

JOSEP E. CORBÍ

## Samuel Beckett, Pragmatic Contradiction & the Vestiges of Practical Necessity

At a preliminary stage, we unhesitatingly claim to know what is going on in the world around us. We regard our beliefs as directly tracking those outside events.<sup>1</sup> At this point, we can hardly have an urge to reach the external world on the basis of what we may experience. There is no conceptual room for such a project given that we do not see our beliefs and experiences as constituting a realm of its own to which we are confined. This idea of our confinement behind the veil of our experience is the outcome of a process of reflection that dismisses our initial state of trust as naïve and unwarranted. This process of reflection goes back to the emergence of the New Science and its technological achievements. This process aims at uncovering the underlying structure of nature by means of well-designed experiments and the sort of evidence that they may provide. Thanks to this procedure, one expects to get rid of all prejudices and, in particular, of the medieval, teleological world-view that had been distorting our understanding of how the world is in itself, independently of us. Nature is finally conceived of as a series of causally interconnected events metaphysically independent of whatever

<sup>1</sup> David Lewis, whose approach to the sceptical argument I will consider in section 3, depicts this initial state of trust as follows: "We know a lot. I know what food penguins<sup>\*</sup> eat. I know that phones used to ring, but nowadays squeal, when someone calls up. I know that Essendon won the 1993 Grand Final. I know that there is a hand, and here is another. We have all sorts of everyday knowledge, and we have it in abundance" (David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, [74:4, 1996]: 549).

view or expectations we might have about it. One's inner experience is derivatively construed as yielding a partial, biased picture of what is going on in the world outside. The crucial epistemic issue then becomes how to go from the distorting, prejudicial inside we are placed in to the outside world thus individuated. This divide between the inner and the outer has some implications, though, for our conception of practical deliberation inasmuch as the outside is conceived of as deprived of any values and, consequently, all sources of practical normativity are circumscribed to the inside, as the received view about practical deliberation - either Humean or Kantian- assume.

Descartes' methodical doubt constitutes a serious attempt to address the epistemic issue. It dramatises the need to unmask prejudices and the indispensability of a method to make some progress in the attempt to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside. More specifically, he invites us to dismiss any belief one might have some reason to doubt and thus become certainty seekers. The sort of doubt Descartes engages in is methodical in at least two senses: firstly, because one's beliefs are to be examined in light of some methodical criteria (i.e., that one has a reason to doubt) but, secondly, because whatever conclusions one might reach by this procedure are claimed to be deprived of any existential import, that is, must be regarded as *merely* methodical, hypothetical or philosophical. *Molloy and The Unnamable* involve, however, a shift from a merely methodical or philosophical doubt to a kind of doubt that still applies methodical criteria - and, therefore, is methodical in the first sense - but has an impact on the way they lead their lives as well.<sup>2</sup> This existential import comes with *a sense of dislo-*

<sup>2</sup> It is true that both *Molloy* and *the Unnamable* often call into question the idea of a system or a method ("Where there are people, it is said, there are things. Does this mean that when you admit the former you must also admit the latter? Time will tell. The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system." (Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnam-*

*cation* insofar as the boundaries between two apparently different contexts, the philosophical and the everyday contexts, are often transgressed:

Where was I? Ah yes, from the unexceptionable order which has prevailed here up to date may I infer that such will always be the case? I may of course. But the mere fact of asking myself such a question gives me to reflect. It is in vain I tell myself that its only purpose is to stimulate the lagging discourse, this excellent explanation does not satisfy me. Can it be I am the prey of a genuine pre-occupation, of a need to know as one might say? I don't know. I'll try it another way.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we may say that Molloy and the Unnamable have a *dislocated existential concern with certainty*. In this paper, I will explore how their dislocated concern may challenge a crucial aspect of the received view about practical deliberation, namely: that all sources of normativity are to be found on the inside, given that the outside, the world as it is in itself, is deprived of all value properties. This assumption is surely at odds with the experience of practical necessity as Bernard Williams describes it:

The recognition of practical necessity must involve an understanding at once of one's own moral powers and incapacities, and of what the world permits, and the recognition of a limit which is neither simply external to the self, nor yet a product of the will, is what can lend a special authority or dignity to such decisions – something that can be heard.

*able* [New York: Grove Press, 2009] 4651). But it is also clear to me that Beckett relies on some methodical resources such as extensive use of pragmatic contradiction to articulate his narrative. ("So it was something more than a principle I abandoned, when I abandoned the equal distribution, it was a bodily need. But to suck the stones in the way I have described, not haphazard, but with method, was also I think a bodily need." [Beckett, *Three Novels*, 1158; see 354, 1552])

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 4690.

[...] in the words of Ajax before his suicide: "now I am going where my way must go."<sup>4</sup>

Ajax's must involves, as we see, the recognition of a necessity, that is, that a certain demand imposes itself upon him. This demand emerges as independent of his will, but it hardly counts as a brute imposition because it includes the recognition of the authority of such demand. It is a kind of authority that does not emanate, though, from one's own will – contrary to what a Kantian approach might recommend – but is experienced as coming both from the outside and from deeply inside<sup>5</sup>:

The experience is like being confronted with something, a law that is part of the world in which one lives [...] It is the conclusion of practical necessity, no more and no less, and it seems to come "from outside" in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside – from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others.<sup>6</sup>

This essay will explore the conditions under which we could make sense of practical necessity. Among other

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Williams, "Practical Necessity," *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 130-1.

