

Chapter 5

Howard Mounce: Wittgensteinian Transcendent Realism?

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Howard Mounce has published books on moral philosophy (co-authored with D.Z. Phillips), Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, American Pragmatism and David Hume, and articles on a wide range of topics from Zande witchcraft to the smell of coffee, many of which express a debt to the philosophy of Wittgenstein.¹ Such a bare summary, while suggesting what is true, that Mounce is a thinker who has contributed to a variety of philosophical areas – ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of language, philosophy of religion, and so forth – would fail to indicate a surprising unifying project which becomes increasingly apparent in his writings after the book on the *Tractatus*: the attempt to show that something like the classical or transcendent realism characteristic of Western philosophy from Plato to the end of the Middle Ages is justified and is in fact the message of Wittgenstein's later writings.

The central ideas of this realism Mounce sets out in a chapter he contributed to an introduction to the philosophy of religion² in 1998. We can understand the world to the extent we do only because it has an intelligible order in which the mind shares. This order is manifest in the world but at the same time transcends it. The concepts through which the world is intelligible are manifested in the world but go beyond any particular range of instances: they are normative, determining what it is reasonable or unreasonable to think, what has sense and what doesn't. This order is already implicit in the world, it is not of our making. The intelligibility of the world, and so the possibility of truth about it, presupposes the objectivity of value. We, too, participate in this order, the nature of the human being determining the standard for human life, what we are meant to be. The intelligible order of the world is not self-explanatory but points to its source

in Mind (but not, of course, ours): it is figurative but not wrong to attribute it to the Divine Mind or God. Since we are merely part of the world, there is more to the world than we can know or understand. We have reason and because of the harmony between our nature and the intelligible order of the world we can understand it within the limits of our finite nature. Truth about the world, both the intelligible order and its manifestation in the world, is something we are subordinate to: we uncover it in various ways, but it is not accountable in terms of human capacities and attributes alone. Part of the truth is moral and religious: so moral and religious values are objective.

This was, according to Mounce, the dominant world view from Plato to the end of the Middle Ages. What characterizes the modern period from Descartes on, in an increasingly explicit way, is the attempt to account for the intelligibility of the world without recourse to transcendence, in terms of the capacities of the human being itself. Since this project is incoherent, it has had its explicit opponents and has resulted in internal tensions and contradictions in the thought of those who have tried to carry it out. This is Mounce's interest in Hume and the American Pragmatists. The theme of Mounce's Hume book³ is the tension between his empiricist inheritance, part of the modern project, and a naturalism he shares with the so-called Scottish common sense philosophers like Reid. Empiricism claims the source of our knowledge lies within us, in sense experience. Hume showed, and is sometimes taken to be sceptical about human knowledge because of this, that we cannot explain our fundamental beliefs about the world, for example in causation, in terms of sense experience alone. We never observe a causal connection, only the temporal and spatial contiguity of events. Hume is rather to be read as proposing that our sense experience is only intelligible in terms of certain fundamental beliefs which cannot be justified in terms of that experience. Natural beliefs in causation and an independent world are implanted in us and only on their basis can we reason and find our experience intelligible. The source of these beliefs lies not in our experience and activity, but rather in the world of which we are a part. The world thus transcends us and through reflecting on the givenness of the harmony between our natural beliefs and our capacities, on the one

hand, and the world we come to understand, on the other, we are drawn towards a belief in the Divine intelligence which is the ultimate source of the world's and our own intelligibility. Hume is not, then, to be read as either a sceptic about human knowledge or in relation to religious belief at least in its Deist form.

Similarly, Mounce's engagement with American Pragmatism⁴ reads Peirce as opposing the modern project while later pragmatists like Dewey and Rorty try to further it by neglecting fundamental aspects of Peirce's work. Peirce's 'Pragmatic Maxim'⁵, to the effect that meaning is determined by human practice so that if two formulations have the same application in practice they have the same meaning, might seem to make meaning and so intelligibility a product of human activity and so be part of the modern project. But such a view for Mounce would neglect the basis for Peirce's maxim. To grasp meaning is indeed to acquire a capacity which we exercise in our understanding of the world. But this is possible because objects in the world have themselves real dispositions which constitute their nature. We understand them through grasping their dispositions in dispositions of our own. Peirce here shares what Mounce calls, following Leibniz, the 'Perennial Philosophy'. The intelligibility of the world lies in law which cannot itself be explained by phenomena in the world themselves. Law shows itself in the ways objects behave: it is what can be understood as governing their movement and change. The world, in its intelligibility, is revealed as the word of the Divine Mind, the source of all intelligibility, God.⁶

