A Truthful Way to Live? Objectivity, Ethics and Psychoanalysis

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Abstract
Is there a best way to live? If so, is this a form of ethical life? The answer, I believe, turns on what we can say about the nature and place of the passions – emotions and desires – in our lives, including in particular, our ability to be *truthful* about our passions and our relations with other people. I approach the question through the work of Bernard Williams. I consider first what it might be for a way of life to be 'objectively' best, before looking more closely at the psychological conditions of such a life, using ideas from psychoanalysis on the way we hide our true passions from ourselves and the effect this can have on our understanding of both ourselves and others. I end by considering whether we can say that a truthful life is the best life, and whether it places universal and material constraints on how best to live.

Is there, objectively speaking, a best way to live? Is there a way that human beings should live, a single 'correct' answer to the question? If so, is the best way to live a recognisable form of ethical life? I shall argue that, in part, the answer turns on the nature of the passions and their place in our lives, in particular, the extent to which we need to be truthful about our desires and emotions, and what that truthfulness means for our relations with other people. In discussing these questions, my interlocutor will be Bernard Williams, who repeatedly returned to these themes throughout his career, most fully in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*[1] and *Truth and Truthfulness*.[2] We begin, in a moment, by clarifying what could be meant by 'objectivity' in this context.

But first, a brief word on 'an ethical life'. I follow Williams in leaving the term 'ethical' rather vague.[3] But we can say that an ethical life is marked by normative thinking – thinking in terms of good, bad, right and wrong. It also recognises obligations in some form, which may arise from one's choices or from one's social situation, and involves a concern for what is 'best'. It utilises a variety

[1] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985); hereafter ELP.
[2] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); hereafter TT.
[3] ELP, 7, 12.

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of terms related to virtues, such as courageous, honourable, generous, etc. It maintains a conception of the self as related to other people in ways marked by these concepts. We may, for now, contrast the ethical life with one that is entirely egoistic, where all forms of thought and relevant considerations for action concern some advantage gained by the agent without regard to others. Precisely what more goes into an ethical life I leave for the reader to fill out. Ethics is, first and foremost, an activity conducted in the first-person.

1. Two types of objectivity

Williams distinguishes between theoretical and practical senses of objectivity in ethics – which I shall designate objectivity$_T$ and objectivity$_P$.[4] To understand objectivity theoretically is to understand ethics as grounded in propositional knowledge of ethical truth. Ethical judgments are made true by the way the world is, and it is a function of theoretical reason to discover this. On a standard realist interpretation, there are ethical properties, and true judgments correctly describe which objects (actions, situations, persons) have which ethical properties. Thus, there is objectivity$_T$ in what makes ethical beliefs true or false. By contrast, practical objectivity in ethics (objectivity$_P$) involves an 'Archimedean point'[5] within practical reason that yields a determinate set of ethical values, attitudes, or rules. Here we may think of Kant's attempt to ground ethics in pure practical reason or, on Williams' interpretation, Aristotle's approach to ethics as the best way to live.

While I cannot develop the argument fully here, Williams famously provides reason to doubt the possibility of objectivity$_T$ in ethics through his ideas of thick concepts and a limited form of relativism.[6] Different cultures, he observes, have different thick concepts – concepts such as honesty, courage, honour, chastity, loyalty, and many more, that involve both descriptive and normative elements. Within the ethical conceptual scheme of a culture, there may well be convergence in judgments made using those concepts. We may rightly talk about how the ethical thought and language of people in that culture 'tracks the truth' about, say, which people are honest, which actions display courage, and so on. But this is not

[4] See ELP, 29, Ch. 8 (esp. 152).
[5] ELP, 29.
[6] ELP, Ch. 8–9.

enough, Williams argues, for objectivity$_T$.[7] For this type of local convergence is perfectly compatible with different cultures having quite different ethical conceptual schemes. Local convergence given a set of thick concepts on its own neither offers nor calls for an integration of different conceptual schemes – it does not raise the question 'Which set of ethical concepts is correct, objectively speaking?' or to put it another way, 'Which ethical concepts are necessary to express objective ethical truth?'. Without further reflection, we may think of each culture's ethical concepts and judgments as expressions or artefacts of their way of living, rather than making claims that are true or false objectively speaking. What we need for this more robust form of objectivity$_T$ is a positive answer to the question 'Is it correct to judge like this, using these concepts?'.

