On the Skeptical 'Foundation' of Ethics

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1. Introduction

The series of essays by David Hume—"The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic"[1]—is relatively well known but has perhaps received less philosophical attention than it should receive. Fortunately, Robert McCarthy has recently considered these writings in an interesting paper, "The Sceptic's Ascent."[2] It is easy to become convinced that the essay series is by no means a marginal piece of Hume's work; on the contrary, reading these essays may lead us to appreciate some of the most fundamental aspects of Hume's conception of philosophy.[3] It is not my purpose here to question McCarthy's, or anyone else's, interpretation of the essays, since I have little to add to his presentation from a scholarly point of view. Hume is, for me, only a start-

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[1] These essays can be found in David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, vol. I: Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, eds. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (in Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, vol. 3 [Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964; reprint of the 1882 London edition; first published in 1742], chs. 15-18). Henceforth cited as *Essays*.

[2] The present article has grown out of a comment on McCarthy's paper, "The Sceptic's Ascent" (forthcoming), presented at the 29th Annual Hume Society Conference *Born for Action? Born for Reason?* (Helsinki, August 6-10, 2002). (Page numbers refer to McCarthy's manuscript.) I am grateful to Bob McCarthy and to other participants of our session at the conference; thanks are due to Bob also for the permission to quote from his unpublished paper.

[3] Given the importance of the essays from the point of view of Hume's overall philosophical concerns, I find it somewhat surprising that McCarthy gives only a couple of brief references to the *Treatise* and deliberately avoids comparing

Hume's views are relevant to more recent methodological concerns.

ing point for an investigation of the idea of "grounding" ethics (or, rather, the lack thereof). Hence, I intend to offer some to my mind interesting comparisons, recontextualizations and further developments that may highlight the relevance of Hume's views (and of McCarthy's interpretation of them) to some more recent discussions of the methodology and overall concerns of moral philosophy, or of the philosophical search for the good life.

Thus, even though my remarks will occasionally take us far away from Hume, they may serve as reminders of how certain Humean themes are well and alive in apparently non-Humean contexts. It is the position—or, better, attitude—that we find in "The Sceptic," in particular, that proves valuable in the comparative study I shall engage in; and it is McCarthy's reading of the four essays that brings this out nicely. Moreover, I should add that the present article does not, as such, constitute an argument for the (Humean) view that ethics cannot be metaphysically grounded. It is impossible to deal with various realistic construals of morality, or their anti-realistic denials, in the scope of a single article.[4] What I attempt to do is, rather, to reflect—finding help in Hume and some others—on the question of what kind of an issue the "grounding" or "foundation" of morality is. From the point of view of someone who refuses to share my conclusion, my reflections may seem question-begging. But such a charge would miss my basic point. I do not primarily think of philosophy as a project of demonstrating the truth of certain theses on the basis of indubitable premises. On the contrary, this essay purports to express a kind of metaphilosophical orientation in which skepticism, albeit

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the essays to the views propounded in the *Enquiries*. In particular, "Of the academical or sceptical Philosophy" (*Enquiry*, section XII) would have been relevant, although none of its varieties of skepticism seems to correspond exactly to the views presented in "The Sceptic" Cf. David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., eds. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975/1996; reprint of the 1777 edition); similarly, the lengthy discussion of "the sceptical and other systems of philosophy" in Book I, Part IV, of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., eds. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978/1985; originally published in 1739-40) should receive attention. In any case, detailed scholarly differentiations between the views Hume developed in various places are irrelevant to my concerns in this article.

[4] In appropriate places, I simply refer the reader to other works of mine that address this issue more substantially.

in a Humean "mitigated" sense, has a guiding role to play—without any of the catastrophic results that opponents of skepticism (more traditionally conceived) have warned about. Indeed, the "skeptical" metaphilosophical way of looking at moral philosophy and its aims and concerns that I recommend should (I hope) lead us to a more *human* way of engaging in ethical thinking.

McCarthy notes that Hume's series of essays can be read as an "ascent" from "The Epicurean" through "The Stoic" and "The Platonist" up to "The Sceptic," but persuasively argues that the essays do not constitute an ascent in the ordinary sense of the word. The ultimate result is not any positive philosophical wisdom but a skeptical insight which urges us to philosophize not by aiming at rationally established ultimate truths but in a self-critical and reflexive manner, keeping our thought "in service of action" and ordinary life, to which we should return from our trip to philosophical heights in which "air is too thin to breath" and which are, therefore, too much for our merely human understanding.[5] McCarthy carefully explains how Hume first formulates and then criticizes the Epicurean's, the Stoic's and finally the Platonist's ethical views of life. He shows that the structure of the first three essays is similar: each begins with a problem, proposes a solution ("The Stoic" and "The Platonist" also reject the solution

[5] I assume here without further argument that "The Sceptic" more or less represents Hume's own orientation, though not perhaps his views in all detail. McCarthy sets out to show that this is in a sense true but that it is also true that none of the essays, as such, contains Hume's own positive position (precisely because the message of "The Sceptic" is that no such positive philosophical knowledge is to be had). Although one might expect that "The Sceptic" would have been almost universally seen as Hume's own voice, this is not true: for example, T. H. Grose cites, in his "History of the Editions" (in Hume, *Essays*, 15-84; see 46), a biography of Hume by Burton in which "The Stoic" is argued to be the piece into which "the writer has thrown most of his heart and sympathy." Grose notes, however, that in "The Sceptic" Hume "returns to that sober and quiet English, which was not more in accordance with the immediate occasion, than with his habitual tone of thought," and implies that this essay, therefore, is closer to Hume's views than the others (p. 47). One might argue, however, that the message of "The Sceptic" differs significantly from Hume's more official position (to be found in the major works), according to which skepticism (about, say, causality or the self) is a purely philosophical exercise far removed from our ordinary concerns outside the academic life. I shall neither affirm nor deny this reading. It is very much an open question among commentators whether, and to what extent, Hume's views on the natural, instinctive beliefs of ordinary life can be compared to, say, Reid's common sense philosophy.

of the preceding essays), and ends up with the limits of the proposed solution. Thus, we can discern an ascent, a single "story of human development from simple natural pleasures to the rarified pleasures of mind and spirit" in the first three pieces; we are "drawn ever upward, from the base physical desire of the Epicurean through the active virtue of the stoic to the sophisticated wisdom of the Platonist."[6] But the ascent turns into a circle as soon as we realize that the Epicurean rejects the Platonist's ideal of contemplation as "artificial happiness."[7] Thus, we move on to the fourth and final essay, in order to find something quite different.

2. *Comparing Hume's "skepticism" with Wittgensteinian and pragmatist moral philosophy*

McCarthy perceptively summarizes what Hume tries to say in "The Sceptic" as follows:

> The others adhere to specific views of happiness, but the sceptic stands above and questions their approach. . . . The sceptic's sentiments do not incline to any particular view of happiness. Instead, they incline away from the philosophical tendency to impose particular sentiments and ideas on the whole of experience. The sceptic distrusts the philosopher's construction of universal ethical systems from her own peculiar sentiments. Unlike the other sects, then, the sceptics share no positive view, but only opposition to the reductive prejudices of other sects.[8]

It is right here that we can take up the comparisons I promised. Upon reading "The Sceptic," and McCarthy's characterization of the Humean "sceptic," one can hardly think of a more accurate description of the kind of moral philosophy some thinkers have found in the legacy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The so-called *Wittgensteinian moral philosophers* (among others, Rush Rhees, Peter Winch, D. Z. Phillips, Raimond Gaita, and Lars Hertzberg) have strikingly similarly stressed that moral problems are deeply personal problems which cannot be settled by universal philosophical theories of the good life.[9] These philosophers' approach

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[6] McCarthy, "The Sceptic's Ascent," 9.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, 10.