For Rorty, however, the 'Pragmatic Maxim' becomes an expression of the unintelligibility of a reference beyond human practice to account for intelligibility. Descartes had bequeathed to philosophy an insoluble problem. Starting from our thoughts, how are we to secure knowledge of a world independent of them? If knowledge is to be the mirror of nature, the mind reflecting the world, we cannot, as mind, ever know that our thought reflects something independent of it. We can check one thought or representation only by referring it to another: we can never have access to a world independent of our representations. Descartes' problem is insoluble. The reso-

lution rather is to get rid of the image of knowledge which produced it. Knowledge is to be understood not as a relation between representations and an independent world, but rather as a relation between judgements. All descriptions are produced in terms of human linguistic practices which contain norms of justification for assertions. ‘Knowledge’ as ‘congruence of mind and reality’ is to be replaced by knowledge as the right, by current standards, to believe. But current standards may be opposed by others. There can be no appeal beyond these conflicting norms to an independent world to determine which are better. Where such incommensurability occurs, the resolution is simply a matter of which standards prevail and thereby become the current ones in terms of which knowledge claims are justified. But new standards, forms of linguistic practice, are always possible, and historical experience suggests that whatever we claim as ‘knowledge’ now will be replaced. We must, therefore, always hold any current knowledge claim, and the practices within which it is justified, as revisable, and so we should actively promote institutions for seeking new viewpoints.⁷

Mounce argues that Rorty’s view entails a vicious regress. For Rorty, the justification of a belief involves a potentially infinite process of reinterpretation: the process can never be halted since what is justified in terms of current standards may become unjustified in relation to standards which replace them. For Mounce, this is vicious because there is no justification if the process is endless. Justification never in fact gets underway: we should be involved in a conversation whose only point is to keep itself going.⁸ Against this infinite process, Mounce suggests that my entitlement to a belief rests not in referring it to another belief but to the way I acquired it. I am entitled to the belief ‘It is raining’ by having been outside to look. Of course, this appeal is to the norms of a practice, but these are consistent with my finding either it is or it is not raining. The norms and their associated background beliefs about the normality of conditions are not sufficient to determine truth: for that I have to actually look. Without an intelligible doubt about the normality of the situation, questions about the satisfactory nature of the justification become unintelligible.⁹ This would, however, leave it open for Rorty to suggest that such a question would arise if an al-

ternative practice with different norms were proposed, and that we do not know now that this will not occur. Mounce probably needs here some claim that the procedures he refers to embody something like Hume's 'natural belief' to which we cannot envisage alternatives.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* embodies for Mounce a species of the realism that characterized pre-modern philosophy. When the text announces that 'The world is all that is the case', 'the world' is construed as what can be stated in propositions. Reality is thinkable: what must be the nature of reality for this to be possible? There must be an isomorphism between thought, the proposition, and reality. The general form of the proposition, that it is a truth-function of elementary propositions which are logically simple, consisting only of names, corresponds to the structure of reality, that it consists of situations constructed in a logically combinatory form from elementary states of affairs consisting solely of 'objects'. Here, the 'harmony' between thought and reality is a matter of their sharing logical form. Since what can be said is propositional, what makes it possible for there to be propositions (the logical form of the proposition and of reality) is not something which can be said. It 'shows' itself in the truth-functional analysis of propositions in a perspicuous symbolism. In so far as the *Tractatus* appears to articulate this logical form in propositions, it must produce a species of nonsense. Nevertheless, such nonsense has a point. 'Logic can be stated' and 'Logic cannot be stated' equally lack sense (are not propositions having truth-falsity polarity), but the latter has a point in attempting to put a stop to utterances of the former kind (the generation of metaphysical theories).¹⁰ When that function is served, the denial, since it says nothing, becomes useless and can be discarded. Nevertheless, there *is* something shown which the propositions of the *Tractatus* illicitly try to say. What is shown is the transcendence of logical form to the world, what is the case, as its possibility, and the independence of the world in the truth-falsity polarity of any proposition. Thus, in his discussion of the *Tractatus* on solipsism, Mounce remarks that there is 'a truth behind solipsism, but it cannot be stated'. The apparent problem with his position immediately becomes clear when he then tells us what that truth is: 'The truth is not that I alone am

real but that I have a point of view on the world which is without neighbours.’¹¹

Perhaps Mounce would say that his own formulations, like the Tractarian ones, aim to prevent confusion, not to convey a storable truth. Nevertheless, when the confusions are removed, for Mounce there is communication, something is shown which we find ourselves expressing in a misleading way. It can only be *shown* in analysis of our propositions. Recently, in discussing James Conant’s and Cora Diamond’s rejection of such a reading of the *Tractatus* on the grounds that the idea of, as it were, sensible nonsense, is itself nonsense, Mounce objects that the existence of what transcends experience may manifest itself in experience. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are intended not to indicate what eludes language, which would be nonsense, but rather what shows itself in language. There is something shown, but its nature means that any attempted expression of it must fail. Nevertheless, the failure is revelatory.¹²