Trying to provide such a positive answer by appealing to 'how the world is' is ultimately incoherent, thinks Williams. Three brief reasons. First, we have no coherent idea of our judgments about which ethical concepts are 'correct' being guided by the way the world is. In science, there is talk of 'carving nature at the joints', developing a conceptual scheme that correctly identifies what is 'there anyway', but there is no coherent parallel conception of carving ethical reality at its joints. While there is one physical world, it seems that there are many social worlds, many workable ways of thinking and living ethically. Second, thinking of cultures attempting to find 'the truth' about ethics doesn't sit well with a history of how ethical practices develop. And, in considering whether a culture's thick concepts are correct, if we decide that they are not, we would need to explain why that culture had 'got it wrong': why couldn't people in that culture see what was independently right and do that? We would need to develop a theory of error, and it is not obvious what that may be. Third, our most robust account of how we gain knowledge of 'how the world is' places perception at its heart. But a perceptual model of ethical judgment is indefensible – we do not, in any literal sense, 'perceive' what is right.[8]

So much for objectivity$_T$. However, this does not mean that there is no objectivity in ethics – for there remains the possibility of objectivity$_P$. We can look to the needs and basic motivations of human beings to try to construct a theory of the best way to live. If we can provide such an account, it will depend upon the social and psychological sciences offering an account of these elements of

[7] ELP, 146–7.

[8] See Michael Lacewing, 'Emotion, Perception and the Self in Moral Epistemology', *Dialectica* 69 (2015), 335–355.

human nature. This approach has been a central motif in virtue ethics. Although Williams *tentatively* concludes that we won't secure objectivity$_P$ either, it is a real possibility: 'it is at any rate a comprehensible project, and… represents the only intelligible form of ethical objectivity'.[9]

Should we succeed, it is worth noting that we will not have demonstrated the objectivity$_T$ of certain ethical truths. While we can say that there is one very general objective$_T$ ethical judgment 'to the effect that a certain kind of life was best for human beings',[10] other ethical judgments are rendered objective$_P$ not because they are true (objective$_T$), but because there is good reason to live a life involving such judgements (thick concepts), which help us navigate the 'best' social world. We will have shown the value of living a life with those particular concepts, which, as noted already, can be considered artefacts of that way of living. For example, if courage is a trait that human beings need in order to live in the best way, then courage is a virtue and the concept of courage is one that we should retain, as it plays a role in our understanding of and living out the best form of life. The concept is not merely a reflection of certain contingent cultural practices, but is necessary, objectively$_P$ speaking, to inform and structure the best way to live. We would fail to achieve and understand the best life if we lacked the concept of courage to inform our practices and character development. Again, if family honour and shame form part of the best way to live, then these concepts, and judgments applying them, can be said to be objectively$_P$ grounded. Should we think that such concepts are problematic and to be rejected, we are claiming that the best way to live does not involve thinking or acting in these terms.

2. Three strengths of objectivity$_P$

In asking 'Is there a best way to live?', our concern now is with objectivity$_P$. To begin, we can distinguish three strengths of objectivity$_P$.

1. Objectivity$_{P1}$: in general, an ethical life – a life we can recognise as ethical – is better than a non-ethical life.
2. Objectivity$_{P2}$: for each and every person, an ethical life is the best way to live. If this is true, we have an answer to amoralists

[9] ELP, 153.
[10] ELP, 154.

and immoralists, who defend the view that some non-ethical form of living is best, at least for them.

3. Objectivity$_{P3}$: a specific ethical life is best (in general). Here we contrast different ethical ways of living, e.g. that have characterized different cultures. If this is true, we have an answer to relativism – it turns out that there are very significant constraints on which practices are best for human beings.

In what follows, we shall discuss each in turn, though in varying degrees of detail.

3. Objectivity$_{P1}$

The idea that human beings could live collectively without some form of ethics is a non-starter. It isn't possible for us to lead a recognisably human life without this being a form of ethical life.[11] Nevertheless, it would be good to know that the ethical life is also justifiable, that it is a coherent ideal for us to hold.[12] So, first, it is natural for us to form dispositions that support ways of relating to each other that are informed by ethical considerations. This is unsurprising given our long childhood and the ways in which we must relate to and depend upon each other. That an ethical life of some kind is good for us follows fairly directly from this aspect of human nature. Second, when reflecting on the question of what human well-being involves, we provide answers that involve appeal to notions of right and wrong. Perhaps universally across cultures, we are attracted to conceptions of well-being that have an ethical component to them. Third – often neglected in academic philosophy, but nevertheless significant – how would we wish to raise children? There is no reason to think that, for our children to have happy or good lives, we should raise them to be amoral, to break free from normative ways of thinking. If there are people who are happier (in a non-ethical sense) not leading an ethical life, it is rarely if ever the case that this is how they were raised.

