

## Contingency Inattention: Against Causal Debunking in Ethics

Regina Rini (rarini@yorku.ca)

York University, Toronto

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Imagine a crossover universe where the great figures of the British literary canon wander about, in and out of their own narratives, sometimes running across one another. Our scene: some dusky moor, the night vapors settling on nondescript ruins. Two figures enter, left and right. One, hunched over his endlessly wringing hands, staggers the uneven ground, muttering. The other halts, erect and aloof, and inspects the first without masking his disdain. (The muttering figure may be imaged incarnate as Kenneth Branagh or any other player. But the latter must, simply must, be presented to the mind in the person of Benedict Cumberbatch.)

The moon emerges briefly from the murk, and only now does the hunched figure notice his observer. Yet he continues speaking in monologue, seemingly oblivious to how he is taken.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: What do I do? What *can* I do? My uncle has killed my father and my mother complicit. I have a duty to avenge my father's death! But, no! Perhaps my ghostly informant is demonic. Perhaps I am mad!

Sherlock Holmes: This is tiresome. You're not mad, though I'm quite certain you are afflicted with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Hamlet: What, sir? How would you know of me or my troubles? I speak of a grave decision, a weighing of lives, a matter of realities both spectral and moral!

Sherlock: Look at your fingernails. You've chewed the right hand down to the quick, and there is fresh dirt beneath the left. You've just come from a graveyard, haven't you? Fondling the skulls of jesters, I take it?

Hamlet: What? How can you know these things? What are you then, another deceiving spectre? Perhaps you will tell me different. What *should* I do?

Sherlock: I am bored. Look, you're clearly an indecisive prevaricator. You haven't made eye contact once since you saw me. Your right leg is still twitching. What you *should* do is of no importance, because I know exactly what you *will* do. You'll carry on entertaining yourself with aimless soliloquies, until you attempt to pursue both your options at once and ruin each.

Hamlet: Why! You, sir - you are an asshole!

And Hamlet is right. Sherlock Holmes is an asshole. Because no matter how accurate his deductive analysis or the reliability of his predictions, Sherlock is incapable of relating to people *as people*. He encounters a person spiraling in moral crisis and he sees only an obnoxiously florid bundle of contingencies. A person is merely another causal nexus – a bit fussier than a mousetrap or a turbine, but no different in principle. There’s something deeply wrong with thinking of people that way.<sup>1</sup>

That is the topic of this paper: why is it so terrible to be like Sherlock? We are all sometimes tempted to reduce sprawlingly complex moral agents down to tractable causal thumbnails. In Kantian fashion, I will argue that doing so involves a type of agential disrespect. But more specifically, I will claim that this amounts to vicious defection from an existentially valuable social practice. We are all trapped in a fragile compromise between seeing ourselves as richly autonomous deciders – a perspective necessary for making any sense of the grip morality holds over our will – and the grim fact that there is a truthful sense in which we really *are* just as Sherlock sees us. We achieve these psychic acrobatics only through the help of others, who treat us as if we were the genuine articles of agency we wish to be. Sherlock Holmes defects from this practice - as do we all whenever we dismiss another’s moral beliefs as mere causal misfires.

### **1. The target: Causal debunking in ethics**

I will return to grandiose metaphysics soon. First, I need to get clear on the nature of the thing I am criticizing. It is common both in moral philosophy and in public moral and political debate. It works like this: A and B disagree about some substantive moral matter. Person A wishes to discredit B’s view, thereby winning the argument. A invokes some hypothesis about the causal origins of B’s moral judgments, exposing their grubby genesis to the unforgiving disinfectant of dialectical sunlight. B is meant to feel newly aware of having been ill used by their own psychological history, thus free to openly embrace the superior wisdom of A’s preferred view.