This is, in fact, what Mounce takes as the essential nature of Wittgenstein’s later work too. Against the emphasis on the ‘therapeutic’ interpretation of the later Wittgenstein (and the earlier, too, if one follows Conant and Diamond), Mounce maintains that the distinction between saying and showing remains central there, and indeed gives point to the activity of dispelling conceptual confusion. Logic (in the sense of grammar) cannot be stated, since any such statement is senseless except to those capable of applying the grammar. Application of signs is prior to any rule of grammar, so that in ‘stating rules for language, we soon fall into silence, and then we are left with what shows itself in the use of language itself.’¹³ And what ‘shows itself’ in the application of language itself is (something akin to) the ‘classical or transcendental realism’ which finds (a misleading expression in) philosophy in its pre-modern manifestations. For example, Mounce cites the discussion in *On Certainty* of Moore’s attempted proof of external objects. Moore’s attempt at a *proof* was misguided, Mounce claims, because perspicuous analysis of sense-experience will show it already presupposes a world which transcends it. It is this, Mounce believes, that Wittgenstein is claiming in saying against Moore that ‘My life shows that I know or am

certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on – I tell a friend, e.g., “Take that chair over there”, “Shut the door”, etc.’ What philosophers have tried to prove (the externality of the world, the reality of the past, the existence of other selves, and so on) cannot indeed be proved, but rather shows itself in the perspicuous analysis of language in its application. Mounce says, for example:

[O]n the positivist view, the truth of a statement about the past is constituted by its cohering with the available evidence. Perspicuous analysis will reveal that this is false not simply to metaphysical realism but to ordinary speech. Nor is that a coincidence, for ordinary speech is implicitly realist. The metaphysical realist therefore strives to prove what he might easily have shown in a perspicuous analysis. Wittgenstein retained this view to the end of his life.¹⁴

The propositions of the *Tractatus* attempt to articulate the realism of ordinary language: they fail in the sense that what they attempt to say is shown in the application of language. For the *Tractatus*, this application lay in stating facts. The possibility of propositional statements rests on the isomorphism of reality and thought in its symbolic form (whether linguistic or other ‘picturing’ forms). Reality (as what is the case) transcends the proposition since the proposition is necessarily either true or false and reality determines which it is. And reality as the totality of facts is already logically structured and so able to be expressed propositionally. Both the transcendence of reality to our thought (its independence) and the transcendence of logical form to reality (as the condition of its possibility) show themselves in the perspicuous analysis of propositions in their application of stating. The later Wittgenstein, for Mounce, recognizes that the notion of a connection between language and the world does not explain the possibility of thought but rather itself needs explaining. Hence the importance of the notion of concept formation in his later work: forms of language arise as extensions and developments of ways human beings are already active in the world. The language of time can only be learnt by the child who already looks for the lost ball, expects her tea and plays attentively now with her toys; the language of physical objects can only be learnt by one who already avoids the chair leg as she crawls across the room, sits on her chair and reaches for her spoon, and so on. As Mounce says, ‘it is not through

language that the child is related to the world; one might say that language is related to the world through the child.’¹⁵ The philosopher who tries to prove the reality of the past or of the external world is responding to sceptical doubt. But if we are willing to put these matters in question, then, as the sceptic insists, anything we offer in the way of proof becomes equally questionable. The error is to allow the reality of the past or the external world to be presented as a claim upon which our practices rest which would require proof. Rather, the development of our concepts of time or of the external world already presupposes forms of activity in the world which are instinctual and are therefore prior to the possibility of any claim in language. These instinctual relations for Mounce are already implicitly realist: they are responses to the world, the past, and so on, in its transcendence, independence of, the human being. What the philosopher tries to prove (the reality of the past or the external world) is shown in the perspicuous analysis of our language in its application. What gets shown there is that our linguistic practices are extensions and developments of our instinctual relations to independent reality which cannot therefore be put into question.

Our understanding of the world is, then, itself a result of the world: it is a naturally shared extension of primitive reactions to the world. It is this, I think, which underlies Mounce’s thought that our understanding of the world relates to only part of reality since we ourselves constitute only such a part. Reality transcends our understanding and we are (perhaps) sometimes brought into contact with events which are beyond our understanding. I say ‘perhaps’ because it is always possible for such events to be dismissed as misdescribed or as the subject for later, presently unavailable, explanation. Such an attitude, if generally adopted, however, Mounce takes to be dangerously closed to the possibility of encountering what is beyond our understanding. A character’s remark (Zalman’s) in a story by I. Singer, ‘People do vanish’, is aimed, according to Mounce, to startle us, ‘to raise possibilities hitherto excluded. He wishes his fellows to admit that there are more things in heaven and earth than they are prepared to contemplate in their normal practices.’¹⁶ Again, in *The Two Pragmatisms* he refers to a

case of faith healing in which a minister in Glasgow acquired a capacity to relieve suffering and sometimes effect cures in the sick. The gift

appeared as a result of sustained prayer in which Peddie [the minister] showed his faith in God and his desire to serve him. If God is non-existent, faith vain, and prayer a delusion, it becomes not easier but altogether harder to explain why Peddie's gift appeared.¹⁷

Of course, granted the phenomenon, it is always possible to claim that some natural understanding may be found for it, but Mounce thinks that the refusal to countenance the possibility of encountering what passes our understanding is evidence of a failure to accept that, as merely a part of reality, our understanding is necessarily limited.¹⁸ As D. Z. Phillips remarks about Mounce's discussion of the Singer story, this makes it sound as if these events can be explained, but not by us. We encounter extraordinary events which would require an explanation beyond our capacities, and such explanation requires reference to a supernatural source, God.¹⁹ This is indeed, I think, Mounce's claim.