[9] See, for instance, Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1987); and Rush Rhees, *Moral Questions*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1999).

in ethics is as particularist and down-to-earth as the "sceptic's." They are equally skeptical about universal theoretical systems. In particular, there can, they argue, be no firmer ground than morality itself for philosophical solutions of moral dilemmas. An argument for a view like this cannot be based on any general theory of what morality essentially is or how the good life is necessarily constituted; the view may, instead, be successfully propounded (only) within a Humean-like skeptical framework which questions all rationally constructed theories that claim universal validity. Thus, the "argument" the Wittgensteinians rely on must be, in a Humean sense, skeptical, though of course *not* skeptical in the sense of denying the subject-transcending validity of ethical statements altogether.

No firmer ground than morality itself for philosophical solutions of moral dilemmas.

The "Wittgensteinian" philosophers—whose views I cannot, for obvious reasons, deal with in any detail here—reject moral skepticism,[10] nihilism and anti-realism by rejecting *all* reductive theories of ethics, i.e., any theories that tend to reduce moral values or moral behavior to something allegedly more fundamental (e.g., physical, biological, psychological, or social). They reject all standard subjectivist conceptions of value,[11] even though they are not prepared to embrace any objectivist theory according to which values (or "moral facts") "exist" in some objectively structured, independent realm of the (natural or supernatural) world, either. The Wittgensteinian approach may be interpreted (instead of any straightforward Humeanism) as an instance of quasi-Kantian transcendental reflection, with a kind of moral realism as the emerging result: our being able to hold any genuinely ethical views on anything—or, presumably, *any* views whatsoever—or to make any genuinely moral choices in our lives—or, again, any choices, since arguably all our choices have an ethical dimension—necessarily requires that certain ethical views are held by us (personally) as absolutely correct, that is, not as mere opinions, subjective atti-

[10] Insofar as the expression "moral skepticism" is used in these discussions, it does not mean the same as Hume's skepticism. Like McCarthy, I shall try to avoid the expression in what follows, in order to avoid misunderstandings.

[11] In this sense, of course, the analogy to Hume does *not* hold. The Wittgensteinian tradition in ethics by no means endorses Hume's conception of natural passions as "the only possible source of our ends," of the roots of morality lying primarily in the spectator's sentiments (cf. McCarthy, "The Sceptic's Ascent," 11). See further Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, section I.

tudes, or beliefs relative to a person or a community.[12] Yet, despite the Kantian-like argumentation structure we find in Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, the most important conclusion to be drawn resembles Hume's because of its skepticism about moral theories with universalistic aspirations, including Kant's theory. Indeed, the craving for absolute correctness in one's ethical views is *not* the craving for absoluteness of a philosophical theory. In this sense the analogy to Hume does hold, although surely we have to go beyond Hume's own theory of ethics as grounded in feelings of sympathy in order to arrive at any Wittgensteinian position worthy of the name.

In addition to neo-Wittgensteinian moral thought, Hume's position in "The Sceptic" may be compared to *pragmatism*. This comparison is readily suggested by the idea that philosophy should be a servant of this-worldly, ordinary human action instead of any other-worldly contemplation. Indeed, pragmatism offers at least as good a mediator as Wittgensteinianism between the view that morality is based on, or can be proved with reference to, some objective transcendent foundation, on the one side, and the equally problematic (and undeniably more Humean) idea that morality is a matter of arbitrary subjective sentiments or preferences, on the other.[13] The priority of our ethically loaded practices themselves can be emphasized by clearly distinguishing a pragmatic form of

[12] See here Paul Johnston, *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). For a discussion of Kant's "self-centered" ethics as one of the backgrounds of the *Weltbild* shared by Wittgenstein, some of his contemporaries and many of his followers, see Emyr Vaughan Thomas, *Wittgensteinian Values: Philosophy, Religious Belief, and Descriptivist Methodology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 76, 86-87.

[13] We might speculate that it is partly their common Humean background (in addition to the Kantian background) that unites pragmatism and Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, though further historical comparisons are not possible here. Kantian transcendental argumentation, Humean "naturalism," and the Wittgensteinian emphasis on naturally given human forms of life have been combined by P. F. Strawson in his important little book, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985). Here, Hume is presented not as a skeptic in any traditional epistemological sense but as a "naturalist" whose argumentation is similar to Kant's and Wittgenstein's to the extent that it focuses on what is given to us as the kind of beings we are. Recent scientistic forms of naturalism are, on the other hand, skeptical in the sense of eliminating such natural givens. For a different but equally relevant reading of Hume as a philosopher emphasizing the natural, ordinary human predicament, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

moral realism from stronger realisms that postulate, in some metaphysical or quasi-scientific manner, moral facts or explanatorily relevant moral properties in the world. Here, pragmatic moral realism[14] is closer to the Wittgensteinian tradition than to the more scientifically minded mainstream of recent analytically oriented discussions of moral realism: ethical judgments, again unlike mere arbitrary preferences or opinions, do in a sense claim "absolute" correctness, but their correctness cannot be determined from any imagined God's-Eye-View. The claim to correctness is inevitably context-embedded and is made *from within* our actual practices, from the agent's point of view defined by a serious, personal concern with how one should live and how one should think about the question how to live.

Claim to "absolute" correctness of moral judgments made from within *our actual practices.*

Here, in particular, pragmatist and Wittgensteinian ethics, with little explicit interaction, closely touch each other—and, if I am right, they partly touch the Humeanism we find in "The Sceptic." The very idea of morally right and wrong actions is rooted in our acting in a truly concerned way in the quite ordinary world of natural human concerns, not in some specific moral realm of being (though rightness or wrongness is not just rooted in unreasoned passions or sentiments). Moreover, pragmatists join both Wittgensteinians and Hume's "sceptic" in thinking that actual situations of moral deliberation are so irreducibly complex that it is futile to hope they could be neatly covered by an over-arching ethical theory. This complexity can, perhaps, be better described

1989/1994), 346-347. Again, it remains an open question to what extent Hume's views, as presented in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiries*, can be seen as giving up the demarcation between philosophy and common life and thus be reconciled with the naturalist-cum-pragmatist celebration of ordinariness we more clearly find in the essays (cf. also notes 3 and 5 above). For an argument to the effect that one can, within a Humean skeptical metaphilosophical framework, both maintain caution in one's philosophical endeavors and engage in a "constructive" philosophical inquiry, see Miriam McCormick, "Hume's Sceptical Metaphilosophy" (paper presented at the Hume Society Conference in Helsinki in August, 2002). This reading does not deny that Hume is a skeptic (as more strongly naturalistic readings, such as Strawson's, are supposed to do), but nor does it embrace a skepticism destructive of philosophical knowledge claims.

[14] A paradigmatic representative of what I call pragmatic moral realism is Hilary Putnam, who has repeatedly argued, largely on a pragmatist basis, for the entanglement of facts and values and for the objectivity ("humanly speaking") of moral (and other) values; see Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

by good literature than by philosophical theorization. Both realist and anti-realist metaethical *theories*, then, ought to be abandoned—skeptically—according to both pragmatists and Wittgensteinians. But also the Humean theory that reason is the slave of passions and that morality must be fully accounted for in terms of sentiments ought to be subjected to such a skeptical critique. Even pragmatism itself, or the basic skepticism about universal theories underlying the pragmatist's attitude, should not turn into a dogmatic sect; it should also be reflexively examined in order to keep it open to revision.[15]

Ethical theories should be practice-embedded.