These, then, are some preliminary reasons to think that, in general, we have reason to live some recognisable form of ethical life rather than a non-ethical life. This is good to know – as Williams says, for those of us who seek to lead ethical lives, it keeps up our spirits, provides some insight, especially into the very close and deep connection

[11] ELP, 40.
[12] ELP, 48.

between a human life and an ethical life, and gives us reasons to bring up children in certain ways, to enable them to develop those traits that we recognise as virtues.[13] But the type of objectivity$_P$ secured for the ethical life is very weak. We have only said that, as a species, it is natural for us – and attractive to us – to live according to some ethical code or other. We have not provided any constraints on the form that an ethical life should take, so we have not addressed relativism; nor have we shown that an ethical life is best for each individual, so we have not addressed the challenge from amoralism and immoralism.

4. Objectivity$_{P2}$: conditions on an account

A helpful way to approach this last question is to ask, of each individual, what is in their 'real interests'.[14] Plato, of course, in discussing the ring of Gyges,[15] defends the view that for each person, whether they agree with the claim or not, an ethically good life is in their interests. Hume, too, entertains the question in discussing the 'sensible knave',[16] who will cleverly avoid punishment – which requires him often to respect justice and other elements of an ethical life – but he will get away with whatever he can whenever he thinks it will benefit him. Both he and Gyges are said to be 'self-interested', but do their own real interests, unknown to them, support the claim that they would be better off leading an ethically good life?

Once people have reached adulthood, in normal circumstances, we take their own view of what is in their interests as, if not definitive of those interests, then at least, hard to controvert. It is typically paternalistic or worse to say to someone that what they want for themselves in life is bad *for them* (putting aside the issue of whether it would be bad for others around them). But this is not to say that the claim is always false. So to what extent and under what conditions can we draw a distinction between what someone takes their interests to be and what their real interests are?

It is uncontroversial to say that someone may mistake their real interests because they lack information, e.g. about what the consequences would be of having their desires satisfied. We do commonly correct our desires and our emotions on the basis of new information.

[13] ELP, 40.
[14] ELP, 40.
[15] *Republic*, Book II, 359d.
[16] *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Sec. 9, Pt. 2.

Peter Railton gives the case of Lonnie, who feels ill and craves a drink of milk.[17] Lonnie doesn't know that he is dehydrated, and drinking milk will make matters worse. He should instead drink clear fluids. If Lonnie knew this, he would stop wanting to drink milk, and seek out clear fluids instead.[18] Or again, we can get ourselves 'worked up' about what someone may have meant in saying something to us, or again, what they may have said about us behind our back. In this emotional state, we may take it to be in our interests to plot some petty revenge. When we find out they meant or said no such thing, we calm down, and we change our view of how best to respond. So we can uncontroversially distinguish someone's real interests from what they take their interests to be in cases in which 'an agent merely lacks information which in the light of his other existing preferences and attitudes would alter his desires'.[19]

It is also uncontroversial that people make mistakes in reasoning about what to do, given the desires they have. They choose the wrong path to the fulfilment of those desires, mistakenly thinking it is in their interests to adopt the course of action they do. This could be taking the wrong means to an end, or failing to see how pursuing their short-term desires undermines their long-term ends, or lacking the practical imagination to see how to coordinate different ends they have, or something else again.

So far, the objectivity with which we can talk of a person's real interests, in contrast to what they take their interests to be, relates to matters of information and deliberation rather than the passions – emotions and desires. And the model provides that the person would agree with our judgment of what their real interests are, given new information and correct deliberation.[20]

[17] Peter Railton, 'Moral Realism', *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), 163–207.

[18] Somewhat ironically, and presumably unknown to Railton at the time, the basis for the example is false – milk is an excellent beverage for rehydration, at least on one measure, better than many clear fluids (R. J. Maughan, P. Watson, P.A. Cordery, et al., 'A randomized trial to assess the potential of different beverages to affect hydration status: development of a beverage hydration index', *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 103 (2016), 717–23). We may say, tongue-in-cheek, that while Railton wanted to use this example, it was in his real interests to use a factually correct one!

[19] ELP, 41.

[20] These constraints are, of course, closely related to Williams' famous discussion in 'Internal and External Reasons', in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101–13.

