(so the obligation is not just one of charity). The world would be worse if people ceased to feel that obligation, meaning, again, that they feel the pressure towards concern, unease at their own indifference, admiration for those who do more, and even guilt at the smallness of their own natures. It is uncomfortable that these things are so, but they are.

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REPLY TO SIMON BLACKBURN

I am grateful to Simon Blackburn for the attention he has paid to my book, particularly since he evidently found it a tiring business to extract the thought from the style. He is not the only critic to have mentioned this difficulty, and I must accept that the writing is excessively compressed. I do not think that I have, exactly, "a fear of the obvious" (that unterrifying thing), but I do have a dislike of labouring it. One motive for not doing so is mere politeness; if the pursuit of politeness issues in the inconsiderateness of requiring the reader to work unnecessarily, then all the more there has been a failure, and I very much regret it.

There are some more questions here, however, of the way in which a philosophical writer conceives his or her relations to the reader. In his own recent book,[1] Blackburn quotes with approval Quintilian's injunction to write "so that you cannot be misunderstood". Up to a point, this is good advice, but taken too literally it represents fantasy; indeed, it is not determinate advice at all. By whom must one guard against being misunderstood? Who is Quintilian's reader? Anyone who has marked an examination paper will know that anything can be misunderstood by someone. Quintilian's reader, then, will have to satisfy some minimum conditions of attention, intelligence, seriousness, shared perception, and knowledge. But *that* reader will also have thoughts of his own, ways of understanding which will make something out of the writing different from anything the writer thought of putting into it. As it used to say on packets of cake mix, he will add his own egg. The arrogance of compression – and I concede that there is such a thing, as there is of irony – lies in its aspect of wilful concealment. But compression can also acknowledge a necessary incompleteness, an acceptance that the reader's thought cannot simply be dominated, and that his work in making something of this writing is also that of making something for himself.

Blackburn has helpfully offered an historical location for the set of problems in moral philosophy that particularly concern me, but I do not think that he has brought out what, for me, is an important line to them. The main reason for which I have emphasized 'thick' ethical concepts and, at the same time, problems variously associated with relativism, is a concern for what may be called the 'ethnographic stance', the situation of an observer who has an imaginative understanding of a society's ethical concepts and can understand its life from the inside, but does not share

those concepts. This concern does not come primarily from philosophy itself, but the fact that the ethnographic stance is possible seems to me very important for moral philoso. nl., . That stance combines two things. First, it understands from the inside a conceptual system in which ethical concepts are integrally related to modes of explanation and description. Second, it is conscious that there are alternatives to any such system, that there is a great deal of ethical variety.

Moral philosophy has not been particularly good at holding on to both these things at once. Wittgensteinian writers say a lot about the first, the matter of ethical concepts as part of a way of life. But they are extremely weak on the second matter, to the extent that they can equate the 'form of life' that is represented by some particular set of ethical conceptions with the 'form of life' outside which we no longer understand other beings.[2] Prescriptivism, on the other hand, (at least in its earlier forms) and its anti-realist relatives were well adjusted to describing ethical diversity, but very bad at giving any account of the substance of ethical life. The need to do justice to the ethnographic stance, and so to take on both these things, was my principal reason for discussing the alternatives that I chose to discuss.

It may be that so far as the semantics of ethical terms are concerned I have, under the influence of these motives, neglected possibilities that I should have considered. I am certainly conscious that I have not adequately explored the relations between thick and thin concepts, and questions of what their respective application conditions are. In particular, I have barely touched on a central question, namely how the use of thin concepts by a reflective society is related to their use of such thick concepts as they may retain or cultivate (the possibility that they should have some thick concepts is one that I explicitly allow). To that extent my treatment is incomplete and also obscure. However, I am not convinced that there is some other existing semantic option that would have helped to take things further; or that it lies, in particular, in "serious projectivism". Projectivism, of any sort, requires a world onto which the projections are projected; Blackburn's own version of such a view is no exception. As he has put it elsewhere,[3] "Values are the children of our sentiments in the sense that the full explanation of what we do when we moralize cites only the natural properties of things and natural reactions to them". This leaves open the question whether members of the linguistic community that employs a given value expression could in principle learn and apply another term that was explicitly guided simply by the 'natural properties' in question, and in his present remarks he seems to leave that question open himself. If they could always in principle use such a term, then the situation is much as it was with prescriptivism, so far as these matters are concerned (of course, the position does not have to share the other features of prescriptivism, which Blackburn rightly distinguishes). If, on the other hand, members of this community could not necessarily pick up the non-projective analogue of their value term, then we seem to arrive at the situation I have described in the book with regard to thick concepts, and we are still left with the question of how an

observer who rejects the concept is to describe its correct application by the locals. Do they, for instance, make true statements? I am not sure that, by the time we have reached this point, we are very much helped in answering this question by the model of projection itself, or by Blackburn's approach of 'quasi-realism', which is the project of explaining how those who use a projective concept can properly come to treat its application as though it were not projective.