<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, Williams' contrast between the outside and the inside cannot intelligibly be construed as equivalent to the Cartesian divide between the inner and the outer. In fact, Williams' notion of practical necessity invites a revision of the Cartesian divide, since it requires an interrelation between the properties to be perceived in the outside and what constitutes one's deeper inside that the Cartesian divide excludes. I have refrained, however, from introducing some terminological distinction in the hope that the context will suffice to determine in what sense I am employing the contrast between the outside and the inside on each particular occasion.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002) 190-1.

things, I will show how Ajax' must be connected to Molloy's attempt to visit his mother and to the need to keep talking that both Molloy and the Unnamable share. I will conclude that their dislocated pursuit of certainty reveal – among other things – how the conditions under which practical necessity can be properly experienced have been extirpated from our social and cultural context. Still, the fact that its vestiges nevertheless subsist provide some reason to regard practical necessity as a constitutive aspect of our agency. This will provide a particular sense in which the Unnamable may coherently claim: "I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I will go on."<sup>7</sup>

This piece is structured as follows: in section 1, I will briefly present Descartes' Cogito as relying on the idea that pragmatic contradictions act as deterrents of doubt. In section 2, I will introduce – following up on Barry Stroud – Kant's transcendental arguments as an expansion of Descartes' Cogito and sketch Stroud's own transcendental argument concerning value judgements. Like Descartes' Cogito, transcendental arguments approach pragmatic contradictions as deterrents of the methodical doubt. In section 3, I will argue that pragmatic contradictions, far from acting as deterrents, make knowledge vanish because uneliminated possibilities of error – however far-fetched – cannot be properly ignored once they have been mentioned and, in those circumstances, the initial knowledge claim must be withdrawn if pragmatic contradiction is to be averted. This is, according to David Lewis, the locus of the sceptical argument, and it is also a recurrent strategy in Molloy's and the Unnamable's monologues. To both preserve knowledge and avoid pragmatic contradiction, Lewis argues that the initial claim and the sceptical remark belong to two different contexts, the everyday and the philosophical contexts respectively. In fact, I will pre-

<sup>7</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 6753.

sent Molloy's and the Unnamable' sense of dislocation as associated with their continuous transgression of the boundaries between the everyday and the philosophical contexts. Still, in section 4, I will argue that these transgressions are not the product of insanity or confusion – as Lewis is bound to claim – but, on the contrary, that they shed some light on the nature of our agency and, more specifically, on the indispensability of practical necessity.

### 1. Descartes' Cogito

Descartes expects to find a stopper, a deterrent, for his methodical doubt, that is, a belief that one could not have any reason to doubt. He claims to have reached a deterrent in the Cogito because "I think but I don't exist" constitutes a pragmatic contradiction.<sup>8</sup> Pragmatic contradictions are then assumed to act as deterrents of the methodical doubt and allow us to make the corresponding claim (i.e. 'I exist') with certainty. Once in the business of seeking certainty, the question arises as to how much of our conception of the world could be retained beyond any (reason to) doubt; a second question concerns whether what could thus be preserved provides enough resources to articulate a conception of the world and, thirdly, whether we would ever be in a position to tell how our conception of the world relates to the world as it is in itself, independently of us. These three questions presuppose a metaphysical divide between our conception of the world and the world itself, between the inside and the outside, so that the epistemic endeavour must focus on how to reach the outside from within.

The epistemic project thus construed involves a process of purification of one's inside, so that one might eventually get rid of all prejudices and distortions and rely only on what one's methodical deliberative capabilities may deliver. Prejudices are thus left outside of one's true self. The externality

<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Moore's paradox goes: 'It's raining but I don't believe it is raining.'

of prejudices is enhanced, in *Molloy and The Unnamable*, by the fact that our most resilient prejudices are associated with the experience of being accused by some critical agencies. We feel threatened by them. We feel at fault while vainly vindicating our innocence. Even when no particular critical agency can be identified in the external world, the attack is surely experienced as coming from the outside, for we regard ourselves as the victims and those indeterminate agencies as the perpetrators. But they end up shaping what we see and their views are internalised as one's own.<sup>9</sup> They determine what an agent values most intimately, the way she deliberates and the method she trusts. They are, as we see, both external and internal to the agent. The agent thus feels the urge to reach a deeper inside free of them and the real outside – that is, an outside beyond them – where she imagines that her deeper self could live fearlessly.<sup>10</sup>

The agent must then start from a polluted within and must learn to separate what is strictly hers – her voice, for

<sup>9</sup> One must even anticipate the inescapability of this process of internalisation, as Lucinda relates in *Oscar and Lucinda* by Peter Carey: "'By the way they looked at me, by their perception of me, they would make me into the creature they perceived. I would feel myself becoming a lesser thing. It is the power of men.'

'But I am a man.'