A more interesting and challenging case is one in which someone changes from a non-ethical (amoral or immoral) to an ethical way of life, after which she agrees with the claim that even *before* she changed her way of life, it was (already) in her real interests to make this change. One possible account of what has happened is that she is correct – her real interests have not themselves changed, and the ethical life was in her real interests, though she did not recognise this previously. There are clear cases of this, in which it is not the person's information or deliberations that are mistaken, but their very desires themselves, e.g. a suicidal teenager. Those frustrated desires that underpin their misery, e.g. acceptance by their present, immediate social group or a need for recognition of a certain kind, are ones which are not in their real interests, but are also responsible for their not being able to see this very fact. But they can come to see this later when their desires change. However, an alternative explanation, and a different case, is one in which the person's interests have changed, so that an ethical life is now in her real interests where it wasn't before. *Prima facie*, there could be any number of possible scenarios for this, e.g. that the joy of competitive selfish acquisition has worn off, that the person has fallen in love and for the first time feels the need for close relationships with others, some shocking experience has awoken them to compassion, and so on.

To show that, objectively$_{P2}$, an ethical life is in each person's real interests, the first type of account needs to be correct in every instance. On this account, where someone has desires that fail to support an ethical life, these desires already work against their real interests. This would provide the basis for saying that, even if someone does not adopt an ethical way of life and does not agree that such a life is in their best interests, they are mistaken. It is *now*, even while they live non-ethically, in their interests to live differently. This requires a kind of objectivity about the passions – which desires or emotional dispositions are good for the subject, whoever that subject is. Given that our desires and emotional dispositions may be shaped by our upbringing and experience, and go towards defining who we are (or at least, who we take ourselves to be), this means that we need to be able to say that it can be in someone's real interests to be other than they are.

Can such a case be made? It is important to avoid begging the question here. To adequately defend the view that the ethical life is in each person's real interests, we cannot begin from an account of real interests defined in ethical terms. For example, we should not say that it is in someone's real interests to be generous, because it is good to be generous, and it is in their real interests to be good. That is no

argument at all. We are trying to show that a satisfactory account of real interests leads us to conclude that an ethical life is in anyone's real interests, so we must be careful not to smuggle this conclusion in at the beginning. As part of this, we need an account of just how it is that the amoralist or immoralist fails to understand their own real interests. We need a psychological and epistemological 'theory of error' which does not assume the objective correctness (practical or theoretical) of an ethical life. Thus, says Williams,

> If an agent does not now acknowledge that a certain change would be in his interest and if, as a result of the change, he comes to acknowledge that it was in his interest, this will show that the change was really in his interest only on condition that the alteration in his outlook is explained in terms of some *general incapacity* from which he suffered in his original state, and which has been removed or alleviated by the change.[21]

The incapacity is general in that it is not simply tailor-made to change from an unethical to ethical conception of one's real interests – otherwise, we are assuming that one's real interests are ethical from the outset. It is an incapacity in that the agent is unable to acknowledge such things in their cultural circumstances that we may expect human beings to be able to acknowledge as part of their 'effective functioning' – otherwise, we are left with a puzzle explaining how many people do know their real interests (including how the agent in question recognises their real interests after the change).

Our question now is whether there is any such general incapacity to which we can appeal in defence of objectivity$_{P2}$. What we shall need, says Williams, is a psychological account that is 'at once

i. independent of assumed ethical conceptions,
ii. closely related to the complex aspects of human personality that are involved in the ethical life,
iii. determinate in its results…
iv. favorable to ethical considerations in some form'.[22]

There has been a great deal of recent work in psychology that is relevant and promising here, e.g. with developments concerning the psychology of happiness, the importance of generosity and forgiveness, and the impact of mindfulness.[23] Following a remark of

[21] ELP, 42–3; my italics.
[22] ELP, 45; my numbering.
[23] See, e.g., Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 2011); Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*

Williams, however, my focus shall be elsewhere. The remark is this: 'There are theories, particularly of a psychoanalytical kind, in which hopes have been placed that they will support some ethical conception as a necessary part of human happiness'.[24] Psychoanalysis, in particular theories of psychological defence and development, can, I shall argue, meet these requirements to an important extent. Interestingly, such an account relates closely to Williams' account of the virtues of truth and truthfulness. In the next section, I shall outline the relevant psychoanalytic theory and Williams' account of truthfulness before discussing, in the subsequent section, whether the resulting account meets the conditions on a defence of objectivity$_{P2}$. In the end, I claim, the defence is not fully successful, not least because psychological findings tend to be true on the whole, rather than universally. Nevertheless, it is informative to see just how far the defence goes.

5. The psychodynamic model and the virtues of truth

Psychoanalysis is most commonly understood as a form of psychotherapy. This remains central to psychoanalysis, but it is a mistake to restrict the meaning of 'psychoanalysis' to the interaction between analyst and analysand, as some philosophers and analysts have done either explicitly or implicitly. Psychoanalysis is equally a *theory* about the nature, development and functioning of the human mind, especially in relation to motives. Central to this theory is the psychodynamic model of the mind.[25]

(London: Heinamann, 2006); B.L. Fredrickson, 'Positive emotions broaden and build', in P. Devine and A. Plant (eds) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 47 (2013), 1–54; R.A. Baer and E.L.M. Lykins, 'Mindfulness and Positive Psychological Functioning', in K.M. Sheldon, T.B. Kashdan, and M.F. Steger (eds) *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 335–348.