The distinction between thick and thin concepts, and the account of their application, are philosophical matters. I also associate with the distinction, however, an historical claim, that it is a characteristic of modern society to rely on thick concepts less than traditional societies did. This historical claim is made also by Alasdair MacIntyre, as by others who have an interest in sociology and cultural anthropology. Some who have used this idea have indeed expressed a nostalgia for traditional society, but it is a misreading on Blackburn's part to suggest that I belong with them. I hoped that I had made this clear.[4] Like Charles Taylor among those who use such notions, and unlike MacIntyre, I do not see the Enlightenment as an historical disaster we should try to overcome. We should try to understand better the situation it has left us in. One demand of that situation is, I believe, that we must conduct ourselves without kinds of ethical knowledge that traditional societies provided. That does not mean that we want to go back to them.

There is one other matter on which I seem, to my regret, not to have succeeded in making my view clear. This is the question, admittedly complex, of egoism and deliberative reflection. At no point do I suggest that there is any presumption in favour of egoism with respect to the *content* of practical rationality, nor do I suppose that morality will be rational just in case it serves some antecedently defined notion of well-being. I explicitly reject those ideas at many places, but in particular in the chapter on Aristotle, where the question is the different one, whether a full and proper understanding of individual well-being must involve the ethical life: as some people prefer to put it, whether the good life has to be the moral life.[5]

What is true is that the Aristotelian reflections are, in a sense, formally egoistic, because they offer an answer to a first personal question: that which I called Socrates' question, 'How should I live?'. Such a formal egoism is inevitable if the enquiry starts from a deliberative question, since a deliberative question is in its most basic form a question about actions to be done by the person who asks it.[6] If the search is for a *practical* justification of the ethical life, from the ground up, the answer will necessarily give reasons to the agent who asked for them. That is why an account of the ethical life which is an explanation and only an explanation — one that represents morality as a socially evolved answer to a coordination problem, for instance — cannot, whatever its other merits or interest, answer this question; for the agent can always ask, 'And why does that give me a reason?'.

Of course, many agents who consider these things already accept ethical reasons. Not only do I admit that, but it is central to my account.

"At this level", as I put it (p. 48), "the question will simply be whether society should be ethically reproduced, and to that question, merely from within society, we have an answer." But I claim that we need to go beyond that level. One reason is that we are concerned not only with the question of some ethical life rather than none, but with the claims of different kinds of ethical life. Moreover, moral philosophy has been concerned with the justification of the ethical life *from the ground up*: and I discuss this concern in the deliberative mode, starting from Socrates' question, because I think that it is the most interesting and also historically the most significant way to consider it. I conclude that we cannot so justify it, and that we must inevitably treat ethical life as a going concern, but that is the conclusion and not the starting point. The supposed preoccupation with egoism is in fact simply a concern with that question of deliberative or practical justification. One might indeed discuss social explanations of morality instead, but that would be to talk about something else, something which — in my view — comes later rather than earlier.

In this connection, Blackburn rightly remarks that Hume is absent from the discussion. In many respects, Hume's work in moral philosophy is manifestly important, and indeed it matters a great deal to some of my concerns: in his treatment of free-will, for instance, and in his resolute rejection of the assumptions of what I call 'morality', in particular of the idea that there is some deep difference between virtues and other forms of admirable human quality. But for the particular interests that are central to this book, I find him less helpful, both for the reason that Blackburn mentions, that he is principally concerned with explanation, and also because I do not believe many of his explanations. If you are impressed by the problems raised by moral diversity, you do not look first to a theorist who says: "In what sense we can talk either of a *right* or a *wrong* taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty, shall be consider'd afterwards. In the mean time, it may be observ'd, that there is such a uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance" (*Treatise*, III.ii.8). Relatedly, while Hume is excellent on personal vices and failings, he lacks adequate notions with which to discuss cultural or ideological enemies of benevolence and justice: as in his writings on religion, the favourite categories of *fanaticism* and *barbarism* are simply inadequate to what we now need to understand. In these respects, my problem with Hume is not (as Blackburn seems quaintly to suggest at one point) that he fails to be an ancient thinker, but that he is not a modern one.

One thing that worries modern readers of Hume on these matters is that he seems too comfortable, and while this impression partly lies in a misunderstanding of his irony, it is not altogether a mistake. Blackburn certainly does not want us to be morally comfortable, and at the end of his remarks he makes a point which is extremely well taken, that if a moral outlook makes the well-off uncomfortably guilty, this is scarcely an objection to it. So he does not think that we should be (so to speak) comfortable *from* our moral ideas. But he does think, and explicitly says,

that as a result of our theoretical enquiries the conduct of moral practice, as of other practices, should become comfortable; so we should be comfortable *with* our moral ideas. This distinction corresponds, I take it, to one that he often makes between *deliberative* and *explanatory* reflection. He suggests that the notion of reflection that I use does not clearly separate these things.