This tendency in Mounce's thought may cause us to return to his claim that Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing is central to his later thought and that what is shown in the application of language is what philosophers have tried to prove, the reality of the external world, the past, and so on. When Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty* (section 25) that one can be wrong even about 'there being a hand here. Only in certain cases is it impossible', are we to conclude that such an example shows we believe in an unquestionable manner in the reality of hands? I think we should decline to follow this suggestion on at least two grounds. Firstly, it remains complicit with sceptical questioning to which philosophical realism is a response while Wittgenstein's examples intend to undermine the appearance of intelligibility which such questions have. Wittgenstein is certainly indicating that in such a case the conditions for raising a question, for doubt, are absent, but equally the conditions for assertion are absent too. If the intelligibility of the sceptic's question is challenged in the example, so too is that of the realist's response. The game here of doubt and assertion indeed involves a non-propositional certainty, but as such this is not a matter of,

nor presupposes, knowledge or belief. Secondly, Wittgenstein's examples, in showing the unintelligibility of the sceptical question and the realist response, serve to show something further which is obscured by Mounce's formulation, namely, the sense of 'reality' in this context. The possibility of assertions is provided by the conditions under which doubt can be raised and removed, claims to truth justified, within a linguistic practice, and these show us what it is to speak of the 'independently real' here. The ways in which questions of 'truth' can be raised and answered is different in different forms of language (compare talk of hands with that of sensations or character dispositions, say) as is, therefore, the notion of the 'independently real' internal to these forms. To speak, as Mounce does, of Wittgenstein's examples as showing belief in or knowledge of 'reality' is to leave unarticulated the sense of reality at issue, and thereby to give the impression that a single sense of 'reality' runs through the variety of forms of language since they all involve, in the conditions for doubt and assertion, reference to such 'knowledge or belief'. But such a sense of 'reality' would be abstracted from, rather than showing itself in, the application of language. The *Tractatus* speaks of the general form of the proposition and so correspondingly of the general form of reality. But once, with the later Wittgenstein, we recognize that language does not have this kind of unity, we recognize that 'the real' lacks it too. There is no philosophically useful notion of 'reality as such'²⁰; rather the sense which 'reality' has is given in the very various ways in which questions of 'truth' arise and conditions of doubt are intelligible in different forms of language. It makes no sense, therefore, to see these as merely parts of a 'reality' which transcends them.

This is not to deny, as Mounce claims in relation to Winch,²¹ that no criticism of forms of language is then possible. Mounce says that, in Winch's discussion of Zande witchcraft, Winch makes 'There are witches' a conceptual truth rather than a theoretical or empirical one, thereby exempting it from the possibility of criticism. He objects that, although it is indeed not an issue for the Azande, others outside Zande life may think it ought to be. But the question is what the 'ought' means here. There are varied possibilities of criticism. It may, of course, be that we can make no sense of the talk of the reality of witches at all. Winch tries to show this sense by analogy

with our own understandings of religious forms of life, which are not concerned with providing a further explanation of the world but which come into play where all forms of explanation have done their work. Whether Winch is successful in this is not here an issue. Or it may be that their talk of 'witches' is part of a practice of causal explanation which we can then criticize in terms of our own more developed scientific practice. But unless we first try to understand the nature of the notion of the 'independently real' here, we shall not be able to consider what forms of criticism are possible. Mounce's talk of a 'conceptual truth' rather than an 'empirical' or 'theoretical' one gestures towards a common conception of 'reality' in terms of which the Zande conception can be criticized, as if 'there are witches' were a claim about reality underlying Zande practice. It is as if Mounce were understanding practices containing a conception of the 'independently real' as interpretations of an underlying reality which is ultimately beyond our finite comprehension but towards which we are oriented, in the manner of a Kantian Idea of Reason. I have suggested that this picture lies behind Mounce's claim that what philosophers have tried to prove shows itself in the application of language; we will find it, too, in his conception of moral practices as approximations to a final truth about the Good. Of course, Mounce thinks this is shown in the application of language (something which Kant could equally have claimed). It seems to me, however, that Wittgenstein's later work proposes that such a conception of 'reality' abstracts us from the varied (and undelimitable) ways in which a notion of the 'independently real' manifests itself in different forms of language. Winch in his discussion furthers this enterprise in trying to show us what talk of the reality of witches in Zande life amounts to, what the sense of the 'independently real' is in this context. And we should have to do the same in connection with talk of 'empirical' or 'theoretical' reality too. They do not point towards some overarching conception of reality which can form the standard for criticism in general, even as an unattainable ideal, of forms of language. What the possibilities of criticism are has to be taken case by case, and even if we agree with Winch that the Zande talk does embody a conception of the 'independently real' this does not preclude criticism from the point of view of related ethical and religious conceptions.