What perhaps distinguishes my favorite pragmatist perspective from the more faithfully Wittgensteinian one is the pragmatist's unashamed willingness (on my admittedly controversial construal) to interpret the Wittgensteinian commitment to the primacy of personal moral problems in a transcendental manner, as resulting in claims about the necessary (though deeply practice-laden and thus historically changing) conditions for the possibility of morality. On my pragmatist reading, then, even Hume might (albeit quite anachronistically) be seen as a Kantian thinker in an important sense. By referring to the limits of universal philosophical systems, Hume's "sceptic" reflexively investigates the conditions of morality, though in a manner very different from Kant's ethical rigorism. I shall briefly return to this idea toward the end of this article. We may note already at this point, however, that the suggestion of interpreting pragmatism, Wittgensteinianism and Humeanism in a quasi-Kantian fashion naturally introduces something like a "philosophical theory" into our moral discourse; yet, it should be clear that for pragmatists theories are practical tools, since theories, indeed, can be among the most practical things we have. We just have to avoid turning our practically flexible theories into ossified structures that supposedly cover all instances of our ethical lives. It is, after all, also a theoretical—and in a way universal—claim that "[h]uman life is complex; some people want one thing, others another," although this claim neatly summarizes the critical attitude toward philosophical theory-construction we find in "The

[15] For a thoroughgoing discussion of pragmatic moral realism, in relation to Kantian transcendental argumentation, see Sami Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003), ch. 7.

Sceptic."[16] We cannot entirely avoid theorization in ethics, if we want to say something substantial, however particularized and contextualized, but we can keep our theorization practice-embedded, if we follow Hume and the pragmatists.

Applied philosophy is unphilosophical.

What we can avoid is the simple-minded idea that we could *first* formulate a universal ethical theory and *only then* apply it to particular cases of human life. Neither Hume's skepticism nor pragmatism commits us to such a shallow picture of "applied ethics" (which is something that Wittgensteinian thinkers, Lars Hertzberg in particular, have recently criticized, with good reason). We ought to reject the distinction between moral theories and their practical applications that seems to be presupposed by applied ethics. "The Sceptic" shows us not only how to be skeptical about universalistic tendencies in (moral) philosophy; it also shows us how important it is to avoid the misleading idea that ethics would be rendered a more concrete and humanly relevant subject by "applying" theories to particular cases of moral bewilderment. It is, indeed, hard to find any significance in the idea of "applying" philosophy, if one holds that philosophical questions and positions, insofar as they are genuinely philosophical at all, are always already in touch with human affairs, with our on-going attempt to investigate our place in the world's scheme of things.[17] This is something of which we might see Hume as reminding us.

Philosophical anthropology distinguished from "applied philosophy."

Indeed, it seems to me that Hume's view, pragmatism, and the Wittgensteinian line of thought converge in their reactions to the question of what it means to be a human being living in a metaphysically insecure world in which one simply has to act without any guarantee of success. Thus, the contributions of these traditions to contemporary moral philosophy can be brought to the fore more clearly if we recognize that they are, in the end, attempts to engage in something like philosophical anthropology rather than "applied philosophy," attempts to inquire into the "human condition" that makes morality inescapable for us, yet something that escapes systematic, universalistic philosophical theorizing and its foundationalist aims.[18]

[16] McCarthy, "The Sceptic's Ascent," 10.

[17] Cf. Sami Pihlström, "Applied Philosophy: Problems and Applications," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 13 (1999): 121-133.

[18] Cf. Sami Pihlström, "On the Concept of Philosophical Anthropology," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28 (2003): 259-285.

One way to elaborate on the view that universal theory-construction is misguided in ethics is to point out that to ask, "why be moral?"—a question we occasionally hear, not only among laymen but also among professional philosophers—is precisely to ask a wrong question, both according to pragmatism and Wittgensteinianism and, we may add, according to Humeanism, given that Hume views morality as a natural human response to certain sentiments, a response not to be called into question, or justified, by any allegedly more fundamental philosophical theory. Genuine questions have answers, or at least we have a vague idea of what an answer to a genuine question would look like. But insofar as the moral point of view we take ourselves to be committed to *is* a genuinely moral one, the question, "why be moral?," has for us no significance whatsoever, since the very asking of the question is, we may argue, an immoral act. By posing this question a person presupposes that there is something non-ethical that might function as the motivation, ground or reason for morality or fail to do so. But the point in morality itself, or the point internal to our self-understanding as moral creatures, is precisely that *there is nothing like that*, indeed, that there is no "point" for us to occupy outside morality itself. It is for this reason that morality is the most important, and the most "pointless," thing in our lives.[19] One consequence of this ultimate importance is that the pragmatist or the Wittgensteinian, willing to defend the personal absoluteness of ethical decisions, cannot really *argue* her or his case against the moral nihilist or relativist who treats moral choices as contingent, culturally contextual preferences. There is no room for further argument in terms that both parties to the debate would accept. The nihilist would require a non-ethical justification of morality (which s/he finds impossible to provide), whereas the pragmatist-cum-Wittgensteinian insists that there can be no such justification and that it is already morally suspicious even to require anything like that. We have here a nice example of the way in which argumentative results cannot always be achieved in vital human issues. Again, this is something we may also be led to appreciate through a study of "The Sceptic."

[19] Cf. here Iris Murdoch's essays reprinted in her *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999; first published 1997).

Does this mean that the moral nihilist or the relativist wins on the meta-level and that, given the impossibility of conclusive arguments, morality is after all a matter of arbitrary preferences? This is a serious challenge, but not, I think, a damaging one (although it *may* bring us closer to Hume's position than the Wittgensteinians'). What we have here is a profound *moral disagreement*, since choosing moral realism is itself an ethical choice and rejecting it is, from the realist's point of view, an immoral one. Pragmatic, anti-foundationalist and anti-universalist moral realism was never intended to eliminate such moral disagreements but to make sense of their seriousness. This applies to the meta-level disagreements between realism and its opposites as directly as it applies to our "first-order" moral disagreements. The nihilist's challenge ought (this is an ethical "ought"!) to be faced by means of a serious ethical concern of how to live and think, not by means of any imagined theoretical (neutral, abstract, non-ethical, non-committed) maneuver.[20]

Such a concern will not, however, remove the challenge it responds to. As our morality is utterly *fragile*,[21] there is a deep truth in the moral skeptic's position (see section 3 below). Our life might take such unhappy turns that our moral identity would be torn into pieces—that we would be led to give up moral life altogether and to adopt some sort of cynicism or nihilism instead. Full recognition of the pointlessness of the virtuous life (externally considered) and the impossibility of justifying morality on non-ethical grounds requires that we acknowledge this basic fragility that belongs to our human condition. Recognizing moral fragility is what it means to take seriously the resolute anti-foundationalism that belongs to any full-fledged pragmatist conception of human practices.[22] Our identities, or whatever is most precious to us, can, as David Wisdo observes (inspired not only by Wittgenstein but by Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, among others), be put at risk by evil and suffering; morality, like religious faith, is a "vulnerable

[20] See, e.g., D. Z. Phillips's "Introduction" to Rhees, *Moral Questions*.

