moral life by making a comparison with the role instruments play in deciding whether something is on and off key. People who have a good ear can fairly accurately hear whether someone is on or off key. However, we all make mistakes and in such cases it can help to listen to an instrument. In this way instruments figure as a kind of check on what we think we hear. However, they can only do so for the person who already has a reasonably good ear. An instrument will not allow someone to hear whether something is on or off key when he or she is completely oblivious to the difference between them. This situation is analogous to the situation we are in with respect to the role of moral principles. We are usually not in doubt about the general direction in which real goodness lies, nor are we

[55] See Charles Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, 1st ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91.

completely unable to recognize true evil. However, we are easily swayed and in such cases moral principles can help us by identifying morally salient features of particular situations. In this way moral principles figure as a check on our ethical outlook. However, they can only do so for the person who has the appropriate character. Moral principles will not allow someone to identify good and evil when he or she is completely oblivious to the difference between them. The important point to grasp is that moral principles only provide insight to those who are in the position to hear it.

The result of this chapter might seem somewhat unsatisfactory though. I have only made the negative point that moral principles cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook, but I have said nothing about the means we do have to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. This chapter might very well be interpreted as a justification of the second step of the argument of the skeptical argument I outlined earlier. It might give of the impression that we indeed lack the means to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. But nothing could be farther from the truth. For the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable is nothing more than an illusion.[56]

[56] Part of this chapter, the part of the character dependency of moral principles, is a reiteration of a point I have already made in a previous paper (Murdoch and *The Idea of Perfection* – Whether moral perception can be critical of itself). I have made the necessary adjustments to justify using it again.

Unmasking the Illusion

In this chapter I will explain my position more extensively. Let me give an overview of what has been said so far. The self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive. We are inclined to make an exception of ourselves. Therefore, ethical confidence is fragile and the problem is how to cope with this fragility. One way of coping with the fragility is suggested by McDowell. According to McDowell, it is only by subjecting our ethical outlook to our own reflective self-scrutiny that we can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. But the results of such an assessment are always provisional and inconclusive so that there is no end to the endless tinkering of our moral life. However, if we grant that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive, mere reflective self-scrutiny seems insufficient. The fear is that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order. That is why Kant suggests another way of coping with the fragility of ethical confidence. According to Kant, we *can* avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness but only by invoking an independent check on our ethical outlook. It is only by subjecting our ethical outlook to an independent moral principle like the Categorical Imperative that we can assess whether ethical confidence is in order. Now the important question is whether the aforementioned fear is warranted, which is why the central question of my thesis is: *Is human selfishness a threat to ethical confidence?*

Now human selfishness is *not* a threat to ethical confidence, since this fear is nothing more than an illusion. For *if* the character one has developed is virtuous, then one has come to possess the virtue of humility, and this will allow one to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. Like I said in the preface, a satisfactory treatment of the

problem of the fragility of ethics makes it clear *why the fear is capable of gripping us*, while nevertheless *unmasking it as an illusion*. The fear is capable of gripping us because the self-serving bias of human selfishness is indeed very real and so human selfishness is indeed something which needs to be avoided. The fear is nevertheless an illusion because the acknowledgement of the pervasiveness needs not undermine the possibility that ethical confidence *may* be in order. For it does not undermine that, *if* we have developed a virtuous character and thereby come to possess the virtue of humility, we *are* able to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. Of course this leaves the question open whether one has actually acquired a virtuous character, but that is not the point. The point is simply, *and this is important*, that there is *nothing compulsory* about moving from the acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of the self-serving bias of human selfishness to the fear that human selfishness is unavoidable. We can credibly block that move so that ethical confidence *may* be in order.

To see how we can credibly block that move let me return to the skeptical argument I wrote about earlier. It went as follows:

1. The self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive;
2. We lack the means to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness;
3. Therefore, the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and ethical confidence can never be in order.