Mounce, I suspect, like the sceptic, and the philosophical realists who try to answer the sceptic's questions, feels there must be a further issue, over and beyond the ways we do remove doubt and make assertions, as to whether these ways really put us into contact with reality. The resolution to this question for him, of course, is not to be found in a theory, which could be argued about, but in what shows itself in the perspicuous analysis of the application of language. That our practices make contact with reality is shown in their formation on the basis of instinctive relations to it, so that they are themselves products of reality, and in the continuing possibility of criticism of their conception of reality so that they are answerable to something over and beyond themselves. We are then seen, as Aristotle thought, as the part of the universe which understands the world. It is this which then enables Mounce to see the 'reality' we understand as simply a part of a reality beyond our comprehension, a notion of 'reality' abstracted from the conditions under which we can or cannot assert that something is so. Wittgenstein's later work seems to me, however, directed against the philosophical motivations which prompt the development of such a notion. What shows itself to us in forms of language, and can be articulated, is rather the varied senses which the notion of the 'independently real' can take. These do not compose parts of a general notion of 'reality', nor does what is the case in terms of this variety constitute aspects of an all-encompassing reality we know only in part.

It is illuminating in this respect to compare Mounce's treatment of morality in his first book, *Moral Practices*,²² co-authored with D. Z. Phillips, with that found in his recent work. *Moral Practices* was an attempt to draw out some of the consequences for moral philosophy of the later work of Wittgenstein. Moral judgement and decision, the book tells us, are intelligible only where certain matters are not open to judgement or decision. A particular falsehood may be condemned as wrong because it is a lie, but this is not because lying itself is judged as wrong. Rather, lying is one of the criteria in terms of which (for us, say) judgement of wrongness takes place. However, although for any moral agent some facts ('It is a lie') will entail some things are right or wrong, it is not the case that the same things fulfil

this function for every moral agent. Rather, there are different moral practices in terms of which the same facts will entail different conclusions: in Sparta, private property was considered of little significance and a man was admired if he succeeded in tricking another.²³ There is an irreducible variety in moral practices²⁴ and so in the possibility of permanent radical moral disagreement.²⁵ It is not possible to resolve such disagreements by referring to the 'human good' since what is deemed humanly good is itself determined by moral beliefs. So with the variety of moral practices goes a variety of conceptions of what constitutes human good and harm, and there is no *a priori* limit to the forms this can take. We cannot deny the multiplicity of moral practices both within and between societies without falsification.²⁶ The philosopher, however, may say that if we have such opposing conceptions of human good and harm, we must determine which, if any, is the correct one, otherwise we cannot know what is really right or wrong. *Moral Practices* raises two kinds of consideration in response to this demand. The objection, firstly, treats the opposing moral perspectives as if they were hypotheses about some state of affairs (the human good) in the way there may be conflicting astronomical theories about a star. But in the latter case we can imagine what sort of evidence might settle the matter for there is something independent of the theories against which they can be checked. But moral perspectives are not theories, they are not interpretations of something more ultimate than themselves. Nevertheless, this does not mean that anything whatever can be said here. The notion of the independently real has its place, although in a different form from that found in the case of scientific theorizing: the moral status of participants in a practice is determined by their relation to the conception of human good contained within it. The second kind of consideration raised against the philosophical question of which, if any, of two conflicting moral perspectives is correct, is what we might call the issue of the existential status of the question. We have to ask what the nature of the question 'Which conception of human good is right?' is. As Kierkegaard might have said, the philosopher is a human being like any other, so if he or she is asking this question seriously, it can only be heard as an expression of existential doubt, of someone genuinely at sea in relation to what they value, an expression of despair. But if we are not in despair, if we are sure of our moral

convictions, what could the question of rightness amount to? If we are asked why we are right in our moral position, our answer would be in terms of the content of the values concerned, since it is by reference to them that judgements of right and wrong can be made. We would not say that our rightness consisted in our saying we were right, in our willing this, since this would not be to relate to the values as determining our moral worth but as determining their worth in terms of ourselves. But does this rejection of the philosophical question commit us to saying that we and our opponents are right from our different moral perspectives? But again, we have to ask who is saying this²⁷ since neither we nor our opponents could say it, as for both of us questions of right and wrong are determined by the values concerned, not the rightness of the values by something else. This is not, then, relativism, if relativism is the view that what is right or wrong is to be determined relative to the perspectives of individuals, groups, societies and so forth. In suggesting this, the relativist, just as much as the absolutist who believes there must be a single standard to judge any moral perspective, removes herself from the judgement of rightness as if she is not necessarily, as a human being, implicated in a conception of the human good. Rather the conclusion to be drawn is that we should not try, philosophically, to reduce moral practices to a single form nor forget that questioning of a moral practice always proceeds in terms of another practice to which the questioner is related in a comparable way to those involved in the questioned practice.