[21] See David Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), ch. 6.

[22] The term, "fragility," is my favorite alternative to Hume's "scepticism," which may sound too much like the more nihilistic "moral skepticism" contemporary philosophers often speak about. Fragility may also be understood as a philosophical-anthropological concept, depicting a central feature of ethically significant human (forms of) life.

gift" we cannot take for granted.[23] A situation in which morality had ceased to be a significant thing for us would undoubtedly redefine "us" in such a radical way that it would not be easy *for us*, in the cultural and historical situation(s) in which we now contingently find ourselves, to recognize ourselves (or our possible future selves) in those changed circumstances. Still, our pursuit of moral life may gradually be fragmentated by unexpected external factors. Our very conception of ourselves as rational, reflective self-legislators may fragmentate.

This is, in my view, one thing we may learn from the Wittgensteinians and from Hume's "The Sceptic," namely, that morality is fragile and we may lose our faith in it. This is partly because there are real-life cases—and they are not rare—in which morality requires us to do what we consider morally *wrong* to do. Universal theories, such as Kantian deontology or utilitarianism, leave us helpless in such cases. For instance, I may be absolutely convinced that it is wrong, under any circumstances, to kill another human being, but I may arrive at a situation in which I have a duty to kill someone who, e.g., threatens a child's life. Philosophical theory is powerless here, the Humean skeptic would surely point out. The duty to kill does not remove the wrongness of the killing, if I am genuinely committed to the ethical principle "thou shalt not kill"; I can, and should, feel remorse afterwards, even though I may have done my duty.[24] I cannot think it would be "right" to kill someone even if it saved many more lives, unless I am corrupted and not at all serious in my conviction about the wrongness of killing. Philosophical theories that aim at justifying wrong actions because of the greater good they produce are morally suspect at best and simply wicked at worst.[25] Cases in which there is no right thing to do but only, tragically, bad alternatives are not unusual in our lives, although some of those cases are of course more significant than others. (Moral seriousness comes in degrees, we might say.) It is easy to feel that a practice or

[23] Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief*, 8, 101.

[24] Cf. Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991), and D. Z. Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

[25] For a discussion of the problem of evil in relation to these issues (within a pragmatist framework), cf. Sami Pihlström, "On the Reality of Evil: A Jamesian Investigation," *Streams of William James* 4:2 (2002): 12-21.

institution that makes incoherent demands, by declaring a certain deed both as a duty and as a horrible thing to do, ought to be abandoned and that we should therefore give up the idea of morality as something binding or normatively action-guiding. But, once again, it is the importance of morality in our lives that leads us to these confusing situations, to our being puzzled about the possibility of having a duty to perform a morally wrong action. The possibility of experiencing something terrible (e.g., killing) as an obligation in a given complex situation, yet as a wrong thing to do regardless of the complexity of one's situation, is one of the conditions that characterizes our reflective moral experience. This skepticism, if it may be so called, far from leaving morality intellectually suspect (because no fully coherent universal theory is available), receives its compelling force from the primary importance of morality itself. If ethical obligation cannot be accounted for by means of theory, then so much worse for the theory.

Ethical obligation prior to theory.

We now begin to see what can be meant by the idea of a "skeptical foundation" of ethics. It is hard to criticize someone who gives up morality as a result of tragic experiences. The central idea here is that, as we noted, the moral identity of any given person is fundamentally vulnerable. Neither the Epicurean, the Stoic, nor the Platonist is permanently protected against forces that may make her/his ethical commitment to the pursuit of a good life a personal impossibility for her/him. This is what the skeptic perceives. The reasons for one's losing one's faith may be quite similar in the cases of morality and religion: the full realization of all the evil in the world, the apparently unnecessary suffering not prevented, mortality as the unavoidable condition of any living creature. In neither case does the loss of faith normally result from one's becoming convinced by some particular philosophical argument—by the moral nihilist's argument to the effect that objective values are "queer" and cannot exist in nature, in the ethical case, or by the atheist's argument to the effect that there are no good reasons to believe in God and that the problem of evil renders theism incoherent, in the religious case.[26] Instead of theoretical arguments, what is at issue is a profound change in the person's life

[26] A paradigm case of someone who develops both lines of argument is J. L. Mackie: see his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) and *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

and her/his understanding of that life, its meanings and possibilities. Philosophical arguments, or purely intellectual considerations in general, may in some cases constitute one important factor in the emergence of such a change, but usually their role seems to be limited. (This, again, takes us close to the insights defended by Hume's "sceptic.") And of course there are cases in which a moral (or religious) enthusiast will *not* lose her/his faith, whatever happens. There are cases in which people in desperate circumstances—say, in a concentration camp, awaiting their deaths—act virtuously, without any hope for rewards, without any external goal or purpose, hence "pointlessly," yet justly and honorably. Again, the skeptic wins here, for in such cases the purely intellectual, theoretical perspective would have led to a rejection of morality.

There is for humans no logical space for neutral amorality.

The fragility and contingency of our ethical lives is something we should simply acknowledge and pay respect to, as there is no guarantee, philosophical or otherwise, that morality will forever remain important for us. "The Sceptic" (or the entire series of essays) can, in my view, be included in the works of Western thought that, against mainstream moral philosophy, try to acknowledge this need of acknowledgment without guarantee. If morality does not remain important for us, then our lives *should* be judged in moral terms, but should that happen, we would no longer accept those terms as relevant for judging our lives. Yet, again, this paradoxical impossibility (and the simultaneous necessity) of judging an immoral (or rather amoral) life morally highlights rather than diminishes the importance of morality for us. One can move outside morality only by being or becoming an immoral person. There is, for us humans, no logical space for a neutral *a*morality. One can surely take a step "beyond good and evil," but one is in some sense pathological or abnormal—not a human being in a normative sense of the expression—if one does so. This, once more, adds a philosophical-anthropological element to our metaethical discussion: it is part of the human condition, normatively rather than purely descriptively viewed, to be committed to morality—not for the sake of any non-moral purpose (or on the grounds of a foundationalist argument allegedly legitimizing moral knowledge), not because of any supposedly more fundamental philosophical theory which justifies morality, but in the framework of a thoroughgoing skepticism directed at all such

theories. Such a framework makes our fragile commitment to morality all the more serious, or, better, makes morality itself possible as a serious human enterprise. In a word, a skeptical attitude to ready-made philosophical answers to the deepest questions about the nature of good life affirms the fundamental importance of one's own personal concern with one's life, in the absence of any metaphysical "foundation" of morality. Postulating such a foundation supposedly more fundamental than morality itself would be truly immoral. Alternatively, we may say that it is only against the background of the fundamental (but not foundationalist) significance of morality that the skeptical attitude to moral theories receives its philosophical relevance.

These conclusions can of course be drawn from *Hume's* essays, with which we began, only with extensive extrapolation, but they may be worthwhile conclusions to draw nevertheless. I have not claimed that Hume's "The Sceptic" has had any direct influence on the development of pragmatist or neo-Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, but I have suggested that these do share important points of contact which are unhappily left out of typical ethical and metaethical discussions today.