[24] ELP, 45.

[25] I am not here concerned to defend the epistemic credentials of the psychodynamic model, having done so at length in previous publications. I refer the interested reader to overviews in 'Could psychoanalysis be a science?', in W. Fulford, et. al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1103–1127; and 'The Science of Psychoanalysis', *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* 25 (2018), 95–111. The very interested reader may follow up more detailed

The psychodynamic model claims that we are motivated in ways that we are unaware of, i.e. there is unconscious motivation. Second, in many cases of unconscious motivation, we are also motivated not to become aware of these motivations. It is not that we simply happen to be unaware of the motivations, but we seek to keep them unconscious. This is the idea of psychological defence, mental processes that change what we think and experience so as to reduce or eliminate anxiety and other painful feelings (such as guilt, shame, and envy), especially when connected to self-esteem. Examples include projection, denial, passive aggression, intellectualization, and repression. These are means – themselves unconscious – by which we keep our emotions and desires from our own awareness. (This is not to say that *all* unconscious motivations are defended against; some may simply never have been brought to consciousness, though they cause no anxiety.) Third, the psychodynamic model also claims that these motivations and defences significantly influence our behaviour and conscious thoughts, emotions and desires, especially in relation to people who are important to us. Defences operate both to protect us from excessive anxiety and to protect the integration of the self by changing how we understand and experience ourselves, our passions and thoughts, others, and the social world. The distortions, motivated by the wish to avoid psychological pain, occur unconsciously and unintentionally.

To consider the effects of defences in the context of an ethical decision, let us suppose two individuals, a son and father, are faced with the father's terminal illness as it approaches a painful stage in its development. Let us assume that they each decide that the father should request and receive euthanasia and this occurs. Both their joint decision and the resulting action can exhibit virtues, such as love and courage, but they can also, depending on the case, be callous, lightminded, selfish, disloyal, or cowardly.[26] Let us suppose, in this example, that the son's decision is callous and the father's is cowardly – the son desires the father's death and the father prefers death to the

discussions in 'Inferring motives in psychology and psychoanalysis', *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* 19 (2012), 197–212; 'The Problem of Suggestion: An Analysis and Solution', *Philosophical Psychology* 26 (2013), 718–743; and 'Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Insight and Therapeutic Action', *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 21 (2014), 156–173.

[26] I adapt this list of vices from Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1991), 223–246; 235.

disapproval or contempt of his son, perhaps because their relationship has always been marred by competitiveness that has prevented real warmth between them and stoked resentment. But they hide their feelings from themselves and each other. Instead, the prospect of pain is taken by them, perhaps without much consideration, as sufficient reason for the request, which they both agree is 'courageous'. They both feel relief at the prospect of the father's death understood as release from pain, but do not recognize their relief at not having to confront a very different sort of pain about the truth of their relationship.

The psychodynamic model typically includes an etiological claim as well: both psychological defences and unconscious motivations are, to some significant extent, embedded within and/or the result of patterns of experiencing or relating to others that derive from one's individual history of psychological development. These internalised representations of interpersonal relations (known unfortunately as 'object relations') are constitutive of the structure of the psychological self, including our conscious and unconscious understandings of who we are in relation to others. Object relations that are functional in childhood, in conditions of high dependency on and proximity to specific others, may become maladaptive in adulthood. For example, a fearful wariness of authority figures may be necessary to negotiate unpredictable, volatile father figures in childhood, but may contribute to difficult and less than honest relations with line managers at work (or through identification, be a cause of becoming an unpredictable, volatile line manager oneself). Or again, the need to repress anger, because it is not accepted in the childhood home, may lead to depression in adulthood. Because our object relations are partially unconscious, we can fail to realise the sources of our relationship difficulties and the maladaptive nature of our expectations of others and sense of our selves.

