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## *Ethical (Self-)Critique*

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17.30 - 19.15

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#### B I O G R A P H Y

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#### E D I T O R I A L   N O T E

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## ETHICAL (SELF-)CRITIQUE

FABIAN FREYENHAGEN

If we grant that there can be no ethical validation that is external to our own ethical outlook, does this mean that we can only engage in internal piecemeal reflection, or could we still reflect on the whole of our outlook? In this paper I argue that the latter is possible, and that it is necessary if we face an ethical outlook that is wholly wrong.

I. When looking back at a social context such as Nazi Germany in the 1930s and '40s, one feels both a clear sense of moral condemnation, and a nagging question whether it is just the luck of a later birth that puts one in the position to condemn the outlook and actions of regime supporters, rather than to endorse them. Perhaps if one had been growing up within the authoritarian social structures of the German Empire, had experienced World War One and the turmoil that followed it, had then been affected by the economic and political crises of the Weimar Republic, and had finally been subjected to a propaganda machine and the elimination of any opposition voices, then one would have succumbed to the racist, social-Darwinist ideology and gladly signed up to the NSDAP, a lucrative role in the state apparatus, and perhaps even the war or the death camps. One might think that there is something mistaken in this speculation, since, arguably, it would not have been *we* who could have been in this earlier historical context, given that *who we are* is inextricably tied up with when we were born and the contemporary social world we inhabit, which in our case is formed, at least in part, by the historical experience of Nazism. Nonetheless, it gives us reason to pause and reflect on what resources are at our disposal to engage critically with our ethical formation and outlook, if these turned out to be morally corrupt as a whole. After all, it is a distinct possibility that our formation and outlook are completely wrong too, albeit in a different way and to a different extent than that of a member of the NSDAP in the 1930s and '40s. Perhaps future generations will look at the ways we destroy the natural environment and at the ways we leave many of us to die of poverty and easily preventable diseases as deeply wrong, and as due to a wholly corrupt ethical formation and outlook.

In response to such considerations, it might seem natural to think that what we would need, and what we would hope ethical theory to supply, is an external validation for ethical outlooks, that is, a validation which is independent of our own and any other ethical outlook. However, for various reasons, one might think that such a validation is not and perhaps cannot be available (or, even if it were available, that such a validation could not, actually, make any difference, since it would be an ‘abstract ought’, which would lack motivational power and/or be unsuitable as guidance for the inevitably concrete situations in which we act).

In this paper, I do not dispute that an external validation of our ethical formation and outlook is unavailable or unsuitable. Instead, I want to ask what other resources we have to navigate the kinds of context with which I started.

The purpose of this is two-fold: on the one hand, my sense is that the search for external validation of ethics derives much of its motivation from the thought that without it we would be entirely lost in the sorts of contexts I started with. Against this, I want to argue that we have more resources available than those hankering after external validation realise. On the other hand, I want to agree with them that a certain form of internal validation of ethics is insufficient to gain critical purchase on one’s ethical formation and outlook. The internal validation strategy I have in mind is piecemeal reflection, which is often illustrated by (a particular interpretation of) the metaphor of Neurath’s boat.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for example, McDowell writes:

‘There is an alternative [to external validation] [...]: a conception of reflection for which the appropriate image (at least for us [...]) is Neurath’s, of the mariner repairing his ship while afloat. [...] Neurathian reflection on an inherited scheme of values takes place at a standpoint within that scheme; the scheme can be altered piecemeal, but not suspended in its entirety, with a view to rebuilding from ground up’ (1998, pp. 36f).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I leave it open here whether or not Neurath meant the metaphor in the way McDowell and others use it.