3. The ethical relevance of skepticism

As McCarthy puts it, Hume's "ascent" in the four essays "collapses," throwing us "back at the bottom, apparently with the Epicurean insistence that we cannot transcend our nature." "All philosophical views ultimately fail."[27] In this situation, one may, as was suggested in the previous section, approach ethical issues in a pragmatist and/or Wittgensteinian manner, drawing attention to the profound personal relevance of genuine ethical problems and the vulnerability of ethical duty. Now, McCarthy concludes, "[t]his insight"—i.e., that all universalistically aimed philosophical views concerning true happiness or the value of life, such as Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Platonism, desperately fail—"*is* the sceptic's view."[28] It remains to be considered how the (Humean) skepticism we have, with some qualifications, defended, can really work in moral philosophy, helping us to "return to our merely

[27] McCarthy, "The Sceptic's Ascent," 12.

[28] *Ibid.*, 13. So the skeptic does, after all, have a "view." Is this a problem for Hume, or for the philosopher trying to philosophize without any views? (For some Wittgensteinians, perhaps?) We must leave the question open here.

human lives" in such a way that "we are not the same when we return," because our understanding both of ourselves and of the philosophical task we started with has changed.[29] Skepticism, in this sense, reminds us of the fact that "reason serves life, life does not serve reason"[30]—and this is almost identical with what was labeled "pragmatism" above. It should be no surprise that classical American pragmatists, particularly William James, found Hume (as well as the other British empiricists) among their most important predecessors. But it should be kept in mind in contemporary discussions of pragmatism that there is a significant role for skepticism to play within this tradition. It has too often been claimed that pragmatism simply casts skeptical worries aside. This is a line of thought we should resist (although this article is not the right place to venture any far-ranging hypotheses about pragmatism in general). Pragmatism, I insist, is an inherently anti-skeptical form of philosophizing only if skepticism is construed in a Cartesian (or traditionally Humean) manner as a doubting of the reality of, say, the external world, other minds, or causality.[31] It has been clear since antiquity, and should be even clearer since Hume and Wittgenstein, that this is not the only kind of skepticism there can be.

Instead of ancient skepticism, which would of course be a natural comparison, too, I shall try to say a few more words about the relation between the views of Hume's "sceptic" and the "truth in skepticism" (or the "moral of skepticism") that some recent philosophers standing close to pragmatism, particularly Stanley Cavell and (following him) Stephen Mulhall, have found not only in Wittgenstein but also in Heidegger and in the American tradition *before* pragmatism, namely, in the transcendentalism represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau (and even to some extent in Kant himself, whose influence on Wittgenstein,

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*, 14.

[31] Several scholars of pragmatism—including the present author; see my book, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998)—have too strongly emphasized the essentially anti-skeptical nature of pragmatism. The anti-skeptical interpretation has a legitimate application if restricted to epistemology and the philosophy of science; on the other hand, one of the basic points of pragmatism is that philosophical discussions should not be thus restricted but must take ethical issues into account.

Heidegger and the transcendentalists is undeniable). What I have in mind is, essentially, the following: arguing, with Cavell, that our relation to the existence of the world, including other people, is a relation to something "acknowledged," "accepted" or "received"—instead of something justified by a universal philosophical theory refuting skepticism once and for all—enables us to express the *depth* of that relation as compared to (mere) knowledge.[32] Here we arrive at a metaphilosophically skeptical-cum-pragmatist view of the *kind* of issue the "foundation" of morality (or, better, the lack thereof) is, as distinguished from any

[32] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981/1992; 1st ed. 1972), 133; also 106-107. See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 84, 241, 329 ff. Among Emerson's essays, particularly relevant here are "Experience" (1844) and "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic" (1850), in Edward Waldo Emerson (ed.), *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Ed., 12 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-04), vols. 3 (*Essays: Second Series*, 43-86) and 4 (*Representative Men*, 147-186), respectively; among Thoreau's writings, *Walden* is of course the major one. (A detailed comparison of Hume's "The Sceptic" with these classical pieces of American literature, or with the slightly more recent classics of pragmatism, lies beyond this article.) Regarding pragmatism's alleged inherent anti-skepticism, Cavell points toward a more nuanced account: "[A]s my *Claim of Reason* claims, throughout his *Investigations* Wittgenstein is in struggle with the threat of skepticism, as Emerson is .... In contrast, neither James nor Dewey seems to take the threat of skepticism seriously. This is hasty. James' treatment of the 'sick soul' [in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902] intersects with something I mean to capture in the concept of skepticism. But on James' account, it does not seem imaginable that *everyone* might be subject to this condition. That is, James perceives the condition as of a particular temperament, not as something coincident with the human as such, as if, as with the skeptical threat that concerns me, it is the necessary consequence of the gift of speech. Or shall we ... lay down definitions that distinguish skeptical pragmatists from nonskeptical pragmatists? To what end?" (Stanley Cavell, "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?," in Morris Dickstein [ed.], *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998], 72-80; see 77-78.) It has also been noted that Emerson's doctrine of "self-reliance" is part of the "*Weltbild* of self-concern" that lies behind Wittgenstein's and his followers' views on ethics and religion: cf. Vaughan Thomas, *Wittgensteinian Values*, 84-85. Regarding Emerson's relevance to the topic of skepticism, I am indebted (in addition to Cavell's writings) to an insightful (unpublished) B.A. thesis by one of my students, Heikki Kovalainen: "Minä, skeptisismi ja maailmankaikkeus: Ralph Waldo Emersonin esseiden elämänfilosofia" [I, Skepticism, and the Universe: The Philosophy of Life in the Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson] (Department of Philosophy, University of Helsinki, 2002). Up to now, Kovalainen's reading of Emerson is available only in Finnish.

"first-order" views which attempt to give detailed arguments concerning the possibility of such a foundation.

The "truth in skepticism" can be appreciated when I realize, in Cavell's words, that I sometimes have to "rest upon myself as my foundation" in my normative life.[33] There is, ultimately, no firmer ground for giving up moral nihilism (or any other view I *have to* give up in order to continue what I find a decent human life). I *just* refuse to be a nihilist (or, say, a solipsist) and *simply* acknowledge others as my neighbors requiring ethical attention. Here I am "thrown back upon myself," recognizing that there are limits to my understanding, limits that I have to draw on my own grounds.[34] I have neither Epicurean, Stoic, Platonist nor any other ready-made ethical systems at my disposal. What we seem to need in moral philosophy, instead of theoretical arguments against nihilism or solipsism (or further work in "applied ethics"), is precisely Cavellian acknowledgment. Cavell, followed by neopragmatists like Hilary Putnam, draws our attention to Wittgenstein's use of such first-person points of view as the one employed in the *Investigations*: "If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"[35] There is a sense in which this first-person emphasis is an expression of skepticism, although this is *not* the sense of skepticism that Kripke and other interpreters of Wittgenstein's rule-following discussions have had in mind.[36] Cavell stresses that Wittgenstein takes the skeptical thesis (about the world and other minds) as undeniable and argues that our relation to "the world as a whole" and to others is not one of (certain) knowing; we do not, then, *fail* in knowing these things, either.[37] *Contra* Kripke, there is no skeptical failure requiring a "solution"; the attempt to offer a solution is as misguided as the skeptic who asks for it.

The finiteness, groundlessness, and insecurity we again encounter here are key elements of our life, skeptically viewed. The

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[33] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

[34] *Ibid.*, 115.

[35] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), I, § 217. See Putnam's discussion in Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 85 ff.