It does not, and I do not want it to. There is, no doubt, explanatory reflection that is not at all deliberative; but there is no thorough-going and adequate deliberative reflection that does not involve itself in explanation. Good deliberative reflection is guided by a good under-standing of how things are, and very general deliberative reflection — on Socrates' question, for instance — will be good only if it is responsive to an understanding at a very general level of who we are and what we are doing. Blackburn's distinction between explanatory and deliberative reflection runs the risk of obscuring this fact. It may be significant that the word he chooses for very general ethical reflection is *moralizing*, hardly a happy term in several respects, but in particular one that does not help to remind us that those reflections should be guided by explanatory understanding.

It may be that Blackburn thinks that no distinctively *philosophical* understanding of what ethical life and ethical thinking are will make any difference to them. It is hard to see why this should be so, and all the more so if, like Blackburn and Hume, you are inclined to see philosophical understanding of our practices as rather like a form of natural explanation. Surely some natural explanations — some psycho-logical explanations, for instance — might affect our ethical conceptions and the degree to which we feel comfortable with them? I doubt whether there is any 'purely philosophical' understanding of these matters, unaffected by history, psychology and the social sciences. If there were such a thing, but it were somehow guaranteed not to upset our ethical ideas and our deliberative practices — presumably by its being a criterion of correctness in that subject that it left everything where it was — I do not see why we should have any reason to be interested in it.

NOTES

1. *Spreading the Word* (Oxford, 1984), p. v.
2. See in particular Susan Hurley, "Objectivity and Disagreement", in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (London, 1985).
3. *Spreading the Word*, p. 219, note 21. For the aims of quasi-realism, mentioned below, see in particular pp. 171 and 180.
4. At page 198, for instance, about the Enlightenment; and at page 168, where I emphasize that to say that traditional societies had more ethical knowledge than we do is not necessarily to say that they were better off.
5. It is just a mistake to say that when Mrs Foot was concerned with the justification of morality to pre-moral self-interest, she was concerned with an *Aristotelian* question. She was concerned with a sophistic question, represented for instance by Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. (I believe that she has now gone on to the Aristotelian question.)

6. In the book, and elsewhere, I have said that practical questions are "necessarily first personal". Donald Davidson has now persuaded me this is not the right way to put it: but the reasons for this do not affect the point of the present argument.

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Tractatus de universalibus
By JOHN WYCLIF (ed. Ivan J. Mueller)
Clarendon Press, 1985. xciii + 403 pp. £35.00

On Universals
By JOHN WYCLIF (tr. Anthony Kenny)
Clarendon Press, 1985. 1 + 185 pp. £25.00

The six-hundredth anniversary of Wyclif's death in 1384 has been accompanied by a flurry of Wyclif scholarship. Mueller's edition of Wyclif's *Tractatus de universalibus* with Kenny's translation is perhaps the most important of several major publications. Other major recent ones include a general biography: Louis Brewer Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif* (Chicago, 1983); a general introduction to Wyclif and his thought: Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford, 1985); two collections of papers investigating Wyclif's philosophical and theological views and his influence on later speculation, ecclesiastical reform, and the development of the English language: *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford, forthcoming), and the proceedings of the Queen's College Conference on Fourteenth-century Thought from Ockham to Wyclif, forthcoming; and an important bibliographical work: Williel R. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclif* (Toronto, 1983). The edition under review makes available for the first time an important treatise (the fifth treatise of Book I of Wyclif's *Summa de ente*) which appears to be the cornerstone of Wyclif's mature philosophical views. The process (still in the very early stages) of evaluating Wyclif as a philosopher, determining the relation between his philosophical and theological views, and placing him in the context of fourteenth-century thought generally will be greatly aided by Mueller's work.

    Volume one of the two-volume set contains the text of *De universalibus* (DU) together with Mueller's introduction and an index fontium. The introduction contains a useful discussion of DU and its relation to Wyclif's other works, an important argument for revising the accepted dating of many of Wyclif's works (Mueller dates DU to 1373−74, later than is usually supposed), and a complete description of the twenty-three manuscripts of DU. The index fontium is fairly complete — except for some fourteenth-century figures such as Bradwardine and Burley and Wyclif's references to his own works (Mueller promises to identify these latter references in a work now in preparation) — but references are often to pre-critical editions even where critical editions are available.

    Volume two contains Paul Spade's helpful essay introducing some of the views Wyclif presents in DU, and Kenny's English translation and