'No,' she said, too impatient to let him develop his argument. 'Of *men*, men in a group, men in their certainty, men on a street corner, or in a hall. It is like a voodoo. Do you know voodoo?'" (Carey 1988: 146. See Corbí 2016 for a discussion of this issue). Similarly, the Unnamable remarks: "Who would ever think, to hear me, that I've never seen anything, never heard anything but their voices? And man, the lectures they gave me on men, before they even began trying to assimilate me to him? What I speak of, what I speak with, all comes from them" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 5184).

<sup>10</sup> I am not assuming here the existence of a true self that the agent must uncover but only that there is room for an agent to alienate some views as external to her and to acknowledge some other views and attitudes as more genuinely – or deeply – her own. Of course, any attempt to draw such a distinction will be plagued with uncertainties and confusions, but our perseverance in this hopeless attempt to discern what genuinely constitutes one's own view may lie at the heart of a certain conception of our agency.

instance – from what comes from them.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of what is strictly hers, she should find a way to access the outside of them. She needs a world to dwell in where they are absent, or at least where they do not determine the way she sees and assesses her situation, only thus would she be freed from fear. It is not enough to deny them and affirm her inner self, she must reach the outside beyond them, for there is no human life or experience without a conception of the world, that is, a world that we regard as independent of us. They have certainly inoculated within us one particular conception of the world outside. That is our starting point: the existence of this conception inextricably ingrained within us but, in some sense to be specified, alien to us. On Descartes' approach, their conception is external to an agent inasmuch as it expresses a prejudicial view, that is, a view that departs from the facts that the agent may have methodically attested: one must then start off with the Cogito and see what else a method can provide. At some point, one should enquire however about where one's confidence in the idea of a method may come from. It could also have been imposed upon the agent herself by some alien agencies. This is, in my view, what *Molloy* and *The Unnamable* suggest but Descartes fails to consider, since he quite naïvely identifies the true self with the ability to strictly apply his method, *the* method. And, yet, I will take advantage of Beckett's novels to argue that there is no room for our agency within Descartes' methodical doubt, that is, once we are placed within. More specifically, I will firstly defend the view that there is no room within Descartes' method for Ajax's must and, secondly, that *Molloy* and *The Unnamable* provide some strong rea-

<sup>11</sup> "It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, its round that I must revolve, of that I must speak, with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine, since there is no one but me, or if there are others, to whom it might belong [...]" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 4893; cf. also 5588, 5370)



son to regard this must as indispensable, that is, as a constitutive aspect of our agency.

## 2. Kant's Transcendental Arguments

To make some progress beyond the Cogito, we must rely on our deliberative capacities. Descartes' sceptical arguments call them into question but there is no way we can proceed unless we trust them. Kant did trust them. He granted that we are agents with a conception of the world and explored what we must assume as a result. Transcendental arguments are then meant to identify what we must coherently assume given that we do have a conception of the world and, like Descartes' methodical doubt, this sort of argument hinges on the idea that what we claim or believe has some enabling conditions that cannot be denied if pragmatic contradiction is to be averted:

The original security and distinctive invulnerability of "I think" will extend outward to every other proposition that must be true if 'I think' is true. This idea was richly exploited by Kant. He was interested not just in the thinking of an individual thinker, but in the possibility of thinking in general by anyone. And since he regarded even experience of a world as impossible without thought, he focused on the necessary conditions of any possible thought or experience. The overall project of his Critique of Pure Reason was to establish that there are certain concepts or ways of thinking that are necessary for thinking or experiencing anything at all. If such ways of thinking could be identified and their distinctive status established, it was then to be shown that any world we could experience and think about must be as those ways of thinking say it is.<sup>12</sup>

Kant excluded value judgements for his transcendental research because, in his view, freedom and responsibility are

<sup>12</sup> Barry Stroud, *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction: Modality and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 127-8.

not to be conceived of as elements of the world as it is in itself. He regards them as ideas of reason instead. By contrast, Stroud expands the scope of transcendental arguments to encompass value judgements as well. He argues that the content of our evaluative judgements cannot be coherently individuated without ascribing evaluative properties to the world as it is in itself, independently of us. Besides, evaluative judgements are rather pervasive, since they are involved in our ability to act for a reason and, therefore, are constitutive of our self-image as deliberative agents.<sup>13</sup> Hence, insofar as we regard ourselves as agents who act for reasons, we must assume that our value judgements are correct or incorrect independently of what any particular person – or group – might think. Stroud concludes that we cannot coherently deny that the world possesses evaluative properties and this calls into question subjectivist views about value insofar as they cannot be asserted without excluding our capacity to act for reasons that they, in turn, presuppose.<sup>14</sup>

We can now go back to Williams' notion of practical necessity. The experience of practical necessity presupposes a world we confront ("The experience is like being confronted with something, a law that is part of the world in which one lives...") and makes certain demands on us ("now I am going where my way must go"). It seems then that the experience of practical necessity – Ajax's must – cannot be individuated but on the assumption that there are values in

<sup>13</sup> "Attending to our evaluative judgements and practices as they actually are leaves us unable to see them all together from a position that somehow reveals their relation to an independent world in which none of them hold. The combination of the irreducibility, the indispensability, and the pervasiveness of evaluative judgments defeats the attempt to reach a completely general negative metaphysical verdict about them." (Stroud, *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*, 124).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Barry Stroud, *The Quest for Reality: Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Colour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), for his case against subjectivist views regarding colour.

the world. In fact, we can regard the acknowledgement of practical necessity as a specific kind of value judgement. It follows that practical necessity can be asserted on the same metaphysical grounds as any other value judgement. I will argue, moreover, that the acknowledgement of practical necessity is an indispensable kind of value judgement.