It will help to have examples in mind. The first will be familiar to analytic philosophers: neuroscience as normative theory by others means. The conflict began with Joshua Greene’s wielding of fMRI data against deontological ethics. According to Greene (2008; 2014), when people intuit that it is *not* morally okay to use others as mere means toward utilitarian ends, this is simply the causal product of an evolutionarily outmoded ‘alarm-like’ emotional system attuned to keeping our primate ancestors from needless violence, no longer fit for purpose in our well-ordered mass technocracy. Foes of utilitarianism, pleased to give as they get, proffered a worrisome correlation between consequentialist thought and the personality profiles of psychopaths (Bartels and Pizarro 2011). On both sides of this debate, the point is the same: when there is an honest reckoning with the causal origin of those wrong intuitions, the dialectical scale will tilt decisively in our favor.<sup>2</sup>

A second example runs via history and sociology rather than individual psychology. Think of Nietzsche’s (1887/1989) debunking of Christian slave morality, allegedly forged in the uncleanly sewers

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this framing of my project to Rima Basu, whose paper at the 2018 Pacific APA in San Diego helped me see a thread running among various disordered philosophical homespuns littering my mind. Along with contributing to my Kantian anxieties, it was Rima who fingered Sherlock Holmes as the prime suspect. See Basu (2019).

<sup>2</sup> I’ve previously discussed psychological debunking like Greene’s in other places, like Rini (2016), Rini (2017), and Rini and Bruni (2017). You can usefully think of this paper as an attempt to make good on some of the dialectical rumors I’ve previously let slip.

of suppressed resentment. An entire family of Marxist theories circle the related concept of ‘false consciousness’, which holds that the systemically disempowered languish in constructed ignorance of their own interests, praising a moral system they would renounce if only they could plainly see its treacherous causal-historical roots.

A third example: some speculative political causation from a surprisingly parallel quarter, the Youtube guru of Toronto, Jordan Peterson. Peterson is trying to explain the origin of postmodern philosophy, which he claims arose when unreconstructed Marxists became embarrassed by exposure of Stalin’s and Mao’s atrocities in the 1970s. Rather than admit their ideology was flawed, claims Peterson, the Marxists rebranded as postmodernists and kept seeking gullible converts:

It was about power. And everything to the postmodernists is about power. And that’s actually why they’re so dangerous, because if you’re engaged in a discussion with someone who believes in nothing but power, all they are motivated to do is to accrue all the power to them, because what else is there? There’s no logic, there’s no investigation, there’s no negotiation, there’s no dialogue, there’s no discussion, there’s no meeting of minds and consensus. There’s power. And so since the 1970s, under the guise of postmodernism, we’ve seen the rapid expansion of identity politics throughout the universities. It’s come to dominate all of the humanities—which are dead as far as I can tell—and a huge proportion of the social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Peterson sees no need to engage with the substantive claims of postmodernism or ‘identity politics’, because it’s all just driven by a sneaky psychological impulse toward power.

What these three examples share is the use of causal explanations to perform a dialectical end-run around substantive disagreement. Rather than directly argue down an opponent’s position, they instead aim to disqualify it. This sort of genealogical debunking is rhetorically powerful, and sometimes may even be appropriate in formal theory-construction.<sup>4</sup> But whether or not genealogical debunking is theoretically legitimate, I intend to argue that it is morally suspect.

One final clarification of my target. We can distinguish two types of causal debunking in ethics, which vary by scope.<sup>5</sup> *Global* debunking targets *all* moral judgments, on the basis of some suspicious feature of the moral domain itself. In philosophy, this is commonly expressed as a form of error theory (Mackie 1973, Joyce 2006). Then there is *selective* debunking, which aims to disqualify only certain moral judgments on the basis of their particular causal history, leaving other judgments intact. My target in this paper is selective debunking. (I think there are other problems with global debunking, but they at least do not exhibit the defection problem I will discuss below.)