We can illustrate this further by considering some motivations for lying, following a discussion by Alessandra Lemma.[27] One motivation may be 'to attack and triumph over the duped other. The object [i.e. the other] needs to be controlled and humiliated for the self's gratification, often to reverse an earlier experience of humiliation.' The liar may be unaware of these needs to control and humiliate, perhaps as part of a defence against the pain of their own humiliation (if applicable). In quite a different context, lying may 'represent an attempt at communication with [someone] felt to be

[27] Alessandra Lemma, 'The Many Faces of Lying', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86 (2005), 737–753. Quotations are from page 738.

emotionally unavailable or inscrutable. The lie is used to substitute the "real" self felt to be unlovable for a "made-up" version of the self felt to guarantee the [person's] love.' Again, if this is not recognised by the liar, the need to please the other will distort judgments about appropriate forms of relationship in adulthood, even if this was a way to survive emotionally in childhood. The person may continue to feel that their real self is unlovable, and so never expose this self to others, trying to win love through lying so as to appear lovable. Third, the lie may be used as protection against someone who is intrusive or controlling. As in the previous case, lying becomes the primary way of dealing with such relationships, and even an automatic response to intimacy (which carries a potential threat of intrusiveness). Again, this may have been necessary in childhood but becomes problematic later.

Thus, distortions in our experience of ourselves, others and the social world more generally, arising from maladaptive object relations and from defences, can lead us unknowingly to form mistaken understandings of who we are, what we feel, what others feel, and the relationships between us. Difficulties in facing or discovering the truth about these matters can involve not just instances of wishful thinking and self-deception but deeper, more unconscious psychological structures and processes. We can see how these unconscious phenomena, even though they may have evolved initially to protect us from pain, can mislead us as to our best interests and even concerning the morally good life, yet we fail to realise this. Take one last case, Anna Freud's example of 'false altruism'.[28] A woman represses her own desires, and projects them onto others. She then strongly identifies with other people. She therefore expresses great concern for them, but not for herself. She believes it is acceptable to fulfil their desires, and works to do so, but not to fulfil her own. However, she becomes annoyed if their desires are frustrated, as if desires should be fulfilled without hindrance; and she becomes angry with people who are not similarly altruistic, as though this were some personal affront to her. In this case, the woman's false altruism operates as a defence against various painful thoughts and feelings related to her *own* neediness or desires. The passions – the desire to help, the empathetic response, the altruistic concern – will present themselves as selfless and 'other'-directed. But in fact, there is an inappropriate conceptualisation of the needs of others; a lack of recognition of the parity between oneself and others; a misunderstanding of one's

[28] Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1936).

relations to others who are also in a position to help; and little recognition of others' responsibility for themselves.

Understanding the unconscious influences on our experiences and passions, the psychodynamic model holds, is central to understanding the development of our selves, our relationships with each other, and mental health. Thus, Freud commented that 'Psychoanalytic treatment is founded on truthfulness'.[29] And in Williams' account of the virtues of truth and truthfulness, there are indications of psychodynamic thought. He comments that some of our thoughts are wishes, and through wishful thinking, turn into beliefs. Or again, some of our indeterminate thoughts – where just what we are thinking is unclear – may become either wishes or beliefs, and which they become may depend on other wishes and desires we have. Wishful thinking, says Williams, 'is very basic and not a great mystery: the steps from its being pleasant to think of P, to its being pleasant to think that P, to thinking that P, cover no great psychological distance.'[30] As a result, 'there is no mystery about the fact that… an agent may easily find himself committed to [the] content [of his wishes and beliefs] in the wrong mode'.[31] However, this does not happen with the full awareness of the agent. When beliefs arise in these ways, when they 'become hostage to desires and wishes, they do so only as the result of hidden and indirect processes, against which the disciplines of the virtues of truth are directed'.[32] As indicated above, in defence mechanisms, our wish is not to have certain desires or emotions or thoughts, and the result is that we believe that we do not have these mental states (or again, not having certain desires is painful, and we defensively form the false belief that we do have them).

This applies not only to questions of what to believe, but also when thinking about what to do and how to live. Since

> individual deliberation… is inherently open to wishful thinking … it needs the virtues of truth as much as purely factual inquiries need them. [So] thinking about what one individual should do can usefully involve more than one person: we can think about

[29] Sigmund Freud, 'Observations on Transference Love (Further recommendations on the technique of psycho-analysis. III)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XII (London: Hogarth Press; original publication 1915), 159–173; 164.

[30] TT, 83.

[31] TT, 198.

[32] TT, 83.