Stroud grants a rather limited scope to transcendental arguments, though; no matter whether they concern our causal or our value judgements. In his view, they only prevent a projectivist view regarding causation or a subjectivist view regarding value from being coherently asserted, but transcendental arguments hardly entitle us to endorse a positive metaphysical verdict about values or about causal dependence, since such a manoeuvre would apparently amount to pulling a rabbit out of the hat or, in other words, to reach the world outside on the only basis of what one can find out on the inside:

We have just as much or just as little reason to accept everything we believe about the world as we had before we tried to engage in metaphysical reflection about it [...]. Since those are ways we must believe them to be. But that is not a satisfyingly positive answer to a metaphysical question about the relation between our indispensable beliefs and an independent reality. It is a mundane observation we are always in a position to make, without any metaphysical reflection. As far as we have been able to tell so far, the world is just the way we now believe it (or even must believe it) to be.<sup>15</sup>

*Molloy and The Unnamable* seem to confirm this point.

<sup>15</sup> Stroud, *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*, 143-4. I am uncertain, however, whether Stroud can coherently deny the positive metaphysical import of his transcendental argument about value. Some could easily argue that he cannot deny it without incurring the following pragmatic contradiction: "The world has values, but I don't believe it has them." Be it as it may, Stroud assumes that transcendental arguments constitute the most robust strategy to seek some comfort once we are placed within.

There is no way out once you are within and, from this inner perspective, one's preliminary trust in one's capacity to be in touch with the outside sounds naïve and distorted, but is it really so? Is not the view of ourselves as inescapably placed within a peculiar – and perhaps distorting – perspective? A trap we have fallen into at some historical point? Most elements in Beckett's narrative emphasise the inescapability of this perspective, but there are a number of details in these two novels that point in the opposite direction, as we shall see in section 4. In the following section I will argue instead that transcendental arguments are trapped within a dilemma because, if we are certainty seekers, pragmatic contradictions cannot coherently help us to preserve the metaphysical feasibility of value judgements and, therefore, of practical necessity. But if, on the contrary, we are not certainty seekers, then transcendental arguments become irrelevant because we are no longer placed within and in need of a deterrent for the methodical doubt. Let us begin with the first horn of the dilemma.

### **3. Pragmatic Contradiction and Modal Order**

In a Cartesian vein, David Lewis construes epistemology as a context where knowledge vanishes under the pressure of the sceptical argument, that is, as a context where any uneliminated possibility of error we may mention – however far-fetched – acts to defeat our knowledge claims:

For no sooner we do engage in epistemology—the systematic philosophical examination of knowledge—than we meet a compelling argument that we know next to nothing. The sceptical argument is nothing new or fancy. It is just this: it seems as if knowledge must be by definition infallible. If you claim that S knows that P, and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-P, it certainly seems as if you have granted that S does not after all know that P. To speak of fallible knowl-

edge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, *sounds* contradictory.<sup>16</sup>

To a degree, the epistemologist deliberates in her specific context like the insane or the paranoid do in their daily lives. They all see defeaters everywhere:

Maybe we do know a lot in daily life; but maybe when we look hard at our knowledge, it goes away. But only when we look at it harder than the sane ever do in daily life; only when we let our paranoid fantasies rip.<sup>17</sup>

If we are to preserve some knowledge, the conditions must be specified under which some uneliminated possibilities can properly be ignored. Lewis goes on to specify those conditions by enumerating a number of rules. Among them, the rule of attention plays a central role in the development of the sceptical argument:

When we say that a possibility *is* properly ignored, we mean exactly that: we do not mean that it *could have been* properly ignored. Accordingly, a possibility not ignored at all is *ipso facto* not properly ignored... No matter how far-fetched a certain possibility may be, no matter how properly we might have ignored it in some other context, if in *this* context we are not in fact ignoring it but attending to it, then for us now it is a relevant alternative.<sup>18</sup>

According to this rule, whenever an uneliminated possibility of error – however far-fetched – is mentioned, it can no longer be properly ignored. This rule is suggested at various points in *Molloy and The Unnamable*:

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," 549.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," 550.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," 559. Cf. Tobias Grimaltos, "Sé que P, pero no estoy seguro," *Ontology Studies* 8 (2008): 141-51, for a discussion of this rule.