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Philipp, ‘Jordan Peterson Exposes the Postmodernist Agenda’. *The Epoch Times* June 21, 2017. [https://www.theepochtimes.com/jordan-peterson-explains-how-communism-came-under-the-guise-of-identity-politics\\_2259668.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/jordan-peterson-explains-how-communism-came-under-the-guise-of-identity-politics_2259668.html) [[accessed March 19 2019]]

<sup>4</sup> There is a substantial philosophical literature on whether knowing the causal origins of a belief should count to undermine it. See e.g. White (2010) and Srinivasan (2019). I discuss this for ethics in particular in Rini (2013) and Rini (2016).

<sup>5</sup> The distinction appears in several places. I find Kahane (2011) most helpful. For more on how I think the distinction works, see the final sections of Rini (2016).

## The Antinomy of Contingency

I start from an antimony: a pair of mutually opposed propositions, both of which seemingly must be true. Kant is especially famous for antimony-mongering, and it will be useful for us to begin from his Third Antimony in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Thesis: It's not the case that absolutely all the appearances of the world can be derived from causality according to laws of nature and can't be derived from anything else. To explain these appearances we have to assume there is another causality, that of freedom.

Antithesis: There is no freedom; everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature. (Kant 1781/2017, 219-220)

In contemporary terms, we talk about this as an antinomy between free will and determinism; it *seems* as if our choices are up to us in some fundamental sense, yet it *also* seems as if our choices are just more bits of the causal nexus of the world, just as subject to lawlike determination as everything else. It seems that these claims cannot both be true at once, and yet it seems that both are indeed true. Kant himself (in)famously addresses his antinomy by invoking transcendental metaphysics and drawing a distinction between theoretical and practical perspectives.<sup>6</sup> In the *Groundwork* Kant is prepared to claim that “with a *practical intent* the footpath of freedom is the only one on which it is possible to make use of one's reason for deeds and omissions”.<sup>7</sup>

Many people find the tension of this antinomy so compelling that it drives their views across seemingly unrelated issues. Consider a famous 1960 debate in the pages of *Science*, between cyberneticist Norbert Wiener and IBM researcher Arthur Samuel. Wiener claimed that artificial intelligence would one day develop capacities exceeding those intended by its human programmers, thereby acquiring moral significance in its choices. Samuel (one of the first great AI programmers) claimed this was impossible – and his showstopper argument appears to be simply pounding his fist on Kant's Thesis:

There is (and logically there must always remain) a complete hiatus between (i) any ultimate extension and elaboration in this process of carrying out man's wishes and (ii) the development within the machine of a will of its own. To believe otherwise is either to believe in magic or to believe that the existence of man's will is an illusion and that man's actions are as mechanical as the machine's. Perhaps Wiener's article and my rebuttal have both been mechanistically determined, but this I refuse to believe. (Samuel 1960, 741)

For whatever reason (no doubt Sherlock could explain), I've never found the Third Antinomy quite as compelling as Samuel and others do. But I won't pursue it here. I've introduced it simply to get us in the spirit of where I'm going instead. Because I want to suggest we attend to a different antinomy, one that I'll call:

## The Antinomy of Contingency

Thesis: My moral judgments sometimes have the phenomenal character of necessity – as if I simply *must* do what morality requires of me.

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<sup>6</sup> For interpretation of this rather difficult part of Kant, see e.g. Allison (1990) and Vaida (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Kant (1785/2002, Ak 4:455-456). My reading of Kant on these points is heavily indebted to Korsgaard (1996a).

Antithesis: For any particular moral judgment, there is some contingent causal history that fully explains why I feel bound to abide by it.

Let me take a moment to explain both parts of this antinomy, then why they seem incompatible. First, the thesis. What do I mean by the phenomenal character of necessity? I am trying to articulate a *feeling* that I think we all have, from time to time, about the way that moral demands on our will are *non-optional*. The demand morality makes on me is phenomenally authoritative in a way that my ordinary preferences or desires are not. In fact, it can often trump my ordinary preferences or desires. Suppose I discover a child in mortal peril. It feels to me as if I *simply must* try to save the child. It doesn't matter whether I want to, whether that's good for my interests.