Now compare this with some remarks Mounce makes in a recent review.²⁸ Plato, Mounce there tells us, argued that the various moral codes are all imperfect reflections of an absolute good which we, as finite beings, can only know imperfectly. Intractable moral disagreement supports Plato's view, since it shows that each contestant holds their view as absolute and so expects others to agree. Where we do not expect such agreement, there we make our judgement relative to our own position: you have your tastes, I have mine. We would not say we are entitled to condemn an opponent only if he is prepared to agree with us, but rather that his not doing so exacerbates the condemnation. Mounce concludes by saying:

I suspect that Plato's view can be avoided only by resorting to outright scepticism. One has to suppose that in their moral judgements people are systematically mistaken or confused.²⁹

The contrast with the position of *Moral Practices* could not be more marked. Different moral practices are subject to a common standard, although one we can only know in part. Moral disagreement shows an implicit recognition of this: we show that we believe there is a standard valid for all in our condemnation of our opponents. Hence, we are bound to regard the other as 'systematically mistaken or confused'. If we then claim to be in possession of the truth about morality, we should have to justify this since it is something equally claimed by our opponents. Such a process of justification, appealing to the existence of a standard valid for all moral agents, leads, Mounce believes, to a recognition of that standard as lying in something like Plato's absolute good.

This position is expounded at greater length in 'Morality and Religion'. There he emphasizes again that moral value is regarded as 'absolute' and not 'relative'. That is, moral value is independent, and the judge, of whatever we may happen to desire or need.³⁰ Not being relative to the latter, we do not in moral matters agree to differ, as when having different tastes. Rather, 'when it comes to what is fundamental in his morality, every person speaks in absolute terms. He expresses himself as though he were speaking not simply for his fellows but for the whole of humanity.'³¹ This means that every moral perspective claims for itself universal validity, a claim which requires justification. Now, following Hume, Mounce claims we do not value something because it is good but rather call it good because we value it. As in *Moral Practices*, we judge things as good in terms of their relation to what is centrally valued in one's moral practice which is not then valued because it is good. Every morality (conception of duty and goodness) values something other than morality. It is because we value family, class, nation, humanity, and so on (Mounce's examples), that we then have the differing conceptions of duty and goodness characteristic of differing moral practices. But each moral perspective claims its central values as absolute and thus having universal validity. One claims a particular duty has absolute value (overrides whatever one may happen to want or

need) by reference to something else (family, nation, and so on) which is claimed to have absolute value. But, Mounce now argues, such a claim can only be justified if that something else is in its nature absolute. Only God is such an object since only God is the standard for any human relation whatever (and therefore the standard in terms of which family, class, nation and humanity are themselves to be judged). All other valued objects are, as it were, intra-worldly, whereas God is the standard for the world itself. It is because the object of a religious morality is absolute that its duties are themselves absolute, determined as they are by God. Without the conception of God, therefore, the claim of absolute value which characterizes any moral perspective cannot be justified: all secular moralities suffer from confusion.

This is, Mounce claims, characteristic of the contemporary condition. In secular moralities, morality is still felt as absolute but they have no object which could explain that feeling. Philosophical attempts to resolve this problem without recourse to God necessarily fail. Utilitarianism proposes a common end of human actions, pleasure or happiness, as the absolute standard, but pleasure or happiness can be an end only for someone who already values other things. We can seek the pleasure of music only if we value music, so pleasure cannot explain that value. Pleasure and happiness are secondary ends. Deontologists propose the autonomy of morality so that duty is valued in itself, overriding all other values. But, as we have seen, morality, a conception of duties, is secondary to the valuing of something else. Relativism proposes that the individual can be judged right or wrong only in relation to the social practices in which he or she is a participant, while those practices cannot themselves be judged. They are neither right nor wrong. But, then, in conflict between societies or groups, no question can arise as to who is right, a view which, in the light of the absolute claims made by each of the opposing parties, is untenable. Social relativism collapses into its individual form. If there is a conflict between society and my individual will, why should I follow society's standards? We cannot settle this by referring to the authority of those standards, since this is precisely what is at issue. Whichever way I decide, whether for or against society's standards, will simply be a matter of my will. My will be-

comes the source of all my values, and so moral value, as absolute and not relative to my will, disappears.³²