As I already pointed out, everything hinges on the second step of the argument. We have already assumed that the first step is correct given our assumption that human beings are naturally selfish and the conclusion of the argument obviously follows from

the first and the second step. The important question was whether we really lack the means to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. Now I'll immediately grant that the second step doesn't seem wholly implausible. Indeed, it seems questionable whether mere reflective self-scrutiny is sufficient and it also seems that any hope we might have have had in the form of an independent check is lost. How could we possibly say then that we can credibly block the move from the acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of the self-serving bias of human selfishness to the fear that human selfishness is unavoidable? What we need to do is make a distinction between the perfect and the imperfect case. Were we talking about the imperfect case, the case in which the character one has developed is not virtuous, reflective self-scrutiny might indeed be insufficient. However, we do not need to focus solely on this case. For in the perfect case, in the case that the character one has developed is virtuous, reflective self-scrutiny *would* be sufficient. For that would be a case in which one has come to possess the virtue of humility and this will allow one to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. The virtue of humility is what provides the means and allows us to credibly block the move from the acknowledgement of the self-serving bias of human selfishness to the fear that human selfishness is unavoidable. What remains then is to show how exactly the virtue of humility allows us to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness.

However, before I do so it is important to fully understand what these considerations amount to. The skeptical question was this: "If we grant that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is pervasive, how can we ever be sure that our ethical outlook gets things right and thereby makes us better persons?" Now the important point is to grasp that the considerations I have presented here are *not* an answer to that question. "The

aim here is not to answer skeptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way common sense has always wanted to."[57] It could not be, since I have said nothing to make clear how we can ever be sure that our ethical outlook gets things right and thereby makes us better persons. What I'm claiming is merely that despite our acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of the self-serving bias of human selfishness we can block the move to the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable, because, *and this is important*, that acknowledgment doesn't undermine *the idea of a perfect case in which we have developed a virtuous character*. For my purposes the sheer intelligibility of that idea is enough, for it shows that the skeptical question lacks any kind of urgency it is supposed to have for it to be troubling. This is in line with Wittgenstein when he says: "The queer thing is that even though I find it quite correct for someone to say "Rubbish!" and so brush aside the attempt to confuse him with doubts at bedrock, - nevertheless I hold it to be incorrect if he seeks to defend himself[.]"[58] For to say "Rubbish!" to the skeptic is not to reply but to admonish him.[59] There is a clear parallel here with McDowell's disjunctivism.[60] The disjunctive conception of experience states that it's *either* the case that we get things right *or* it's the case that we are misled. So if we get things right what we know is not merely our representation of the facts, but the very fact that things are thus and so itself. The point is, that the possibility of being misled doesn't undermine the idea that, when we get things right, experience opens us

[57] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 113.
[58] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), §498.
[59] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §495.
[60] See McDowell, *Mind and World*, 111-113 and McDowell, "The Disjunctive Conception of Experience", in *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. Adrian Haddock and Fiona MacPherson, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 376-382.

to the world as it is in itself. Once again the sheer intelligibility of that idea is enough but not to answer the skeptical question of whether we can ever trust our senses, but rather to dismiss that question as unimportant. Now what if someone were insisting on asking the skeptical question? “If someone insists on asking that, on some particular occasion, an appropriate response might start like this: “I know why you think that question is particularly pressing, but it is not.” If the question still stands, nothing particularly philosophical is called for in answering it.”[61] In this way the tenacious sceptic is a similar to “a little frontier fortress that will undeniably be forever invincible, but whose garrison can never leave, so we may go safely past it and not be afraid to leave it behind us.”[62]

[61] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 113.
[62] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation – Volume 1*, trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman and Christopher Janaway, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 129.

The Virtue of Humility

In this chapter I will argue that possessing the virtue of humility is the only way to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. If the self-serving bias of human selfishness is about making an exception of ourselves, then anything connected with the ability to see the unself is to be recognized as virtue. For our present purposes we can say that virtue is *unselfishness*, it is the ability to see reality as it really is, independent of how we want it to be.[63] The virtue of humility is the most important in this regard, because it is the most striking exercise of such unselfishness. I will now try to explain what I mean with the virtue of humility, since the nature of humility is often misunderstood to such an extent that some even doubt whether it is a virtue.