Think of that scene in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, where Indy and Short Round are trapped in a chamber with a slowly-lowering spiky ceiling. Willie is outside the chamber, and there is a switch she can pull to save them – but the switch is deep in a hole swarming with enormous insects. Willie desperately desires to not stick her arm into the millipede swarm. But Willie knows that she *simply must* go ahead and do it, no matter how strongly she desires otherwise. Morality demands it of her, so into the swarm goes her hand – and Indy and Short Round are duly saved!

I'm not the first philosopher to draw attention to this idea (though perhaps the first via problematic 80s films). Harry Frankfurt (1982) argues that certain normative attitudes – such as love – are “volitional necessities” that structure our moral agency. Richard Joyce (2006) claims that experiential overridingness – which he calls “practical oomph” – is the conceptually distinguishing feature of morality. Lisa Tessman (2015, 73) argues that some of our moral commitments hold the status of “non-negotiable requirements”, so binding on the will that doing otherwise is literally unthinkable. The point is to characterize how it *feels* to be in the grip of a demanding moral conscience – sometimes, it feels to us as if we *simply must* do what morality orders, and this demand is not contingent on any fact about our preferences or desires.

The second part of the antinomy is also familiar. If we start looking into the psychological origins of our moral judgments, we will find that *each* of them can be causally explained in some way that involves contingent facts about our history, either as individuals or as a species. One infamous illustration of this point comes from Charles Darwin (1871, 73):

If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.

Darwin's point is that our protective moral attitude toward our families (also the same example cited by Frankfurt, Joyce, and Tessman) is a contingent feature of our evolutionary history. If our evolutionary environment had gone differently, then we'd all feel quite differently about the *right way* to relate to our offspring – indeed, we'd feel just as volitionally bound to kill off excess eaters, even if we liked them, because that is what we would feel that morality requires.

Causal debunking arguments fit somewhere on a spectrum from *proximal* causation (you feel that way because of causal factors in your personal psychological environment or history) to *distal* causation (you feel that way because of long-ago causal factors in the species' evolutionary development). What they share is a recognition of the causal contingency of our moral judgments.

Whether aeons ago or just last week, something happened, which could have happened otherwise, and that causal difference would have made us feel morally bound to do something very different.

When we are being honest with ourselves, we have to admit that it is probably true that *every* moral value we hold is contingent in this way. Even deeply core values, such as our attachment to our own children, could have gone otherwise if the causal history had been different.<sup>8</sup> But we don't like to admit this fact, because doing so is incompatible with our experience of the binding necessity of our moral experience.

It might look like I've just played a little trick with words. You might think that the senses of 'necessity' and 'contingency' – as they feature in the two theses of my Antinomy – are not really at odds with one another. So, you might say: when I experience phenomenal necessity, the thing I experience as necessary is my *choosing this action right now, given the motivational set I happen to have*. In other words, given that I am constituted as I happen to be, I really can't choose otherwise. *This* thought is compatible with the point that I contingently might have been constituted in some other way, with some other motivational set. Hence there's no real antimony at all, just a misleading way of framing two distinct ways of describing our actions.

I wish that were the answer, but I don't think it's right. Here's why. When I feel that morality necessarily requires me to do something, the *content of my experience* includes the idea that the action truly must be done. When Hamlet grapples with his terrible choice between filial piety and peacefulness, he does *not* experience this as two rivalrous psychological compulsions. (That, of course, is how Sherlock sees the situation.) Rather, from the inside these two moral demands *feel* like something much bigger than mere psychological happenstance. Thinking of them in that way is not true to the phenomenology.

We can see this if we attend to the experience of a moral agent marshalling herself to overcome a strong preference simply because that is what morality requires. Think of Willie, outside the spike-crushing chamber, looking at that switch covered in squirming millipedes. She feels a strong compulsion to stay away from the switch. She also feels a strong compulsion to reach for it, because that's the only way to save Indy and Short Round – and that is what morality requires. The latter impulse wins out, in part *because* it has the phenomenological character of robust necessity.