<sup>2</sup> See also: ‘No particular verdict or judgment would be a sacrosanct starting point, supposedly immune to critical scrutiny, in our earning the right to claim that some such verdicts or judgements stand a chance of being true. This is not to say that we must earn that right from an initial starting position in which *all* such verdicts or judgments are suspended at once’ (1998, p. 163; emphasis in the original). Admittedly, neither in this, nor in the quotation in the main text McDowell says that the deliberation has to be piecemeal, but merely that any change

Those who deny external validation and argue for piecemeal reflection envisage that such reflection can be radical (see, for example, McDowell 1994, pp. 81f; 1998, p. 189). Indeed, according to Hursthouse, ‘the Neurathian approach’ can handle the possibility

‘[...] that our acquired ethical outlook might be all wrong. All it denies is that we could either find this out or fix up a new correct one *quickly*. For, in theory, Neurath’s boat might, over many years, become like Theseus’s ship, without a single plank of the original remaining. And then, in a manner of speaking, we, or our descendents, could look back at the ethical outlook within which we started and condemn it in retrospect as all wrong’ (Hursthouse 1999, p. 166; emphasis in the original).<sup>3</sup>

The worry I have about this proposal is that it does not seem to me to do justice to the depth of the problem. Specifically, all that piecemeal reflection comes down to is whether or not our ethical outlook is internally coherent,<sup>4</sup> and what is overlooked thereby is the possibility that it is so coherent *and all wrong*. If it were that, then the proposed method of ethical critique provides – at least speaking from within the outlook – no reason for changing it, whether slowly or quickly. Naturally, it might change anyway – only philosophical hubris can make one think that ethical outlooks merely change because of incoherence. The point is that an internally coherent ethical outlook might still be something that is morally wrong in its entirety. Thus, as important as it is to scrutinise critically each element of our ethical outlook against the background of the other elements making up this outlook, this approach would be shipwrecked if we faced a consistent, coherent ethical outlook which was morally corrupt as a whole.

As uncomfortable as it might be, Nazism – both as official doctrine and how at least some people took it up as orientation that governed

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(‘alteration’) has to be piecemeal. Still, I take it that McDowell’s view is that both have to be piecemeal. At any rate, this is the position at issue in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Hursthouse adds in a footnote that it might be that by the time the transformation has taken place, the earlier ethical outlook might have become ‘[...] completely incomprehensible [...]’ for us, ‘[...] and thereby neither right nor wrong’ (1999, p. 167 note 5). Presumably, she is picking up on the work of Williams and his claim about the truth in relativism, namely, relativism of distance. Leaving this aside, it is unclear how the claim that we cannot find out or fix up a new one quickly is compatible with the idea of moral conversion, to which at least McDowell subscribes (see 1998, pp. 102, 107). Moral conversion suggests something more sudden than what Hursthouse says is possible. I do not pursue this further here.

<sup>4</sup> Even new experiences cannot by themselves dislodge the outlook, but will be viewed through its lens and measured up against the other elements it contains. McDowell has more recently talked of perceptual experience generating indefeasible warrants (see McDowell 2011), but I do not see how this is compatible with his insistence that no verdict or judgement is immune to revision (see quotation in note 2 above).

their lives – might have presented such a coherent ethical outlook. Whatever was wrong with it was not its lack of coherence (understood to include both logical consistency and a high degree of mutual supporting relations and inferential connections among the elements). Indeed, what was problematic about it includes that it did not contain sufficient tensions to allow a challenge to arise within it. It was hermetically sealed off, at least in the way it operated in many people.<sup>5</sup> In a certain sense, then, it might have been more coherent than our ordinary ethical outlooks are, which often include inconsistencies or at least a higher number of unrelated elements. Moreover, even in the case of those adherents of Nazism whose outlook still contained tensions, these tensions tended to be such that they could be accommodated without radical change. Thus, the main character of Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, Max Aue, might by way of piecemeal reflection come to the conclusion that the extreme Nazi outlook of the SS (to which he subscribes wholeheartedly) would hang together better if its prohibition on homosexuality would be dropped, but it might well be that after this adjustment the outlook would be coherent – or at least that Max Aue would view it as such. Finally, even if I am mistaken about my historical claims about the internal coherence of Nazism, we can imagine that there might be ethical outlooks that are wholly wrong, but internally coherent. This possibility alone suggests that piecemeal reflection would leave us shipwrecked.