But the mere fact of asking myself such a question gives me to reflect.<sup>19</sup>

The less I think the more certain I am.<sup>20</sup>

The narrator in either novel recurrently brings out possibilities that are *usually* ignored and call into question what he has just claimed:

How agreeable is to be confirmed, after a more or less long period of vacillation, in one's first impressions. Perhaps that is what tempers the pangs of death. Not that I was so conclusively, I mean, confirmed, in my first impression with regard to [...]<sup>21</sup>

However this may be, and without dwelling further on these macabre details, it is certain I was grievously mistaken in supposing that death in itself could be regarded as evidence, or even a strong presumption, in support of a preliminary life.<sup>22</sup>

The notion of evidence lies at the heart of both passages. The first passage suggests that only conclusive evidence will do. In everyday life we feel satisfied with much less than that, even in those special circumstances where we are in a reflective mood and try to check our first impressions. We must then construe the narrator as a certainty seeker, as someone who will only be content with conclusive evidence. We are dealing, though, with a rather peculiar kind of certainty seeker because his search goes beyond the boundaries of an epistemological context and permeates his daily life as well. Moreover, the second passage invites us to

<sup>19</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 4690.

<sup>20</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 184.

<sup>22</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 5494.

concede that nothing could be regarded as evidence for anything, given that not even being dead counts as evidence for a preliminary life. There are some other occasions, however, where the narrator invokes directly the idea of certainty and casts doubts on his own understanding of some fundamental epistemic concepts, like seeing:

A and C I never saw again. But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to recognise them? And am I sure I never saw them again? And what do I mean by seeing and seeing again?<sup>23</sup>

In these three passages, the narrator makes an initial assertion P that is immediately challenged by another claim of him where a far-fetched uneliminated possibility of error is mentioned. The narrator is thus forced to withdraw his initial claim if he wants to avert pragmatic contradiction, for there is no way in which all such possibilities could ultimately be eliminated:

These few general remarks to begin with. What I am to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations validated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless.<sup>24</sup>

This overall strategy, quite persistent in both novels, highlights how, for a certainty seeker (or for an epistemologist, in Lewis' terms), there is no deterrent point, no place to rest. If pragmatic contradiction served Descartes to stop the methodical doubt or Kant and Stroud to produce some transcendental arguments, Lewis and Beckett stress how pragmatic contradictions lie at the heart of the sceptical ar-

<sup>23</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 4640.

gument and can hardly not constitute a deterrent when one is looking for certainty. Any attempt to assert knowledge will be at the cost of pragmatic contradiction because there will always be some uneliminated possibilities of error that a certainty seeker cannot properly ignore. Hence, if pragmatic contradictions are to be averted—as Descartes, Kant and Stroud take for granted—then knowledge must vanish.

Moreover, I wonder whether certainty seekers could coherently have a conception of the world, for they must consider all uneliminated possibilities of error – however far-fetched – as equally relevant to their knowledge claims. But then on what basis could they distinguish between far-fetched and nearby uneliminated possibilities of error? Can they coherently preserve this contrast when doing epistemology, that is, in a context where all knowledge claims have been challenged? Should they not give up the idea of a well-ordered set of possible worlds? Should they not conceive of the world as a flat land, that is, as a place with no modality, with no well-ordered set of possibilities? But where there is no modal order, there is no world either that we can coherently confront. This is, at least, Kant's and Stroud's point of view. Transcendental arguments then face a dilemma. If we are certainty seekers, transcendental arguments cannot coherently help us to preserve the idea of a world we confront and, in particular, the metaphysical feasibility of value judgements. And if, on the contrary, we are not certainty seekers, then transcendental arguments become irrelevant because we are no longer placed within and in need of a deterrent for the methodical doubt.

Some might object, however, that Beckett's use of pragmatic contradictions typically concerns particular judgements, that is, judgments about one or another aspect of a given situation, whereas transcendental arguments have to do with general claims about what sort of property one must assume the world to have. Still, both Kant and Stroud stress that the content of a concept can only be



determined by its use in particular judgements. And, from the viewpoint of certainty seekers, no particular judgement can survive the scrutiny of uneliminated possibilities of error and, therefore, there is no way in which they could coherently have the idea of a well-ordered set of possible worlds, given that any such order – which includes the distinction between far-fetched and nearby possibilities – will rest on some particular modal judgements that could pass that scrutiny.

To avoid both the vanishing of knowledge and pragmatic contradiction, Lewis argues that “ascriptions of knowledge are subtly content-dependent, and maybe epistemology is a context that makes them go false.”<sup>25</sup> But epistemology is not a context where we can stay for ever:

The pastime of epistemology does not plunge us forevermore into its special context. We can still do a lot of proper ignoring, a lot of knowing, and a lot of true ascribing of knowledge to ourselves and others, the rest of the time.<sup>26</sup>

The sceptical argument rests on a confusion about the context where the distinct claims to knowledge are uttered. It neglects the switch from an everyday context to an epistemic one, like someone who might argue like this:

I say (1) pigs fly; (2) what I just said had fewer than three syllables (true); (3) what I just said had fewer than four syllables (false). So “less than three” does not imply “less than four”? No! The context switched midway, the semantic value of the context-dependent phrase “what I just said” switched with it. Likewise in the sceptical argument the context switched midway, and the semantic value of the context-dependent word “switched” with it.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” 550.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” 559.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” 564.