Secular moralities are, therefore, always involved in an intellectual confusion. Their absolute duties are derived from something else which is absolutely valued, but they have no means of justifying this evaluation. A reflective individual will feel ‘that he cannot fully account for the point or meaning of what he feels’³³ unless he has a religious view of existence. What would *Moral Practices* have made of this train of thought? The argument is this. We value morality (duties, conceptions of human good and harm) absolutely only by referring them to something else (family, nation, and so forth) we value absolutely. But only God can be justifiably absolutely valued because only God is the absolute object: all other objects are intra-worldly whereas God is transcendent to the world and therefore its standard. Secular moralities are involved in the possibility of radical disagreement precisely because they value absolutely what is not by its nature absolute. For *Moral Practices*, we value morality (duties and a conception of human good and harm) in terms of valuing something else, a form of human life characteristic of a moral practice. In so far as it is in terms of that form of human life that we judge all else, it is the standard of our valuing and not the subject of valuation. In that sense, we value it absolutely. But to say this is, of course, to deny that, for someone within such a moral practice, the question of the value of the overriding conception can arise at all. If it does, this marks an existential slackening of the hold of that conception on the individual. For them, the suggestion that their conception of life is not absolute because it is subject to a further valuation in terms of a religious conception of life can have no significance other than the proposal by the other of their competing conception. For the religious view is equally subject to evaluation in terms of the individual’s own conception. The suggestion that this question (What is the appropriate object for absolute valuing?) arises for the ‘reflective individual’ who can then see, intellectually, the right answer, is to present that individual as if, in their reflection, they were divorced from themselves as an existing individual, one living in terms of some conception of the value of their life which determines the significance of anything within that life. For someone whose judge-

ments are made in terms of some overriding conception of human life, the question what is the appropriate object of absolute valuing is equivalent to asking what determines the value of her life, and that is clear. The question could only be asked existentially as an expression of despair or existential doubt, and its resolution could only be sought in what could remove such despair. But that is not supposed to be what the 'reflective individual' is suffering. The question, in other words, is at one and the same time meant to be existential (to show an individual what the right way of life is) and yet not to have the character of a real existential problem. Religion is 'the standard of any human relation', the absolute, only in the sense that the absolute relation to God requires giving up all absolute relation to anything else (which is why Kierkegaard said that one can make a bid for Christianity only out of absolute despair). But this does not show that an absolute relation to other conceptions is an illusion: *that* is a judgement from within the religious perspective itself and entry to that is only via the rejection of worldly conceptions. As *Moral Practices* insisted, there is no existentially neutral point (occupied by a 'reflective individual') from which life-conceptions can be evaluated, and therefore no neutral standard in terms of which such evaluation can be carried out. To insist otherwise is to pretend that one is (as a philosopher) something different from what one is as an existing individual. The philosopher cannot raise the question of the significance of life, since this is necessarily something raised by an individual about their own. The philosopher must be content to recognize, as *Moral Practices* does, what follows from the existential character of the plurality of conceptions of human good contained within the variety of moral practices. Mounce's formulations distort this character. For example, to say each perspective 'claims to speak for all humanity' is no more than to say that its adherents value it absolutely. They present it as unconditionally valuable and so not as valuable because of their particular characteristics. As *Moral Practices* insists, its value is not a matter of its appealing to us. Rather, it gives value to our lives, not our lives to it. If it is said that in valuing it absolutely we require the agreement of others, then, again, this is transposing to this case a grammar which has its home elsewhere. I can 'require' your agreement where I can point to something over and beyond our positions which could settle the dispute. But, as *Moral Practices* says,

existential perspectives are not interpretations of something more ultimate than themselves. Mounce's later argument is a result of failing to stay true to the existential character of the language of existence conceptions, whether religious or otherwise, and to what this means for the attendant concepts of 'problem', 'argument', 'resolution', 'reflection' and 'truth'. They must be understood in terms of an individual's relation to their own life, where one does not see 'the truth' of life and adopt it, but where one only sees 'truth' in adoption, where the truth is, as Kierkegaard says, the truth of appropriation. Mounce's argument depends on taking moral and religious concepts out of their existential context where they have their sense. It then appears possible to ask about 'the truth' of human life in a way separated from one's own existential position. *Moral Practices*, however, restricts itself to asking what it means for an individual to raise the question of the truth of their life, which is not itself a question about the truth of life.