Here one might reply that what I am really saying is that from our different ethical outlook the ethical outlook in question – say, the one the Nazis propagated and put into practice – is all wrong, but that this is not so from within it. We are then faced by a pluralism of ethical outlooks, possibly even a pluralism of outlooks that are internally coherent but mutually incompatible with each other, and this might lead to a search for external validation, especially if the pluralism is accompanied by real practical conflicts. Moreover, if no such external validation is possible or suitable, then we have to adopt a number of other strategies to manage such pluralism and conflicts – toleration, dialogue, compromise- or consensus-building measures, self-defence, war, re-education, incarceration, or whatever else we might think of. These strategies would be political coping mechanisms, not ethical

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Arendt's – admittedly controversial – account of Eichmann as facing a total moral collapse where no one openly challenged him on the basic ethical premises of his work (not even the Jewish leaders), but only on the details of how he carried it out ([1963]/1994, esp. pp. 52, 116f, 123, 130).

validations. It is perhaps surprising how little the problem of pluralism and conflicts features within writings of Hursthouse, McDowell and others who reject external validation, but this by itself does not show that their position is mistaken. It might well be that Neurathian piecemeal reflection is all there is in terms of *ethical* validation of one's own outlook (rather than *political* coping strategies for co-existence with others or survival).

In what follows, I want to consider what other resources we can mobilise that are not external validations of the sort that Hursthouse, McDowell and others reject, but nonetheless forms of ethical validation (not just political coping strategies). I suspect that McDowell and his followers do not cast their net wide enough, and that piecemeal Neurathian reflection, in particular, needs to be supplemented by these other critical resources. In particular, I want to investigate whether there are ways to take the whole of an ethical outlook *as a whole* into view – rather than only one of its elements at a time and in relation to its other elements – and do so without recourse to external validation. This way one would not miss what I worry piecemeal reflection does miss: the possibility that there is something problematic about the outlook as a whole, which – due to its internal coherence – does not come into view when checking for how its elements fit into it.

II. Before considering a number of ways in which the whole might be critically investigated, let me address an objection that might have been nagging you from the beginning: can we even make sense of a view that is *morally corrupt as a whole* (rather than, say, only *on the whole* corrupt)? McDowell *et al.* do not seem to exclude this possibility as such, although they want to suggest that we – given that no external validation is (and can be) available or suitable – could never get our outlook as a whole into view at once, but could find out about its wrongness only one piece at a time. Yet, one might think that the very idea that an ethical outlook could be all wrong is actually itself incoherent or otherwise problematic. At the very least, some beliefs and perhaps even some ethical elements within the worldview in question will not be mistaken, but true, at least as much as we can discern the latter ourselves. Put differently, we share – the argument could run – some non-ethical and some ethical elements *even* with a coherent Nazi: for example, that 2 plus 2 is 4; that Zyklon B is poisonous for individuals and therefore to be avoided; or that the sun's warmth is good for animal life. Hence, either, we have to be mistaken about these shared



elements too (which seems implausible) or the coherent Nazi outlook is only *on the whole* wrong, not *all* wrong or *as a whole*.

In response, I would like to suggest that if we think about outlooks holistically, we can make sense of the idea that an outlook can be wholly wrong, even if it *seems* as if it contains elements that we regard as right. Thus, it is only on the surface that there appears to be agreement with the coherent Nazi that Zyklon B is poisonous for individuals and therefore to be avoided. In reality, what he means by individuals is – given the whole this element is part of – different from what we mean by it. For example, Jews might not be individuals properly speaking for him and, within his outlook, Zyklon B might not be (all things considered) bad for them (true it kills them, but this is something to be welcomed and should be furthered, not avoided); whereas individuals for us undoubtedly include people of Jewish faith or background, who deserve to be protected from exposure to Zyklon B. What about non-ethical elements, like the basic maths example above? Here too holism means that the overlap is only apparent. Emerson remarks about an ethical outlook he thought was wrong as a whole that its proponents are:

‘[...] not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four is not the real four; so that every word they say chagrin us, and we know not where to begin to set them right’ (1856, p. 48).