This is why the claim “[a] I know that I have hands” is true in an everyday context where the possibility of a demon is ignored, whereas “[b] I know that I am not handless and deceived” is false insofar as the possibility of an evil demon has been considered and, in virtue of the rule of attention, can no longer be ignored. We can only preserve the truth of [b] by interpreting it not so much in the sceptical context where it was actually uttered but in the everyday context where [a] was produced.<sup>28</sup> This way Lewis avoids pragmatic contradiction and preserves what we claim to know in everyday contexts. This approach can hardly explain, however, the lure that the sceptical argument has for us, given that the argument would rest on a confusion, on an unnoticed switch of contexts.<sup>29</sup>

Molloy and the Unnamable take the sceptical argument more seriously, however. A sense of dislocation accompanies our reading of their monologues. Where does this sense come from? In my view, it partly stems from the tension between, on the one hand, the fact that they present their narratives as dealing with the actual circumstances of their lives and, on the other hand, that the kind of concern that they manifest sounds only appropriate in those contexts where one is *exclusively* concerned with certainty, that is, with the need to rebut the sceptical argument. To put it another way, the pragmatic contradictions that recurrently turn up in their narratives cannot easily be dispelled as arising from an unnoticed switch of contexts, for, if I am right, the systematic transgression of the boundaries between the philosophical and the everyday contexts play a crucial role in their monologues. In fact, they point to some context quite close to our everyday life

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” 564.

<sup>29</sup> Remarkably enough, Lewis raises a rather similar objection against the fallibilist (Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” 561).

where a concern with certainty sounds inescapable.<sup>30</sup> In my view, this context has to do with the sort of fear that arises when one feels threatened by some indeterminate agencies or, more precisely, a context where one is frightened by the idea of being accused by some such agencies. This accusation isn't experienced as arbitrary, but as grounded on a mistake one has made. It is one's fault, one's lack of innocence that motivates the accusation. As a result, the voice of those indeterminate agencies become the voice of reason:

Yes, night was gathering, but the man was innocent, greatly innocent, he had nothing to fear, though he went in fear, he had nothing to fear, there was nothing they could do to him, or very little. But he can't have known it. I wouldn't know it myself, if I thought about it. Yes, he saw himself threatened, his body threatened, his reason threatened, and perhaps he was, perhaps they were, in spite of his innocence. What business has innocence here? What relation to the innumerable spirits of darkness?<sup>31</sup>

In this context, a sense of protection may be derived from an existential obsession with the pursuit of certainty: "If I make no mistake, I will be safe." Lewis could reply, however, that taking this fear to the extreme is precisely what the insane and the paranoid do. They apply to everyday contexts the kind of concern that *only* makes sense when doing epistemology. The insane and the paranoid are the unfortunate victims of a confusion. But is this the way we relate to Molloy and the Unnamable, though? Do they look like mere

<sup>30</sup> "Let your paranoid fantasies rip – CIA plots, hallucinogens in the tap water, conspiracies to deceive, old Nick himself – and soon you find that uneliminated possibilities of error are everywhere. Those possibilities are far-fetched, of course, but possibilities all the same. The bite into even our most everyday knowledge. We never have infallible knowledge." (Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," 549)

<sup>31</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 103-10.

victims of a confusion? The confusion Lewis is pointing out presupposes a clear divide between the philosophical and the everyday contexts and, yet, is it not partly the point of *Molloy and The Unnamable* to challenge the neatness of this divide? To favour a positive answer to this question, I suggest to approach Beckett's narrative as dislocated not so much with regard to our everyday life – because what our everyday life consists of is after all what we must elucidate – but relative to the received conception of our everyday life. More specifically, I will stress in the next section how Molloy's and the Unnamable's monologues may serve to challenge the dominant conceptions of practical deliberation that, far from having a merely philosophical import, permeate the way we lead our everyday lives. It will follow that in some crucial respects the boundaries between the philosophical and the everyday contexts cannot – and, therefore, must not – be kept apart.

#### 4. The Vestiges of Practical Necessity

Molloy and the Unnamable are dislocated existential certainty seekers and, as such, they are unable to recognise any practical necessity in their lives, for there is no world whose demands they could coherently confront. Still, a number of vestiges of practical necessity weave their narrative. One can see such vestiges (a) in their persistence a passion with truth,<sup>32</sup> (b) in their urge to keep talking,<sup>33</sup> (c) in the continuous complaining of the Unnamable regarding his incapacity to shape a voice that he could recognise as

<sup>32</sup> "For I always say either too much or too little, which is a terrible thing for a man with a passion for truth like mine" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 507).

<sup>33</sup> "The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue. No, I must not try to think, simply utter. Method or no method I shall have to banish them in the end, the beings, things, shapes, sounds and lights with which my haste to speak has encumbered this place. In the frenzy of utterance the concern with truth" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 4774).

properly his own<sup>34</sup> and also (d) in Molloy's resolution to go and see his mother.<sup>35</sup> I will briefly examine this last urge in the hope that it may shed some light on the role that the experience of practical necessity plays in our lives.