[36] Cf. Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[37] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 45 ff., 241.

moral point of view, despite or rather because of its precariousness, is irreducible—it is, one might say, too important to be metaphysically accommodated. There is nothing metaphysical to be relied on as a ground of the ethical duty of acknowledging another human soul. What we have to do is to face the others' genuine otherness truly ethically—in Wittgensteinian terms, by engaging in the problematic human form of life they engage in, without *first* trying to build a theory that would establish their reality and our cognitive contact with them. Furthermore, in so doing, I ought to assume a *responsibility* for my position,[38] that is, accept my bedrock, the piece of land where my spade is turned and where I stand firm, as *mine*. Refuting moral nihilism or solipsism, or coming to know that such views are false (whatever that might mean), is not, then, something we are supposed to be able to do but actually fail to do. Once again, this might also be taken to be one of the morals that Hume's "sceptic" draws. We just have to accept our human predicament, the non-foundational and fragile nature of our life, viz., what Cavell calls the moral of skepticism. More precisely, this is not something we "have to" do but something we simply do. This non-foundationality is captured by Cavell's emphasis on acknowledging, rather than knowing, other people. Solipsism or nihilism is a very *inhuman* philosophy, but throughout *The Claim of Reason* Cavell tries to remind us that it is a most human effort to try to reject one's humanity. Inhumanity is always a human possibility. And it is a human task to acknowledge, in a way or another, (potential) inhumanity, too, in others and in oneself.

Acknowledging potential inhumanity in ourselves and others a human responsibility.

While emphasizing the profundity of the skeptical situation, Cavell by no means entirely rejects the Kantian transcendental approach to Wittgenstein (or to other writers he considers), although such an approach might seem opposed to any endorsement of the "truth in skepticism." Discussing Thoreau but alluding to Wittgenstein, he remarks that "Thoreau had the Kantian idea right": "the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological) preparation"; moreover, such *a priori* conditions of knowledge are "necessities of human nature," to be discovered experimentally and historically.[39]

[38] *Ibid.*, 268, 312.

[39] Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 95.

Our primary relation to the world is "not one of knowing it."

He also speaks about "heroic writing" (which he takes Thoreau's *Walden* to exemplify) having to "assume the conditions of language as such"[40] and about "the creation of a world by a word,"[41] which brings him close to something like linguistified transcendental idealism. His central idea of the truth in skepticism that does not signify any "failure" of our cognitive efforts is also at work in this context, captured in the slogan that our primary relation to the world is "not one of knowing it."[42] This kind of skepticism, needless to say, is very different from Cartesian methodological doubt, for instance, as well as from the kind of skepticism Hume has been taken to advance in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry* (and to which Kant, as the traditional story goes, gave a critical response).[43] "[T]he right ground of the skeptic," as Emerson puts it in his essay on Montaigne (another classical figure we might take up here but whom I must ignore), is "not at all of unbelief; not at all of universal denying, nor of universal doubting,—doubting even that he doubts; least of all of scoffing and profligate jeering at all that is stable and good."[44] Properly formulated, skepticism remains a part of life, just as it does in "The Sceptic." Exactly as Cavell has emphasized in relation to Wittgenstein (and Emerson), no solution is being offered to the so-called problem of skepticism. On the contrary, skepticism is the background against which alternative philosophical solutions to human (especially ethical) problems are to be evaluated.[45] It is only against the liberating context of "The Sceptic" that Epicurean, Stoic and Platonist views may function in a healthy way. As there are more important things in human life than knowing, or even seeking to know, what good life (or anything else) "really" is, the "sceptic's" point against the sects is that such knowledge-seeking is funda-

[40] *Ibid.*, 33.

[41] *Ibid.*, 112.

[42] *Ibid.*, 106-107, 133. The distinction between knowing and something deeper (acknowledgment, trust, certainty) might be backed up with references to Wittgenstein's project in *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

[43] I am *not* claiming, of course, that Hume did not hold a traditional (Cartesian) form of skepticism in his major works. I have merely been concerned with "The Sceptic" (and not even with that essay in a scholarly historical manner).

[44] Emerson, "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," 159.

[45] It is one element of Cavell's work to insist that there is a sense in which this also makes our skeptical predicament *tragic*. A further task would be to read Hume's writings on tragedy in the light of this insight.

mentally misguided, though significant ideas may be learned through the "ascent" to its repudiation. This is a way of making the Wittgensteinian point that it is not the actual solutions to philosophical problems that matter—because in a sense there cannot be such solutions—but it is the search for clarity itself, the philosophical activity that amounts to dissolving the ambiguities that result in those problems, that leads us to whatever (skeptical) wisdom philosophizing can produce.

Cavell's account of the truth in skepticism has recently been further developed by Stephen Mulhall through a reading of Heidegger.[46] While Mulhall is careful to note that Heidegger—as emphatically as the pragmatists, we might add—overturns the Cartesian skeptical problematic because it does not respect the essentially worldly existence of Dasein and is thus in a sense self-defeating or at least uninteresting,[47] he reads Heidegger as leading us to a deeper insight into "the true sceptic" who is "in the

[46] It might seem problematic to take up Mulhall here, because both his reading of Cavell and his (Cavellian-inspired) reading of Heidegger have been severely criticized. For example, Edward Witherspoon (in "Houses, Flowers, and Frameworks: Cavell and Mulhall on the Moral of Skepticism," *The European Journal of Philosophy* 10 [2002]: 196-208) argues that Mulhall misrepresents Cavell's central message, i.e., that our relation to the world as a whole "is not that of knowing." (Witherspoon's criticism is directed at the treatment of Cavell in Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994].) According to Witherspoon, we should not, *contra* Mulhall, postulate any "framework propositions" to get rid of (epistemic) skepticism, or any new propositional attitudes distinct from the familiar epistemic ones to account for the "not knowing" relation Cavell speaks about. There is not "something" (in skepticism) that we cannot say. More importantly, it is the notion of the world as an object, "as one thing," that we should give up (see Witherspoon, "Houses, Flowers, and Frameworks," 205). At this point, there is an obvious connection to the on-going debate on whether Wittgenstein (early or late) attempted to draw limits to language, to argue that there is something we cannot do or say: cf. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Another critic of Mulhall, Martin Gustafsson (in his review of Mulhall's *Inheritance and Originality* [2001], *The European Journal of Philosophy* 10 [2002]: 255-260), specifically questions Mulhall's view that skepticism can be used to illuminate Heidegger's views on anxiety, which seem to "go deeper" than skepticism (see 258-260). I shall shortly get back to this reading of Heidegger, but there is no need to rely on Mulhall's understanding of Heidegger (or Cavell); I am just using his work heuristically as a collection of insights that surely deserve critical scrutiny.

[47] Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 219 ff., especially 222.

grip of anxiety," or angst.[48] According to Mulhall, Heidegger's method in *Sein und Zeit* is "inflected by a specific mood long associated with philosophical scepticism," seeking to realize an "authentically sceptical phenomenology" which overcomes skepticism from within by being skeptical even about its own skepticism.[49] Dasein is both worldly (its being is being-in-the-world) and disoriented, "always already away from home."[50] It is this realization of our ineliminable insecurity (or fragility, as I called it) that may lead us to authenticity; yet, as every reader of Heidegger knows, achieving authenticity is not an easy task. As Mulhall shows, skepticism has a key role to play in our quest for authenticity, although this role may be compromised by traditional philosophical formulations of skepticism as a view or doctrine:

> [W]e might think of philosophical scepticism as differentiated from itself, as always already split between its doctrinal or systematic realization and the anxious mood of which those doctrines are the intellectual expression; its philosophical authenticity resides in its beyondness to its own self-image, in the uncanniness that speaks silently before and beyond its assertions. . . . [W]e might think of scepticism as representing an aspect of ourselves, both in its anxious receptivity to our uncanny individualization and in its intellectualized flight from that apprehension. If so, then authentic, phenomenological philosophizing must mean being prepared to acknowledge the sceptic within us—which means being prepared to give voice to the anxieties that we typically repress by projecting them outside ourselves, to let them find their natural expression, and then of course to find a way beyond those expressions, to find a way of articulating them otherwise.[51]

These words by Mulhall may serve as a summary of what is going on in "The Sceptic" as much as in *Sein und Zeit*. Yet, this is not enough; there is still an important role to be played by skepticism even if we try to go "beyond Heidegger"—a move that has probably been made by Emmanuel Lévinas more forcefully than by anyone else engaged in moral philosophy.[52] One of Lévinas's

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[48] *Ibid.*, 262-263.