Once we do not think of ethical outlooks as constituted by discrete atomistic elements, the idea that a view as a whole could be wrong – because each element is embedded in relations with the other elements and thereby everything is made wrong, infected – becomes less implausible. However, an implication of admitting to this possibility is that – if Davidson is right that we cannot make a view comprehensible unless we ascribe mostly true beliefs to its holders (i.e., if he is right that we have to adopt the principle of charity in our interpretations of others) – then a wholly wrong moral view is not comprehensible to us outsiders, and, indeed, even its holder, once he or she realised this, cannot comprehend this view anymore. The key point is that the latter would not be a problem, but welcome: once people who subscribed to the view in question realised that it was wholly wrong, they would become alienated from it and even view it as incomprehensible, just as a schizophrenic patient coming out of a psychotic episode might view his psychotic beliefs as implausible or even incomprehensible. As to the former – that the outlook would be incomprehensible to those who did not share it – this would also not present a problem for my account

either, but rather suggests that only through practical engagement would we be able to begin to understand each other, since the practical engagement would change both outlooks (ours and that of the coherent Nazi).

A related objection might be made here. The problem with what I am proposing is not that there is no way of making sense of the idea that an ethical outlook is wholly wrong, but rather the problem is with the idea that any ethical outlook does or could form a coherent whole. For a start, ethical outlooks are not just about beliefs, but also about dispositions and sensitivities, which already makes it difficult to speak of coherence (although we might grant that there is a sense of coherence in relation to dispositions and sensitivities too, namely, absence of dissonance between them). More importantly, once this wider view of what constitutes an ethical outlook is accepted – as I am happy to do – the floodgates open, such that the idea of a coherent whole can no longer be sustained, for we are now considering not just what the agent currently endorses or does, but also what they would endorse or do in various and ultimately endless counterfactual scenarios, which are impossible to anticipate in full. In response, I propose to remain non-committal about what exactly it means to speak of an ethical outlook as a coherent whole, but to note that whatever it is, there are genuine phenomena of reflecting about the whole of one's outlook, not just about elements within it. Expressed by way of the Neurathian metaphor, the phenomenon is about asking about the shape of the boat, not merely about how each plank fits into it. Indeed, there are at least two related kinds of phenomenon here: asking myself how I relate to my whole outlook (whether I am committed to it in its entirety or not, whether it is expressive of the kind of person I want to be) and asking more impersonally of an outlook whether as a whole it is believable (whether it is just a house of cards or not, whether the whole thing is just a scam or not). The first of these kinds of phenomenon often arises because of encounters with others (I come back to this below); the second might arise in cases where abnormalities accumulate within a particular paradigm or viewpoint.

III. With these objections defused, let me ask what resources we have to investigate critically an outlook as a whole, and in which sense, if any, these critical resources are external to this outlook. I do not mean to produce an exhaustive list or survey, but merely to highlight a cluster of five related resources that strike me as particularly pertinent to the kinds

of context at issue. I present these resources, as much as possible, as if speaking from within the ethical outlook under scrutiny – as if we are undergoing a process of ethical *self*-critique of our wholly wrong outlook (which has the advantage that incomprehensibility of it to others would not constitute an obstacle).

Firstly, we might want to start with a commonplace: namely, that instead of just looking for internal coherence of our ethical outlook, we should also look at historically past and contemporary ethical outlooks, even or perhaps especially if they are incompatible with ours. Among other things, such an exposure to alternatives might make us see that our ethical outlook is perhaps only internally coherent because it is rather narrow and impoverished in its characterisation of human affairs, or because important parts of our society are not given a voice in shaping it (I come back to this second point below). In the case of comparison with contemporary outlooks, such reflection need not be, and might be more effective if it is not just, intellectual and theoretical. Rather, it might involve actual dialogue with an interlocutor who holds an alternative outlook, or even a practical struggle and confrontation of wills (I provide a more concrete example of this below).