To some people it is even clear that humility cannot be a virtue. Aristotle certainly thought it wasn't one. He argued that virtuous person was not a humble person. He says:

> Such, then, is the proud man; the man who falls short of him is unduly humble, and the man who goes beyond him is vain. Now even these are not thought to be bad (for they are not malicious), but only mistaken. For the unduly humble man, being worthy of good things, robs himself of what he deserves, and to have something bad about him from the fact that he does not think himself worthy of good things, and seems also not to know himself;

[63] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 84.

else he would have desired the things he was worthy of, since these were good.[64]

While I would say that the virtue of humility is the mean with vanity as an excess and meekness as a deficit, Aristotle disagrees about this, since he thinks the good man has pride as virtue, which according to him has vanity as an excess and humility as a deficit. Aristotle believes the virtuous person cannot be a humble one, since he takes humility to be a matter of underestimating oneself and presenting oneself as worse than one is. In this respect humility is a bit like self-deception. In contrast, the virtuous person is proud of who he is and sees himself as someone who is better than others. But this way of understanding humility is completely wrongheaded. "Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues."[65] To show this I will focus on a familiar metaphor of Plato's Cave and I will interpret this metaphor in the way Murdoch does. Let me first describe the metaphor.

I think the metaphor is familiar to most of my readers. Still, let me say a little about it. In the cave there a prisoners chained up and they are faced towards a wall. The only source of light in the cave is a fire which burns behind the prisoners. Every day at a certain time people from outside the cave walk around with different kinds of objects. These objects cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The only thing the prisoners see are these shadows, they have no knowledge of the things that cast the shadows, let alone of the origin of those objects. They are completely ignorant of what is outside the

[64] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, 63-64.
[65] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 95.

cave. So the only thing the prisoners know is but a shadow of reality. Then one day one of the prisoners is released from the cave. Finally he can see the fire inside the cave, the objects being carried around in it but also, after a long and arduous climb up, what is outside the cave. This is the first time that the prisoner sees the sun. At first he is blinded by it, but after a while his eyes adjust and he begins to see a world that is far more real than the dreary world he was so familiar with. Quickly the prisoner goes back inside the cave to tell his fellow prisoners of what he has seen. But his fellow prisoners do not understand him anymore. For now the only thing they see is yet another shadow on the wall.[66] I think everyone is familiar with this metaphor and also with its standard metaphysical interpretation. I do not want to contest this interpretation, but merely to suggest that there is another way of interpreting it so that it has a bearing on our current subject.

We should identify our position as naturally selfish beings by comparing it with that of the prisoners inside the cave. We are tempted, when looking at the world around us, not to see reality as it really is, but as how we would like it to be. Our perception is often distorted by self-indulging fantasies. We often contemplate shadows and not the real things. The significance of the way out of the cave is to see things how they really are, independent of how we want them to be. This should be connected with virtue, with trying to find goodness. About this Murdoch says:

> Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. This is the

[66] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2004), 208-214.

> non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanation of goodness. 'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful.[67]

That it is hard to find goodness is because we are not naturally predisposed to do this. We are naturally selfish and so it is often easier to see things how we would like them to be. The climb up out of the cave represents the incredible and arduous task of finding goodness and the colossal achievement that is actually succeeding in finding it. In this way the metaphor is a metaphor for the elusiveness of goodness and with that it can be understood as a metaphor for the fragility of ethics itself.

In what way, however, does this metaphor show the importance of humility? Now the humble person because he or she sees him- or herself as *nothing* can see the world around him or her truly and clearly. Or as Murdoch very eloquently puts it:

> The good man is humble[.] [...] Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which if often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self. [...] The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other

[67] Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", 93.

> things as they are. [...] And although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good.[68]

The humble person will not make an exception of him- or herself. The humble person is the one who will not stay in his or her dreary world, but will climb up, transcend him- or herself and try to get to the truth of the matter. Only a humble person can ever hope to set his or her eyes upon goodness for only a humble person will entertain the possibility that the shadows on the wall might not be the real things, but that the real things are somewhere out there. Humility *is* unselfishness.

We have now seen how possessing the virtue of humility is the only way to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. However, there remains one important misunderstanding I need to avoid. One might very well wonder whether I have done enough in this chapter. For shouldn't I have to show that we can be humble? It seems as if we need to talk about the burden of proof. Where does it lie in this case? Is it on me to show that we can be humble or is it on the skeptic to show that we cannot be? The danger is that we have come here to a stalemate and that we have become locked in a game of counter assertion. If this were the case my position would merely presuppose what it is trying to prove by begging the question. But this is a misunderstanding for it misses the point of my considerations. I can simply leave open the question of whether we can be humble. I can do so because I'm not arguing with the skeptic *at all*. For once again: "The aim here is not to answer skeptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as

[68] Ibidem, 103-104.

unreal, in the way common sense has always wanted to."[69] When your opponent is talking nonsense always be sure not to deny what he or she is saying. For the denial of nonsense is still just that: *nonsense*.