[49] *Ibid.*, 264-265.

[50] *Ibid.*, 264. Mulhall notes here the deep similarity between Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's views on ordinariness.

[51] *Ibid.*, 279.

[52] Some of Lévinas's basic writings can be easily found in Seán Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). It is, however, more convenient to raise the skepticism issue through secondary literature, as this is not a scholarly study of Lévinas.

central ideas, or rather *the* central idea of his work, is that the ethical relation to the other has no theoretical grounding, is not a matter of knowledge (or any epistemic attitude), is "beyond comprehension."[53] The Lévinasian face-to-face relation to another human being is closely reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian acknowledgment of the "mystery" of another human being's subjectivity, an acknowledgment that can hardly be based on anything else than the pre-cognitive, non-metaphysical "attitude towards a soul" that Wittgenstein famously describes as something that is not based on an "opinion" that the other *has* a soul.[54] The outcome of this "skepticism," shared by Lévinas and Wittgenstein, is that ethics is not a subject about which one could theorize from a view from nowhere, universalistically, totalizingly. Ethics lies beyond ordinary factual discourse and cannot be put to words.[55] Yet, it "is" everywhere: ethics is something "lived," not something abstractly and theoretically universalized.[56] At this point, a comparison to Cavell's views is readily available: even though I cannot *know* that the other is in pain, I need to acknowledge her/his pain, her/his genuine alterity: ". . . in our relation to other persons we have to learn to acknowledge what we cannot know . . . . The end of certainty can be the beginning of trust."[57] The truth in skepticism is thus also endorsed in a Lévinasian setting, within an ethics of otherness conceived of as a "first philosophy," instead of a mere subdiscipline of philosophy in need of a metaphysical foundation.

Ethics lies beyond ordinary factual discourse.

Putnam also emphasizes, in relation to Lévinas, the "ungrounded" nature of ethics: there can be no "because," neither metaphysical nor psychological, as a grounding of ethics.[58] What ethics, for Lévinas, is fundamentally about is an unreserved,

[53] Simon Critchley, "Introduction," in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.

[54] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II, iv. For an extended discussion, see Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[55] Critchley ("Introduction," 19) compares Lévinas's saying vs. said distinction to Wittgenstein's distinction (drawn in his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics," *The Philosophical Review* 74 [1965]: 3-16) between the (seriously) nonsensical ethical discourse and ordinary factual discourse.

[56] Critchley, "Introduction," 21.

[57] *Ibid.*, 26. Critchley specifically refers to Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 89.

[58] Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in Critchley and Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 35-36.

asymmetrical offering to the other; if one asks, "why?," one is "not yet human."[59] Not even any personal epiphany can serve as the ground of the ethical;[60] there simply cannot be any ground at all. As was argued above, one has already stepped outside the sphere of the ethical, if one believes one must answer the "why be moral?" question. Moreover, this skepticism (though "skepticism" is a term Putnam avoids in this connection) itself is, and can only be, ethically motivated. The totalizing idea of justifying ethics from a "view from nowhere" can eventually only be met with "moral resistance."[61] To argue that it is faulty in some other way, in a more fundamental sense than the ethical one, would be to play the immoralist's game.

Lévinas's moral thought, and Putnam's reading of it, takes us to the border line of ethics and religion, which we shall not examine any further.[62] Suffice it to say that the Humean skeptic (just like her/his ancient, particularly Pyrrhonian, tranquillity-seeking ancestor) is perhaps a more easy-going and healthy-minded, less anxiety-driven fellow than her/his Heideggerian or Lévinasian (or Wittgensteinian or Emersonian) cousin—or James's "sick soul," for that matter. Conversely, the Humean skeptic is less responsive to a religious interpretation of our ethical insecurity and

[59] *Ibid.*, 39.

[60] *Ibid.*, 48.

[61] *Ibid.*, 50.

[62] In Putnam's case, it is not only his Jewish identity but also the Cavellian-Wittgensteinian influence that makes him responsive to Lévinasian ideas. It is another matter whether these somewhat different ways of affirming the truth in skepticism are really compatible. One might argue that, despite the profound parallels between Wittgenstein and Lévinas, the former's attachment to "self-concern" (cf. Vaughan Thomas, *Wittgensteinian Values*, ch. 3) and to the (unsayable) attempt to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis* (cf. *ibid.*, ch. 1) is fundamentally at odds with the latter's celebration of otherness which can never be totalized. Yet, even Lévinas seems to be caught in the problem framework of "self-concern" (or even solipsism, in a manner resembling Wittgenstein), because it is always *me* whose responsibility it is to acknowledge, ethically, the other: I am, asymmetrically, responsible for the other, not *vice versa*. For some remarks on this issue in relation to the topic of mortality (which is highly central in both Wittgenstein and Lévinas), see Sami Pihlström, "Death—Mine or the Other's? On the Possibility of Philosophical Thanatology," *Mortality* 6 (2001): 265-286; for a more comprehensive treatment of the problem of solipsism in relation to ethical and existential matters, see Pihlström, *Solipsism: History, Critique, and Relevance* (Acta Philosophica Tamperensia, vol. 3, Tampere: Tampere University Press, forthcoming in 2003), ch. 5.

homelessness than these other "skeptics."[63] The common point of departure of these different skeptical figures is, however, their insistence on placing an acknowledgment of our profoundly skeptical situation at the very center of our philosophical methodology. Only thus will we be able to develop a (moral) philosophy sensitive to the ineliminable limits defining our human condition—limits which, however, despite their ineliminability, do not signify any "failure" of ours. None of these skeptics, moreover, should be seen as relying on a distinction between "theoretical" and "practical" skepticism; their skepticism about the possibility of giving theoretical foundations to the pursuit of good life is, if anything, practically oriented—ethical.