When employing this first critical resource, our reflection would still be internal – we would not be completely independent of our own ethical outlook when trying to look at it in the light of historically or contemporary alternatives. We could not be so independent. Given the assumption that external validation is unavailable or unsuitable, one cannot but reflect ‘[...] from the midst of the way of thinking one is reflecting about’ (1998, p. 189).<sup>6</sup> However, we would compare not one element of it against the whole, but the whole with other wholes. The comparison would be not just about how one particular plank fits in our outlook, compared to how it fits into the alternative(s), but about the overall shapes of the boats. In a slogan, what we encounter here is *internal, but not piecemeal ethical validation*. Naturally, there is no guarantee that this will make a difference – for if someone is reasonably confident in their outlook, the mere fact that others subscribe to a different outlook need not challenge them particularly, even if the alternatives are themselves internally coherent. Nonetheless, there is also no guarantee against a change, even a radical one. Awareness of alternative views and how they hold together as (internally) coherent

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<sup>6</sup> On this point I do not disagree with McDowell. My point is rather about what reflecting from that midst permits us to get into view.

views might at least take away some of the naturalness and necessity with which one previously viewed one's outlook (I come back to this). Also, it might invoke fascination, admiration, or attraction, especially if the alternatives seem to be richer and more encompassing than one's own narrower perspective.

Secondly, we can turn to the work of Williams for a critical resource beyond piecemeal reflection. While Williams is also committed to the idea that reflection can only be from the midst of, not external to or sideways on, ethical life, he proposes to include in it what he calls the 'Critical Theory Test' (or 'Critical Theory Principle'). In a nutshell, it is the requirement '[...] that the acceptance of justification does not count if the acceptance is itself produced by the coercive power that is supposed to be justified' (2005, p. 6; see also 2002, pp. 219-32).<sup>7</sup> Somewhat generalising it, we might say that the acceptance of an ethical outlook, including judging it to be internally coherent, is not sufficient for validation, if we have reasons to believe that this acceptance (and judgement of coherence) is the outcome of the very power relations that are meant to be justified by the ethical outlook in question. Williams spells out one key presupposition of this test: 'Although it does not rely on a theory of moral truth, it does depend on a theory of error [...]', namely, that '[...] if one comes to know that the sole reason one accepts some moral claim is that somebody's power has brought it about that one accepts it, when, further, it is in their interest that one should accept it, one will have no reason to go on accepting it' (2002, pp. 230-1). Admittedly, much more would need to be said about what is meant by power here (and about how acceptance of a belief is brought about *solely* by power relations), but the test seems to me a crucial resource that we should develop and deploy.

One might think that Williams' Critical Theory Test is just a specific version of piecemeal Neurathian reflection, insofar as the view that '[...] coercion in itself cannot constitute legitimation [...]' (2002, p. 221) might be part of the worldview under scrutiny. I am unconvinced that this is so. The Test is not about checking for coherence of one element with the whole (a plank with the rest of the boat), but – if we stayed within the metaphor at all – the whole's coherence with one of its elements (the boat with one of its planks, or the keel, or perhaps the

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<sup>7</sup> I should note that Williams mainly talks about the Critical Theory Test in relation to politics and political philosophy – specifically distributive justice. Still, he admits that the '[...] schema can be generalised to deal with other moral beliefs as well' (2002, p. 231).

sea). The Test has this special status, since it embodies – at least according to Williams – ‘[...] a genuinely universal principle [...]’ (2002, p. 221). If this is so, then in so far as the outlook under scrutiny is incompatible with the Test, this outlook is wrong (and as a result, given holism, wrong as a whole). And, given that that the outlook in question is internally coherent and wholly wrong, we need to assume that it does not contain the principle that coercion in itself cannot constitute legitimation (or at least not in the sense in which we use coercion, legitimation, etc.). Hence, the Critical Theory Test is not internal. Still, this does not yet make it a form of external validation. Rather, it is an external *constraint*, and as such similar to the way McDowell (1995, p. 218; 1998, pp. 13, 35, 190, 193) thinks about first nature (human nature as the natural sciences conceive of it): it constrains what we can count as ethical validation, but is not itself a validation. Those who deny the universal principle the Test embodies are no longer in the game of validation at all. Moreover, if the Test truly embodies a universal principle, then even though it may not currently be part of the internally coherent but wholly wrong outlook under scrutiny, reflection could presumably in principle make it available.