Molloy's travel to meet his mother is plagued with uncertainties. He is uncertain where his home town is, even though he has never left the region. He thinks he will recognise it but he is not fully convinced. Molloy looks for reasons to justify his urgency to visit his mother but he cannot find them. If he could find them, he would go and see her immediately – or so he claims.<sup>36</sup> He also describes his eagerness to visit his mother as a need. It must be a need because, otherwise, why would he take so much trouble trying to get closer to her:

I needed neither her nor anyone else, which was perhaps a slight exaggeration, for I must have needed my mother, otherwise why this frenzy of wanting to get to her.<sup>37</sup>

What is the nature of this need, however? How are we to interpret it? This need is not like a craving to smoke a ciga-

<sup>34</sup> "Is there a single word of mine in all I say? No, I have no voice, in this matter I have none. That's one of the reasons why I confused myself with Worm. But I have no reasons either, no reason, I'm like Worm, without voice or reason, I'm Worm, no, if I were Worm I wouldn't know it" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 5574).

<sup>35</sup> "But talking of the craving for a fellow let me observe that having waked between eleven o'clock and midday (I heard the angelus, recalling the incarnation, shortly after) I resolved to go and see my mother. I needed, before I could resolve to go and see that woman, reasons of an urgent nature, and with such reasons, since I did not know what to do, or where to go, it was child's play for me, the play of an only child, to fill my mind until it was rid of all other preoccupation and I seized with a trembling at the mere idea of being hindered from going there, I mean to my mother, there and then" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 201).

<sup>36</sup> "My reasons? I had forgotten them. But I knew them, I must have known them, I had only to find them again and I would sweep, with the clipped wings of necessity, to my mother. Yet, it's all easy when you know why, a mere matter of magic" (Beckett, *Three Novels*, 390; cf. also 502).

<sup>37</sup> Beckett, *Three Novels*, 502.

rette. It is not that idiosyncratic: most people tend to care about their respective mothers. Are we then dealing merely with a rather extended idiosyncratic craving? The urge to visit his mother weaves Molloy's drama, no matter how fragmented and twisted it could apparently be. We might think that his drama is limited to obtaining the proper means to achieve his goal, but how could it be a drama at all if Molloy were not attached to his goal, that is, if his life did not hang on it? Sometimes there can be a drama just because the protagonist is obsessed with a rather petty goal she cannot attain; in this case, part of the drama derives from the pettiness of her goal, that is, from the fact that her life has been reduced to such a meagre project. But, even in this case, we appeal to the contrast between petty and significant goals to make sense of the drama. And we then grant that some goals rather than others qualify as important in human life. The importance of a goal must thus emerge as a fact we are confronted with; it cannot be the product of a decision or a mere commitment on the agent's side. The experience of a drama presupposes the existence of facts like this and, therefore, of a world that makes some crucial demands upon our lives we may fail to meet.

An agent may be unable to discern such facts in a certain situation, that is, she may fail to identify the specific demands that this situation imposes upon her, the kind of response it calls for. She may even fail to see that there are some demands at all to be met. These two shortcomings are constitutive of the experience of practical necessity and the sort of opacity that it involves. The experience of practical necessity collapses, however, when we are not only occasionally unable to identify a certain demand but when we have been deprived of the conceptual resources to do so. I have argued, though, that certainty seekers are not in a position to articulate such conceptual resources and, contrary to what Stroud claims, transcendental arguments are useless to restore them, since they rest on an understand-

ing of pragmatic contradiction as a deterrent while pragmatic contradictions are the locus of the sceptical argument and block our access to a well-ranked order of possible worlds, so that the agent can no longer make sense of a world that she confronts and could impose some demands upon her.

Molloy's and the Unnamable's plight lies in the fact that they have an urge to say, to write or to see one's mother, but their existential concern with certainty has deprived them of the conceptual resources to identify the nature of their need. Only vestiges of the experience of practical necessity persist, but not the ability to acknowledge its demands. Their urges tend to be experienced as mere whims or nuisances, even though they articulate their respective dramas. And this is not only Molloy's and the Unnamable's predicament but ours as well. We too have been dispossessed of the conceptual resources required to identify our experience of practical necessity. To briefly motivate this claim, let me turn to the dominant conceptions of practical deliberation.

As we have seen, the dominant conceptions of practical deliberation assume that the world as it is in itself is deprived of any values or demands and, consequently, concede that any obligation or rule of action must spring from the inside. This holds for both Humean and Kantian approaches. Like the epistemic project to rebut the sceptical argument, their views rely on the divide between the inner and the outer, the external world and the self. The experience of practical necessity then becomes obscure or mysterious, since it constitutively involves a demand that comes from the outside. These approaches are not merely philosophical, but shape the way we deliberate in everyday life or, at least, the kind of reason we feel entitled to provide for our actions and our decisions. In fact, we are rather reluctant to recognise any experience that could really challenge them. We are inclined instead to either dismiss any such experience as

mythical or to reinterpret it in terms of the received view.

I have nevertheless taken advantage of Stroud's transcendental argument regarding value judgements to vindicate the metaphysical feasibility of the experience of practical necessity. He applies to practical issues the kind of argument that Kant developed for our knowledge of the world and concludes that our capacity to confront a world that imposes some demands upon us is an indispensable part of our agency. Quite a different issue is whether this discovery on Stroud's part allows us to go beyond the divide between the inner and the outer, for transcendental arguments rest on the fundamental contrast between our conception of the world and the world as it is in itself, independently of us. And, once this gap is opened, it is hard to see how it could be bridged as my discussion concerning Lewis' rule of attention suggests.