Imagine Willie stops and thinks to herself: 'Well, it certainly feels like I *must* reach through those millipedes, but then of course it only feels that way because I've been contingently constituted to experience that particular impulse as non-negotiably demanding. In reality it's just as contingent as all my other impulses, including my very strong preference to keep the hell away from millipedes. So it seems like I'm just choosing between two strong impulses, both of which are contingent accidents of my psychological constitution. If I do what morality demands, it's not *really* true that this is what must be done. It's just that I'm gripped by an especially strong impulse.'

And maybe Willie still reaches through the millipedes and saves Indy and Short Round, despite her strong preference otherwise. Maybe she really does *have no choice* but to do so, given how she is constituted. Maybe this is an accurate way of describing the situation, from a theoretical perspective. But – here's the point – it would be tremendously alienating for Willie to think that way about herself,

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<sup>8</sup> Attempts to exempt certain moral judgments – such as utilitarian axioms – are tendentious. See Lazari-Radek and Singer (2012) and objections by Kahane (2014) and Rini (2016).

about her own moral choice, in the very moment of making that choice. It would amount to regarding one's moral values as paroxysms of the will, which carry one along involuntarily, and for no more reason than contingent accidents of psychology.

Freud once offered something like this picture to characterize the grip of moral conscience over a melancholic patient:

The super-ego has the ego at its mercy and applies the most severe moral standards to it; indeed it represents the whole demands of morality, and we see all at once that our moral sense of guilt is the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego. It is a very remarkable experience to observe morality, which was ostensibly conferred on us by God and planted deep in our hearts, functioning as a periodical phenomenon. For after a certain number of months the whole moral fuss is at an end, the critical voice of the super-ego is silent, the ego is reinstated, and enjoys once more all the rights of man until the next attack. (Freud 1932/1989, 83)

To accept that the felt necessity of morality is *merely* inescapable psychological impulse is to treat all of morality as just a lifelong Freudian "attack". And, I claim, this is not existentially tenable. None of us (except maybe messed-up Sherlock) seriously allow this way of thinking while we are in the middle of settling a difficult moral dilemma. While we are deciding, we take the phenomenal necessity of morality very literally indeed: it truly feels like *this is the thing that must be done*, not 'this is the thing that I'm contingently constituted to be unable to avoid doing'.

And that is the essence of a Kantian antinomy. Perhaps there is a theoretical perspective from which the apparent incompatibility of the thesis and antithesis dissolves. But that theoretical viewpoint is not accessible from *within* the practical perspective through which we live our lives and make our moral choices.<sup>9</sup> We cannot remain true to the phenomenology of moral necessity while simultaneously describing it to ourselves as the result of causal contingency.

How, then, to resolve the antinomy? Can it be resolved? I will suggest that the best we can do – and, in fact, how we actually do live our lives – requires a social process of treating one another as if we really are necessarily bound by the demands of morality. In effect, we mirror for one another our phenomenological self-conception, providing it a form of external validation, a valuable social practice from which selective causal debunking is a treacherous defection. But that's getting ahead of myself. Before coming to my positive view, I need to set aside two other ways of resolving the antinomy of contingency.

### **Two unhappy attempts at dismissing the antinomy: Mystermanism and Fictionalism**

You can make an antinomy go away by decisively rejecting one of its two propositions. I'll now briefly consider each of the ways we might do this. I don't have the space to properly rebut either, but it's important to distinguish them from my own view.

First, we can reject the antithesis, upholding the thesis. In other words, we can affirm that phenomenological necessity of morality is *veridical*. There really is some sense in which we *must* do

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am merely echoing a thought you can find in a number of philosophers of broadly Kantian persuasion, especially Nagel (1986) and Korsgaard (1996b).

what morality demands, and it's simply irrelevant that there is a contingent story to tell about the origins of our moral impulses. Most moral realists endorse this resolution (e.g. Dworkin 1996, Nagel 1997).