[69] McDowell, *Mind and World*, 113.

Our Moral Life

In this chapter I will sketch the consequences of my preceding considerations for our moral life. Now I have unmasked the illusion of the fear that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order. I have argued that moral principles cannot figure as an independent check on our ethical outlook. And I have also argued that possessing the virtue of humility is the only way to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. What consequences do these considerations have for our moral life?

Most importantly, they show that we are not and never will be in a situation of *pure* certainty. Ethical confidence will always remain fragile. The self-serving bias of human selfishness will always remain pervasive. Philosophy can do nothing about that. It cannot formulate the independent moral principle that shows us the way to keep human selfishness in check. There are no independent checks. We can do nothing more than *put in an honest effort*, *try our best and hope that if we do so that we are rewarded by getting things right*. This was also Marx' dissatisfaction when he said: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[70] The problem of the fragility of ethics is not "solved" by philosophizing, it is coped with by good old fashioned hard moral work. These are important considerations, since they underline the perpetual moral task of being humble. Of course this leaves us in an unstable position, but we should learn to live with this impurity. For to think that such impurity is a problem for philosophy to solve is to misguidedly think that the

[70] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", in *Karl Marx – Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173.

uncertainties we are confronted with in our moral life are deficits of rather than inherent to our moral life. In this respect I'm very sympathetic to Aristotle's claim that "[i]t is the mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject matter than the nature of that subject permits."[71] But why then do we tend to think that philosophy should do something here? Probably because we would like to avoid the responsibility of thought. We would like the certainty of an independent check, something which bypasses the arduous moral dilemmas we have to confront. Simply put, we would like something else to do the hard work for us.[72] And that reflects back on our nature: *Human beings are naturally selfish*. So rest assured: *There is no end to the endless tinkering of our moral life*.

[71] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1094b23–5.
[72] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism", 181.

Conclusion

The central question of my thesis was: *Is human selfishness a threat to ethical confidence?* I have argued that human selfishness is *not* a threat to ethical confidence. The fear is that the self-serving bias of human selfishness is unavoidable and therefore that ethical confidence could never be in order. But this fear is nothing more than an illusion, because *if* the character one has developed is virtuous, then one has come to possess the virtue of humility, and this will allow one to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. Like I said in the preface, a satisfactory treatment of the problem of the fragility of ethics makes it clear *why the fear is capable of gripping us*, while nevertheless *unmasking it as an illusion*. The fear is capable of gripping us because the self-serving bias of human selfishness is indeed very real and so human selfishness is indeed something which needs to be avoided. The fear is nevertheless an illusion because the acknowledgement of the pervasiveness needs not undermine the possibility that ethical confidence *may* be in order. For it does not undermine that, *if* we have developed a virtuous character and thereby come to possess the virtue of humility, we *are* able to avoid the self-serving bias of human selfishness. Of course this leaves the question open whether one has actually acquired a virtuous character, but that is not the point. The point is simply, *and this is important*, that there is *nothing compulsory* about moving from the acknowledgement of the self-serving bias of human selfishness to the fear that human selfishness is unavoidable. We can credibly block that move so that ethical confidence *may* be in order. As such, what I have done in my thesis is merely counter the bad reasons for supposing that the fear *would be* compulsory. This has amounted to a limited and piecemeal defense of the idea that ethical confidence

may be in order and that truth *is* achievable in ethics. These are important considerations, since they underline the perpetual moral task of being humble. *There is no end to the endless tinkering of our moral life*.

A boy looks up and sees a golden gift of chance

To prove his worth

And make the best of what might seem a dire circumstance

Onward and onward the slow and steady climb

Task upon task that can lift him to the summit over time

You got to take whatever road's at your feet

You got to make whatever progress you can

Although the map you hold is far from complete

You got to take whatever road's at your feet

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