Thirdly, we might not just want to investigate whether our acceptance of our ethical outlook is due to the very power relations it is meant to justify, but ask more generally how we came to develop this outlook and our acceptance of it – in short, we should engage in the kinds of genealogy that Nietzsche, Foucault, and others have presented to us. These tend to focus on the effects of power relations too, but might also unearth other factors in the formation of our ethical outlooks that shake our confidence in them. For example, it might suffice to shake this confidence, when the naturalness or even necessity which our outlook (or elements therein) seem to have is shown to be illusory, and the deep contingency of the formation of our outlook is revealed (notably by the kind of historical and cultural comparisons I mentioned earlier). Similarly, genealogy might make things visible in our ethical outlook which have so far been invisible because they are so habitual or constitutive that they cannot easily come into view. This approach is not a form of external validation. In many ways, it is internal: just working with the ethical outlook under scrutiny and its history. As such, it is not (or at least need not be) piecemeal. At most, one might say that in using genealogy we compare a *cluster* of beliefs and values (our current ethical outlook) with another *cluster* of elements in our worldview (beliefs about the history of this outlook, in part produced by the genealogical process).

Fourthly, we might want to assign special weight to those among us who contest the coherence and general acceptability of our ethical outlook, especially if they come from marginalised groups within our social world. Moreover, we could test whether our outlook and the social practices related to it block contestation and the possibility that friction and incoherence can arise. The first aspect in a way comes back to the first point – the commonplace about the importance of historical and cultural comparison – since one thing we might learn from history is that it is particularly the marginalised groups that championed revisions of past ethical outlooks that we now regard as essential and justified, and that we should, hence, aim to identify and strengthen those people who challenge the mainstream consensus.

Among other things, this means we should not put our faith into ideal-theoretical constructions, whether it be principles and conceptions of a just society (as Rawlsians propose to do in moral and political philosophy), or even the idea ‘[...] of a purported *phronimos* liberated from the various defects of local mentality [...]’ (as Lovibond has it; 1995, p. 118). If our social world really is wrong as a whole, then ideal-theoretical constructions are no way to avoid entanglement – for it is us, formed as we are by this world and its power relations, and bounded in our reflection and imagination by it, that build the ideal-theoretical constructions, not the members of a perfectly just society or genuine *phronimoi*.<sup>8</sup> We should take a more direct route to enable the marginalised to voice their grievances and concerns than viewing these grievances and concerns through the ideal-theoretical prism.

Admittedly, it is true that this fourth resource might be deployed as part of a piecemeal reflection, but such reflection would not suffice to get to the heart of the matter. The truly marginalised lack the vocabulary to articulate their suffering within the dominant outlook, and, hence, what is required is a more wholesale reflection and revision – say by way of a counterdiscourse – than merely piecemeal reflection and change.

Finally, we might submit our ethical outlook and worldview as a whole to a different test, namely, how it would look in the eyes of a satirist or caricaturist. Naturally, this too would be done from the midst of the outlook and worldview itself – it would be our constructing and imagining from the inside. Still, it could have a defamiliarising or distancing effect, which may lead one to abandon or change one’s ethical

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion, see Freyenhagen and Schaub 2010.

outlook, even if coherent. Sometimes, a satire or caricature brings a view into relief in a way that our confidence is shaken, to our own surprise. Something that looked normal, natural and reasonable – not least because of its coherence – may then look silly, narrow, contrived, or arbitrary. This is done, however, not by focusing on individual elements alone, but on the whole – on the *Gestalt*, if you will.