But there is a familiar cost: realists seem to be forced to claim that it is all just a big *coincidence* that our contingent causal history happened to drive us to do what we really *must*. So: Darwin's bee-people really *must* protect their children as we do, but contingently they missed out on acquiring the right motivations to do so. Lucky us, our contingent evolutionary history just happened to motivate us to do what we anyway really must do. But – here's the cost - how plausible is this coincidence? Given the enormous possibility space of causal contingencies, what are the chances that we've hit upon the independently really-must?<sup>10</sup>

One answer is Mysterianism. This approach insists it's just true that our contingent motivations have hit upon the really-must, though we can't explain why. Kant himself held this view: "it is entirely impossible for us human beings to have an explanation how and why the *universality of the maxim as a law*, hence morality, should interest us." (Kant 1785/2002, Ak 4:460) Contemporary philosophers sometimes go this route as well. Kieran Setiya, confronting the contingency of our moral attitudes in the form of internally-coherent interlocutors who radically disagree with us, suggests that in ethics we must apply a different sort of epistemology, one that is (mysteriously) "biased toward the truth".<sup>11</sup> Thomas Nagel (2012) goes furthest of all, to the point of *rejecting* the Antithesis. Nagel claims that if Darwinian theory implies our fundamental moral values are merely contingent, then Darwinian theory must be wrong.

Another answer is Fictionalism, which embraces the Antithesis. This approach holds that we ought to simply accept that the experiential necessity of morality is an illusion, and self-consciously reconstruct morality as a game of useful pretense. Richard Joyce (2001) pursues this route, arguing that playing along with morality is instrumentally useful to our collective prudential ends, so we ought to keep it around for that reason. A variant view comes from another moral error theorist, Jonas Olson, who claims that we should continue to endorse our moral beliefs despite knowing they are systematically false, again because this has useful motivational results.<sup>12</sup>

I think these are both unhappy resolutions to the antinomy of contingency. Each places an overly strong grip on one of the theses, leading to an unhappy view of our relation to contingent reality. I don't have the space here to carefully rebut each, but I'll offer a quick diagnosis of their troubles. (If you are a defender of either, I don't expect you to be persuaded.) The Mysterians are forced to assert an inscrutably lucky connivance between what morally must be done and what we happen to be motivated to do anyway, which is nothing but grit in the gears of any plausibly naturalist approach to philosophy.

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<sup>10</sup> Arguments of this sort are sometimes framed as objections to the metaphysics of moral realism. But they are probably better understood as epistemological objections, which kick up untenable skeptical worries for value realists. See Street (2006) and McGrath (2008)

<sup>11</sup> Setiya continues: "We must hold that, at the most basic level, nonmoral evidence supports particular moral beliefs—ones that tend to be correct—or that such beliefs are justified without evidence. Of course, there is no guarantee that we are in the right. Perhaps our interlocutors' beliefs are justified, while ours are not. We have no way to address that question that is independent of whether their beliefs are true. But so it goes. There are no guarantees in the epistemology of any beliefs. We do the best we can". Setiya 2010 ('Does Moral Theory Corrupt Youth?'), 217.

<sup>12</sup> Olson (2014). For detail on my worries about Olson's positive view, see my review of the book, Rini (2017b).

And the Fictionalists espouse an existentially arid conception of morality, which evaporates like Hume's philosophical speculations upon the merest contact with lived reality.

I have not refuted these positions, of course. But I have situated them in relation to the antinomy of contingency, and I've suggested that neither gets the whole story right. The mistake, I think, lies in trying to escape the antimony by prioritizing either of its constituents. The better approach, I'll now claim, is to look deep into the antinomy and embrace what we find there: its two propositions are indeed mutually incompatible and are indeed both true.

### **A Social 'Solution' to the Antinomy**

This is another way to 'solve' an antinomy: find a palatable perspective that gives due respect to both of its propositions, so that the antinomy is no longer quite so intractable. I'll now argue that we necessity-feeling/causally-contingent humans have already figured out how to do this. We've developed a collection of social practices that *presuppose* the truth of both sides of the antinomy. These practices are called moral discourse.