> what I should do. This is not just because you may have experience and knowledge which I lack, but because your wishes are not mine – possibly not in their content, certainly not in their effects. [We] help to sustain each other's sense of reality, both in stopping wishes becoming beliefs when they should not, and also in helping some wishes rather than others to become desires.[33]

6. Can the account defend objectivity$_{P2}$?

We can use these observations to build an argument for the claim that the ethical life is in each person's real interests, even in the face of disagreement from those who are amoral or immoral. The psychodynamic model of the mind provides the beginnings of an account of why some people might mistake their real interests but not recognise the fact. This provides the room for claiming that a non-ethical life rests on such a mistake. It rests on or involves a lack of truthfulness as a result of the models of relationships that non-ethical people have acquired and/or the defences that they deploy in their understanding of themselves and other people. Such people do not understand themselves, their passions, and their relationships with others clearly and truthfully. Their relationships and sense of themselves are distorted in ways they are unaware of.[34] We can therefore also expect that after a change to an ethical life, facilitated by recognising and correcting these distortions, they would acknowledge that an ethical life was in their real interests. We could then add the complementary claim that the virtues of truthfulness incline us towards an ethical life. Clearly, we need sincerity, a kind of honesty with ourselves and others. I have argued elsewhere that the pursuit of the truth, particularly the truth about oneself in the face of the pain such recognition may bring, can also require the virtues of courage and compassion.[35]

The account, if true, goes some way toward meeting Williams' criteria for success, laid out at the end of section 4. We have provided an account of a general incapacity that someone who mistakes their real

[33] TT, 198.

[34] For a partial defence of this claim and further references, see Michael Lacewing, 'The Psychology of Evil', in P. Tabensky (ed.) *The Positive Function of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 112–126.

[35] Michael Lacewing, 'Emotions and the virtues of self-understanding', in S. Roeser & C. Todd (eds.), *Emotion and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 199–211.

interests may suffer from, an incapacity grounded in distortions of their experience and understanding of themselves and others as a result of developmental factors and defence mechanisms. This account is independent of ethical considerations, and is not tailored specifically to yielding an ethical account of what our real interests consist in. In its focus on the passions, the self and our relationships, it is, however, 'closely related to the complex aspects of human personality that are involved in the ethical life',[36] and we can see how it favours some form of ethical life. We shall have to consider, in the next section, just how determinate it is in its results.

We can make out the form of the argument – but is it true that people leading a non-ethical life fail to recognise their real interests, and that they do so as a result of a distorted understanding of themselves and others? I think the case applies very widely, but this is not enough for the more stringent objectivity$_{P2}$, that the ethical life is in the best interests of each and every individual without exception.

As a challenge to the claim that a non-ethical life is never in someone's interests, Williams offers us a 'a table of naïve perceptions'.[37] First, an ethical life can have costs, and someone may be unhappy because they are leading an ethical life. Christine Swanton provides the example of an aid worker who works ceaselessly saving lives and relieving suffering in a challenging, tropical country. She is often ill and tired, doesn't experience joy in her work, and dies prematurely from a virus.[38] Second, are non-ethical people always unhappy? Some 'Renaissance grandee' (the Medici?) may have been horrible, but 'dangerously flourishing'. Are there contemporary examples of this? Perhaps such people 'seem sleeker and finer at a distance… Perhaps we deceive ourselves about the past. Or perhaps it is an achievement of the modern world to have made it impossible to rear that type'.[39] Third, an ethical life may conflict with other goods, other real interests we have. Suppose someone is somewhat horrible, but has some pleasures and success. Moving to an ethical life may lead them to be less horrible, but perhaps they would suffer other kinds of psychological conflict or have to give up certain creative activities: any number of artists have been not very

[36] See N. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010) for a review of the empirical evidence related to the link between self–other representations and the ethical life.

[37] ELP, 46.

[38] C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Ch. 4, §2.

[39] ELP, 46.

nice, and it is not obviously false that their art was sustained by traits that would not fit well with an ethical life or inspired by their unhappiness itself.

Does a non-ethical life *necessarily* involve distorted understandings of self or others? Could a person leading such a life recognise themselves truthfully, not just in the abstract, but in experiencing the emotions and desires that they have, their deepest motivations for living non-ethically? Many of us cannot, but perhaps some could. Even if a non-ethical life involves distorted understandings of self and others, do such distortions *always* lead to a worse life than truthfulness? Just what is the place of truthfulness in a good life?[40]

We must conclude that an appeal to truthfulness concerning our passions and relations with others doesn't straightforwardly defend objectivity $_{P2}$, the claim that an ethical life is best for each. But it does, I think, show that an ethical life is best for most, and it has illuminated the central importance of truthfulness to an ethical life.