IV. It might be objected that even if these five resources are available in the absence of external validation, we have no reason to think that someone with a coherent but wholly wrong outlook would be aware of them or could take them up – if at all, they are only abstractly available, not as real options for people who inhabit a social universe where what is right is wrong and what is wrong is right.

In response, I do not wish to pretend that in such a social universe it would be easy to access these critical resources, but I do not think that it would be impossible to do so, and this is so for four reasons. Firstly, piecemeal reflection might play a role here: perhaps, made suspicious by piecemeal reflection, an agent might consider the outlook as a whole, rather than simply drop one element (say the impermissibility of homosexuality) from it. He or she might ask what it is about this whole that led to the inclusion of an element that strikes them as incoherent with the rest. In this way, they might begin to undertake a genealogical inquiry or consider alternative viewpoints, both of which could have the wider implication to cast doubt over their whole outlook and worldview. In a word, it is hard to contain reflection, and hence piecemeal reflection might lead to something more wholesale and far-reaching.

Secondly, actual engagement with other outlooks and worldviews might make an agent consider their own outlook as a whole. In Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, Max Aue, for example, is confronted with his outlook as a whole in a scene where he interviews a captured political commissar of the Red Army. Admittedly, this encounter – which is not just an intellectual one, but a confrontation of two individuals fully committed to their viewpoints, with the political commissar about to be shot for his convictions but unwavering in them – does not lead Max Aue to abandon Nazism. Still, it does force him to take his outlook as a whole into view and compare it to an alternative, and doing this could in principle lead to a wholesale change.

Thirdly, one might think that human beings have certain material needs, the dissatisfaction of which will lead to suffering, which can be mitigated but not completely silenced by being explained or justified within a coherent outlook. Even if people do not recognise directly when and where their material needs are not satisfied because cultural or social mechanisms repress such realisation, or even if they accept their suffering on the basis of some of their beliefs and values, the fact of non-satisfaction of material needs and the repression required to deal with it will show up somewhere else – often with a vengeance. In this sense, the continuing disregard of these needs will remain a source for critical questioning, even in the face of internally coherent ethical outlooks and worldviews. For example, Nazism generated such dissatisfaction of material needs, including among its strongest adherents, not least in the context of the war it brought about (think of Stalingrad or the carpet bombing of German cities). This dissatisfaction led people to question Nazism, despite its internal coherence and despite the fact that it assigned such suffering a role in its overall system. As part of such questioning people did take up, or at least could have taken up, the kind of critical resources suggested here.

Finally, it is also notable that the skills involved in the five critical resources are often developed and employed anyway – even when not pursuing (radical) critical purposes, we engage in historical studies of our own outlook, comparisons with alternative outlooks, satires or caricature, and attempts to bring people into the conversation. It might be that these skills and enquiries are supposed to be limited to ways that do not destabilise the ethical outlook one holds, but having acquired and undertaken them, they can be put to critical use too.

V. Much more would have to be said about all the issues I sketched, but let me briefly sum up. I have proposed that beyond piecemeal Neurathian reflection on our ethical outlooks, we should make use of other critical resources – historical and cultural comparisons, asking about the genesis of our (acceptance of our) ethical outlook (with particular attention paid to the role of power relation in this genesis), contestation by marginal(ised) groups, and defamiliarisation by satire or caricature. The purpose of this has been to suggest that beyond piecemeal Neurathian reflection there are other resources for ethical (self-)critique, even if we accept that we cannot have an external validation of ethics. I have also indicated four reasons why these resources might be deployed by someone who is an adherent of a



coherent but wholly wrong ethical view – not necessarily because they value radical critique as such (their coherent outlook might see no merit in that), but because reflection builds on skills and enquiries we anyway have and undertake and because reflection can be hard to contain once it has started in a piecemeal fashion, or once it has been triggered by a real confrontation with alternative outlooks or by dissatisfaction of material needs. Nothing guarantees that having the critical resources I enumerated available, we avoid having wrong, or even wholly wrong, outlooks – there is not (and cannot be) a fool-proof immunisation in ethics. Yet, we should not think that we are left empty-handed either – there are various antibodies we can mobilise.

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