A critic might suggest that I have not been careful enough to keep two quite different forms of skepticism apart. First, one may speak about skepticism regarding the kind of moral philosophy that seeks to offer a justification of ethical beliefs and practices, a justification strong enough to provide an "outsider" (i.e., someone who initially does not care about morality) with reasons to engage in moral thinking and deliberation. The second form of moral philosophy which can be skeptically viewed would be a search for a systematic account of moral thought, leading to a decision procedure which could be applied to the solving of ethical problems. This distinction may be pragmatically helpful in some contexts, but I have proposed, with the help of Hume, the Wittgensteinians, Cavell, and others, that a skeptical attitude should be adopted in both areas. The two concerns to be treated skeptically—metaphysical justification (even for "outsiders") and systematicity—are indeed closely related, though by no means identical. The systematic ethical theorist might appeal to the very systematicity of her/his approach, and to the (alleged) fact that the systematic theory yields a "decision procedure" and thus helps in solving people's problems, in her/his attempt to justify the adoption of a moral

[63] Putnam briefly compares Lévinas and Hume: they share the idea that ethics is based on our reactions to people instead of any universal principles, but Hume's way of grounding ethics in sympathy is as far from Lévinas's views as can be: "you aren't ethical at all," Putnam says, if you only feel ethically obliged to those you sympathize with ("Levinas and Judaism," 54). An ethics of sympathy, from a Lévinasian perspective, prepares ground for Holocaust, because one can easily treat unethically those one does not sympathize with, conceptualizing them as sub-humans.

perspective. If the rather multi-dimensional argumentation sketched in this paper is on the right track, these two essentially related aims, systematicity and external theoretical justification, should be treated with equal suspicion. It is because there can be no ethical decision procedure that the very idea of justifying morality from an external perspective becomes suspect, and *vice versa*.[64]

4. Concluding remarks

I have above occasionally referred to the similarities between the Humean-pragmatist-Wittgensteinian-Cavellian approach to skepticism, on the one side, and Kantian transcendental investigation, on the other. This may have sounded odd. Yet, while transcendental philosophy has, since Kant, primarily focused on the legitimation and restriction of knowledge claims, there is no reason why we could not reinterpret the transcendental project in a manner which accommodates Cavellian "acknowledgment" of the world (including other human beings) as something more primary, and "closer," than any epistemic relation between the subject and the world s/he inhabits, or Mulhall's related account of the fundamentally skeptical mood of any authentic philosophizing examining our being-in-the-world. Even Lévinas can be re-read in these terms: the other's face is, for him, "the condition of possibility for ethics."[65] If this kind of a reinterpretation of the "truth in skepticism" tradition in moral philosophy is possible, then even Hume's "sceptic" will turn out to be a qualified transcendental philosopher examining the (natural, given) limits of the human condition.[66] The

[64] Another critical suggestion at this point would be that I have failed to consider the position that there is a normative and even "universal" ethical aspect to be found in concrete historical particularity itself. Cf. Claes G. Ryn, "Universality and History: The Concrete as Normative," *Humanitas* 6:1 (1992-1993). Ryn's main thesis is that "universality should be looked for, not in abstract theoretical 'principles' or other ahistorical judgment or vision, but in concrete experience," and that "normative authority, in so far as it exists for man, resides in historical particularity." I cannot explore the similarities between Ryn's "value-centered historicism" and my own approach any further, but it seems to me that they are substantial. It is worth noting that Ryn appeals to Deweyan pragmatism (*ibid.*, section III) in developing his argument.

[65] Critchley, "Introduction," 16.

[66] For a quite different way of arguing for Hume's (qualified) Kantianism, ascribing the faculty of imagination a creative role in structuring perceptions, albeit in a naturalistic framework not fully available to Kant himself, see Ingvar Johansson, "Hume's Scottish Kantianism," *Ruch Filozoficzny* 59 (2002): 421-453.

Humean condition is the human condition[67]—down-to-earth, varied, particularistic. As Hume concludes in "The Sceptic":

> In a word, human life is more governed by fortune than by reason; it is to be regarded more as a dull pastime than as a serious occupation; and is more influenced by particular humour, than by general principles. Shall we engage ourselves in it with passion and anxiety? It is not worthy of so much concern.[68] Shall we be indifferent about what happens? We lose all the pleasure of the game by our phlegm and carelessness. While we are reasoning concerning life, life is gone; and death, though *perhaps* they receive him differently, yet treats alike the fool and the philosopher. To reduce life to exact rule and method, is commonly a painful, oft a fruitless occupation . . . .[69]

"To reduce life to exact rule and method, is commonly . . . a fruitless occupation."

Thus, when McCarthy quotes[70] Hume saying, in the opening paragraph of "The Sceptic," that the philosophers' mistake is that they "confine too much their principles, and make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations,"[71] one cannot help being reminded of Wittgenstein quoting Shakespeare: "I'll teach you differences." This warning about the universalistic tendencies of philosophy should be taken to heart even by those who are willing to examine the possibilities of a Kantian-styled response to Hume, that is, of a transcendental investigation of human experience. It is precisely such a transcendental investigation that, far from "refuting" skepticism, may arrive at a form of skepticism (in a Humean, Emersonian, Wittgensteinian, Heideggerian, Lévinasian, or Cavellian sense) as the background against which (only) a meaningful, "authentic" relation to the world, including other human beings whom we ought to take into account ethically, is possible—or, if that word is allowed, as a (non-foundationalist) "foundation" upon which any inquiry into the good life must inevitably be built.

What is more, if the reflections offered in this article are plau-

[67] This, of course, is an allusion to Quine (also sometimes read as a skeptic), whom I do not, however, regard as an ally in my (qualified) defense of Humean-Wittgensteinian-Cavellian pragmatic skepticism.

[68] It is, of course, right here that the Heideggerian or Lévinasian "skeptic" would protest. But obviously I have not claimed Hume's and Heidegger's (or Lévinas's, or Wittgenstein's) views to be identical; what I have drawn attention to is their metaphilosophical analogies.

[69] Hume, *Essays*, 231.

[70] McCarthy, "The Sceptic's Ascent," 10.

[71] Hume, *Essays*, 213.

sible, there is little sense in the requirement that this "skepticism" (if that indeed is the right term for the position I have sketched) could be argumentatively established against actual or conceivable metaphysically realistic criticisms.[72] To be committed to the view that ethics lacks metaphysical foundations is to be committed to an ethical position, or, better, an ethically loaded orientation to philosophical issues in metaethics, which *cannot*—if the commitment is made seriously—be argumentatively established. Such a commitment is, in brief, incompatible with any attempt to argue for one's position on an allegedly neutral ground, persuading someone who does not already share the same conception of the "groundlessness" of ethics, or a (meta-)ethical orientation similar enough to permit mutually enriching dialogue. Yet, this is not to say that criticism is inappropriate in ethical contexts. On the contrary, this entire essay has been highly critical of the foundationalist projects of metaphysical grounding and systematic theorizing; I have tried to let the skeptical voice be heard in order to leave *that* project aside, though, admittedly, I may not have been able to be fair enough to the "skeptic's" opponent.[73] Argumentative criticism, in ethics and elsewhere, has its limits, and there are philosophical points that can only be made by saying that they *cannot* be (neutrally) argued, as the rival position makes the very project of philosophical reflection (in this case, genuine ethical reflection and commitment) impossible. *This*, of course, is a meta-level argument, ethically structured, though hardly an argument that someone with more metaphysical aims would accept.

At the same time, maintaining a "critical" or even "transcendental" vocabulary within a philosophical framework skeptical of foundationalist theories enables us, if we set out to work in such a framework, to prevent our philosophical investigations of morality from sliding into "edifying" post-philosophical writing *à la* Ri-

[72] One might compare some of the points made above to the arguments presented in mainstream discussions of moral realism and its alternatives: see, e.g., the articles collected in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988)—a task obviously lying beyond the scope of the present undertaking.

[73] In any case, I do not believe that my failure to discuss (here) the twists and turns of various foundationalistic metaethical theories in any way harms my comparative and recontextualizing attempt to make the skeptical-cum-pragmatist case from a point of view internal to the skeptical-cum-pragmatist framework.

chard Rorty and his followers. In a word, a transcendental reinterpretation of the fundamentally skeptical framework that, as we have noticed, some of the most profound ethical thinkers of our time have seen as a necessary "foundation" of ethics, is designed to preserve moral seriousness in our affirmation of the humanly valuable truth in skepticism.