Still, Molly's and the Unnamable's narratives emphasise the robustness of practical necessity, its resilience despite having being dispossessed of the conceptual resources to acknowledge it. In fact, their dislocated monologues can be construed as a *reductio* of any conception of practical deliberation that confines our value judgements to the inside. Moreover, they can be interpreted as a vindication of the need to shift to a different existential – and, indeed, philosophical – context where we could restore the experience of practical necessity and thus be able to make sense of our lives. If there is a way in which the experience of practical necessity can be restored, it cannot be by appeal to pragmatic contradictions as deterrents of the methodical doubt, contrary to what Stroud's transcendental argument for value judgements aimed at. It must be by some other means, that is, by placing ourselves in a different existential context. I wonder whether this context could exist or could at least be conceived of from where we stand, but the robustness of the vestiges of practical necessity suggest that one cannot help trying, even though the notion of



trying may not fully make sense at this stage. It may rather look like a vestige of trying.

Some people might object, in the spirit of Kant and Stroud, that Beckett's narrative as a whole is not after all free from pragmatic contradiction either, since the ability to state a pragmatic contradiction presupposes that words keep their meaning. A systematic use of pragmatic contradiction nevertheless undermines the conditions under which concepts could determine their content and words their meaning. This line of objection presupposes, though, that pragmatic contradiction may act as a deterrent of the methodical doubt, so that some uneliminated possibilities of error are excluded as irrelevant. And, yet, I have argued that pragmatic contradiction cannot play this role precisely because of Lewis' rule of attention. In any event, it follows from this line of objection that, if we are able to formulate a pragmatic contradiction, it is because we are not strictly trapped within the context where the search for certainty becomes existentially inescapable. This surely speaks for the permeability of the boundaries between the philosophical and the everyday contexts, which is what I intended to defend.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this essay, I have argued that the experience of practical necessity (a) is a constitutive aspect of our agency and (b) involves, like any other value judgment, a world that we confront and that makes some demands upon us; but (c) we have been deprived of the conceptual resources to make sense of these demands and (d) transcendental arguments are hardly of any use in this respect. To motivate these four claims, I have firstly examined Stroud's attempt to articulate a transcendental argument for value judgements along the lines explored by Kant regarding causal dependence and other categories. Like Descartes' Cogito, transcendental arguments approach pragmatic contradictions as deterrents of the methodical doubt. Thus, Stroud argues that agents who

act for reasons cannot coherently deny that there are values in the world as it is itself, independently of us, for otherwise we could not individuate the content of those value judgements. Hence, the existence of such values must be affirmed if pragmatic contradiction is to be averted. At second stage, I have taken advantage of Lewis' rule of attention and Molloy's and the Unnamable's extensive use of pragmatic contradiction, to argue that pragmatic contradictions constitute the locus of the sceptical argument and could hardly serve as deterrents of the sceptical doubt. If one is in the business of seeking certainty, no uneliminated possibility of error can properly be ignored once it is mentioned; as a result, the search for certainty makes knowledge vanish if pragmatic contradiction is to be avoided, since one cannot coherently assert P and contemplate an uneliminated possibility of not-P. In other words, certainty seekers regard all uneliminated possibilities of error as equally relevant and, as we have seen, this makes it hard to see how they could make sense of a well-ordered range of possible worlds and, therefore, of the idea of a world – which both Kant and Stroud regard as necessarily modal – they are confronted with. This undermines the metaphysical conditions for the experience of practical necessity.

At this stage, I have explored Molloy's and the Unnamable's condition as dislocated certainty seekers to see whether it can shed some light on the experience of practical necessity. They both seem to be in the grip of the Cartesian project of denying any belief we may have any reason to doubt. Still, they are unable to confine their doubt to a philosophical context and their lives seem to be plagued with doubts and uncertainties. One might think, following up on Lewis, that they are victims of a confusion insofar as they bring together contexts that should be kept apart, like the philosophical and the everyday contexts. I have argued, however, that their continuous transgression of the boundaries between these two contexts serves to challenge not so

much our everyday life, but the received view about it. One aspect of this challenge is the stress on the persistence of practical necessity, even though the divide between the inner and the outer deprives us of the resources to make sense of it. This is why practical necessity does not survive as an experience we could recognise, but rather as a strange vestige whose precise nature we are unable to discern. I furthermore see the robustness of practical necessity as a *reductio* of those conceptions of practical deliberation that – like Humean and Kantian approaches – are focused on the inner as the ultimate source of value and, therefore, as an invitation to restore the conditions under which practical necessity could be acknowledged.

I have argued, though, that transcendental arguments are of scarce use in this respect. We need a shift to an existentially – and, indeed, philosophically – different context. But can we reach it or even conceive of it from where we stand? I do not know. What I do know is that we cannot give up trying, but the conditions for trying may have been undermined as well, and only its vestiges subsist.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> I am indebted to Alejandro Fontcuberta and Tobies Grimaltos for a detailed discussion of an early draft of this paper. I am also pleased to acknowledge that research for this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2013-47948-P, FFI2014-55256-REDT).