Mounce wants to claim that one can only (really) value unconditionally the unconditioned. But this invites the question who is to say this. The claim runs together valuing something absolutely, that is, unconditionally, so that it gives value to one's life and not one's life to it, with valuing the unconditioned, that which is transcendent to the world, devotion to which requires dying to the world.³⁴ One can value the unconditioned unconditionally (follow the path of dying to the world) or conditionally (because to do so pays in terms of some other value, in which case one certainly will not follow that path). But one can equally value the conditioned (that of the world) unconditionally, so that it gives meaning to one's life and not one's life to it, or conditionally (because it pays in terms of something else valued). If the conditioned is valued unconditionally, then if it is taken away, one's life will lack meaning or have meaning to a marked lesser degree (one is simply existing, not living). If the unconditioned is unconditionally valued then nothing that happens can affect the meaningfulness of one's existence. Both are existential possibilities and each will see the other as deficient. To those whose lives are given meaning by concrete forms of life, the religious way of life may seem inhuman (severing properly human forms of attachment), to be using human relationships for a further purpose (as one

puts one's relationship to God above all other relations in one's life), or, as Nietzsche thought, to be the product of a desire to make oneself safe no matter what may occur, a cowardice in the face of reality. To those who practice dying to the world, secular existences may seem lives of hidden despair (for what gives meaning to their lives may be taken away), or to practice discrimination in valuing certain parts of existence over others. But to say, as Mounce does, that the former are unable to account for the appropriateness of their unconditional valuing is to say that this is something they *could* recognize from within their present existential position. That would be for them to recognize that what gives meaning to their lives is subject to a higher standard. But that is precisely what is denied in saying that they unconditionally value it: that it gives meaning to their lives not their lives to it. Mounce can only say this if he thinks that they are really but unconsciously oriented towards the unconditioned. The model here would be the ascent of the soul in the *Symposium*, where the protagonist must discover that he is a 'lover of the form of beauty' through passing through a series of forms of life, the felt inadequacy of each driving him on to the next. Socrates' autobiography in the *Phaedo* follows a similar trajectory. Although this is a possible form of life history, it depends for its cogency on the presence of dissatisfaction to justify the claim that the individual is really looking for some form of life other than the one he lives. But in the absence of this, the claim that anyone who says they unconditionally value something other than the object of religious devotion is self-deceived, is merely an *a priori* stipulation, one that results from seeing all forms of life from the point of view of the religious. Mounce's claim is a result of, not an argument for, seeing existence from a religious point of view. It does not emerge from some general overriding viewpoint which both secularists and the religious can occupy. We see here the connection with Mounce's conception of 'reality': that too, I have suggested, is the result of removing the notion of the 'independently real' from the varied contexts within which it has differing senses.

NOTES

¹ Howard Mounce was born in 1939. He attended University College, Swansea. He taught at University College, Cardiff, from 1963 to 1969 and then at University College, Swansea, from 1969 to 1999. In 1999 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of what is now called Swansea University.

² 'Morality and Religion' in B. Davies (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*, London, 1998, pp. 253-286. (Hereafter MR.)

³ H. O. Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism*, London, 1999.

⁴ H. O. Mounce, *The Two Pragmatisms*, London, 1997. Hereafter, TP.

⁵ TP p. 33.

⁶ TP p. 54.

⁷ See R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 110, and TP p. 185.

⁸ TP p. 189.

⁹ TP p. 188.

¹⁰ H. O. Mounce *Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus': An Introduction*, Oxford, 1981, p. 104.

¹¹ TP p. 91.

¹² Review of *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. A. Crary and R. Read, London and New York, 2000, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 2001, no. 2.

¹³ Review p. 192.

¹⁴ Review p. 189.

¹⁵ TP p. 220.

¹⁶ Review of P. Winch *Trying to Make Sense*, Oxford, 1987, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 1988, 3, p. 239.

¹⁷ TP p. 118.

¹⁸ Even so, it is not clear why, once one has left behind anything our practices could countenance as an explanation, it is 'easier' to explain Peddies' case in terms of the truth of what he believes. One might suppose one just comes up against blank incomprehension. But Peddie is thinking in terms of one of our practices, and Mounce's other considerations about the role of God in relation to the intelligible structure of the world seem to be playing a role here. They raise the question, which would rebound on the Peddie case, of whether Christianity can be understood as providing 'explanations'.

¹⁹ D. Z. Phillips 'From Coffee to Carmelites', in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, London, 1993, pp. 187-8.

²⁰ This does not mean that 'the nature of reality' no longer figures as a philosophical issue, but that it becomes a question about the way forms of language make up a common language. See D. Z. Phillips *Philosophy's Cool Place*, Cornell, 1999.

²¹ Review of *Trying to Make Sense*.

²² London, 1969. Hereafter MP.

²³ MP p. 15.

²⁴ MP p. 45.

²⁵ MP p. 51.

²⁶ MP p. 104.

²⁷ MP p. 102.

²⁸ Review of R. Macklin *Against Relativism*, Oxford, 1999, and J. W. Cook *Morality and Cultural Difference*, Oxford, 1999, in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 51, January 2001.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁰ MR p. 255.

³¹ MR p. 280.

³² MR p. 281.

³³ MR p. 283.

³⁴ This is the Christian demand. It is not, I think, part of Hinduism or Buddhism, for example. I am not sure what Mounce wants to say about the variety of what we call 'religious' understandings of life. Are forms of it outside the Western traditions he considers to be judged mistaken or confused? But if so, it can hardly be because they are secular in Mounce's terms.

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