7. Objectivity$_{P3}$

We conclude with a brief discussion of objectivity $_{P3}$. Is there a single form of the ethical life that is best for human beings (in general, not 'for each individual')? Can we counter relativism, to say of some culture's ethical practice that it is wrong because it harms the real interests of human beings? We could pick up again the example of family honour – are at least some forms of thought and practice surrounding this idea, such as 'honour killings' in response to the sexual

[40] There is some evidence in psychology that we are happier when we distort the truth about ourselves and others. Taylor and Brown famously argue that people who harbour positive illusions about themselves and others do better than those who do not (see S. Taylor and J. Brown, 'Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health', *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988), 193–210; S. Taylor and J. Brown, 'Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction', *Psychological Bulletin* 116 (1994), 21–27). However, Badhwar has demonstrated the uncertainty of their conclusion (Neera Badhwar, 'Is realism really bad for you? A realistic response', *The Journal of Philosophy* 105 (2008), 85–107). Even if Taylor and Brown are correct, it is very important that the illusion is mild, as people whose estimations either of themselves or others are more seriously inaccurate do less well. It is also not established whether those holding positive illusions do so from ignorance, a cultivated mild self-deception, or choice – each of which have quite different implications for the place of truthfulness in a good life.

transgressions of a family member, to be rejected as objectively$_{P3}$ wrong because they form no part of the best way to live? Can we find evidence in social science and psychology on which to rest not just this claim, but the claim that there is a single way of living, with its constitutive ethical concepts and judgements, that is best?

As previously, I shall just consider the implications of truthfulness, arising from the psychodynamic model of the mind. Truthfulness demands that our ethical life involves an undistorted understanding of the self and relations to others. Forms of ethical life that require or rest on distortions can be condemned on that basis. Williams notes that when you and I deliberate about what you should do, not only (as noted above) may I correct your wishes and prevent them from turning into beliefs, the reverse may happen: 'I may reinforce your fantasy, and we may conspire in projecting wishes into a deceptive social hologram'.[41] And this can happen not just between you and me as a pair, but within our social group. Defence occurs not only at the individual psychological level, but the social and cultural level as well,[42] for example in scapegoating or us-them thinking that makes 'us' virtuous and 'them' the source of all wrongdoing. Furthermore, whole cultures can seek to repress particular passions in the way in which the social self is constructed, relationships are set up and normalised. Examples here include gender norms (how did people fail for so long to realise that traditional gender norms were not in women's best interests??) and – if Nietzsche is right[43] – the place of *ressentiment* in moral thinking. This shows that values themselves can embody defensive and distorting thought, and to live by such a value is *per se* to fail to recognise how things really are. In this vein, and following Nietzsche, Williams comments that 'the most potent critique [of ethical attitudes] rely… on showing up those attitudes as resting on myths, falsehoods about what people are like'.[44] That a whole society can live by such values is possible precisely because aspects of human nature are not acknowledged or recognised as a result of defensive thinking and forms of relating.

We may say, then, that the demands of truthfulness condemn certain ethical values and practices, and place constraints on which forms of ethical life are best. But this is not a complete defence of objectivity$_{P3}$, as these constraints will not yield a single determinate

[41] TT, 198.

[42] See D. Armstrong and M. J. Rustin (eds), *Social Defences against Anxiety* (London: Karnac, 2015).

[43] *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

[44] ELP, 71.

way to live that is best. Williams claims, rightly I think, that 'it is hard to believe that an account of human nature… will adequately determine one kind of ethical life as against others',[45] and again, 'There are many forms of human excellence that don't unite into a harmonious whole: Human beings don't have such a determinate nature as to ground a timeless demand for a particular kind of life'.[46] Throughout history and the variety of human cultures, even allowing for only those values and practices that in shaping the self do not distort it, we do not find a particular way to live.

This is not to give up on objectivism$_{P3}$ completely. There are firm foundations in human nature – we have here discussed the dynamics of human psychology – that are sufficient to reject the view that 'anything goes' or that it is not possible to critique ethical practices that differ from our own. We can provide general conditions on a good ethical life for human beings. The value of truthfulness must form part of such a life, together with the implications we have explored above, for structures of the self, virtues and relations with others. But within these conditions, we must recognise a great deal of pluralism. We cannot live by general, uninterpreted values. Values require specification. For example, even if courage turns out to be a universal virtue, we can't simply say 'Be courageous' – we must have an idea of what courage is, how it is manifest, what it requires of us and in what social situations. Courage for Homer is very different from courage for us today. This will apply even to truthfulness itself, even truthfulness about one's passions and relations to others. What does this require of us, what does it involve? For example, I have spoken of defence and distortion, but said little of 'authenticity' or being 'true to oneself', which are particular cultural understandings of these ideas.

Although the account given fails to provide objective$_P$, determinate answers to the question 'how best shall we live?', it does provide us with 'confidence'[47] that fundamental ethical values and virtues centred around truthfulness offer a realistic ideal for us to live by, a good way to live.

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[45] ELP, 52.
[46] ELP, 153.
[47] ELP, 170.