We can find our way to this position by noticing that each of the antinomy's propositions is most at home within a different perspective. The phenomenal necessity of morality fits within a distinctively first-personal perspective; it is *as* a particular moral decision-maker that *I* experience *my* own values as necessarily binding on *my* will. And the causal contingency of morality is distinctively available from a third-personal perspective; it's when we try to describe ourselves as just more furniture of the universe that our rampant contingencies become obvious.

This framing bookends another numerical personhood: the second-personal perspective.<sup>13</sup> We relate to other people as curious metaphysical hybrids; you are unlike me in that you are a component of the contingent world strictly outside my mind, yet simultaneously you are like me in that you (presumably) possess your own interior world, presumably populated with its own phenomenal necessities. At times you *do* seem to be just more furniture of the universe, but I can't quite sustain that image, since it risks the horrific thought that you'd regard me the same way. The second-personal relationship is thus deeply ambiguous – and ambiguity is just what coping with antinomy demands.<sup>14</sup>

There is another way to put this point. What the second-personal perspective offers me is an *external* validation of my first-personal sense of phenomenal necessity. I desperately want to believe that my experience of morality's bindingness is more than solipsistic mania. Yet I will not get that validation from third-personal reality, which unflatteringly insists that I am contingent through and through. But other people *are* external to me, and they *will* validate my phenomenal experience of necessity, because they get the same back from me. External validation, second hand.

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<sup>13</sup> I am obviously indebted in this section to Stephen Darwall (2006). Less obviously, though just as certainly, I owe much to Simone de Beauvoir (1948) (alas, exegetical unpacking of the latter debt will have to wait for another day).

<sup>14</sup> As Elise Springer (2013, 30) puts a similar point: "Our understanding of the social is informed neither by the causal third-person stance of scientific observation nor by the reflective first-person stance of free and reasoned deliberation. In attending to our sociality, we experience such Kantian dichotomies as particularly hollow."

How do we accomplish this feat of second-personal magic? Through a set of social practices that treat each other's claims of being necessarily bound by morality as veridical, *even when we do not agree with them*. This point is crucial. We practice a strange sort of deference to one another's moral views. When someone claims that they morally *must* do such-and-such, our default response is to treat this assertion with respect, even when we do not and *cannot* agree that anyone is truly bound to act in that way.

This point requires examples. First, consider the idea of conscientious objection in wartime (Asheri-Shahaf 2016; Nehushtan and Danaher 2018). A conscientious objector says: I feel morally bound, I *must* not participate in this war. The rest of us disagree (suppose we think the war is justified and all have a duty to support just wars). But we treat the conscientious objector as morally different from someone who merely says, 'I really don't want to risk myself in a war' or even 'I'm just so terrified of warfare'. We do not treat extremely powerful preferences or fears as legitimate excuses, but we *do* treat phenomenal moral demands that way. And we do this even when we don't agree with the alleged demand upon the objector's will. At least sometimes, we defer to a person's self-reported inability to do as we demand, precisely *because* they report a moral constraint on their will.

A second example: hypocrisy. We treat hypocrisy as a distinctive sort of vice, one with a peculiar nature (Isserow and Klein 2017; Fritz and Miller 2018). Suppose a fundamentalist preacher tells me that homosexuality is deeply immoral, and I think he's very wrong about that. Then I discover that he's engaged in lots of clandestine gay sex. I say: 'what a hypocrite!'. My harsh judgment is aimed at the inconsistency between his view and his actions, not the actions themselves (which I think are perfectly fine). One diagnosis of what's going on here is this: when the hypocrite claims gay sex is morally wrong, he is supposed to be reporting a powerful feeling of his will being bound by morality. But when we find out *his* will wasn't bound quite that powerfully, we resent his earlier false claim. In effect, he'd been trading on our (partial) deference to his self-reported moral commitments which we now regard as an abuse of trust.

Third: moral courage. This is somewhere between the last two. We can admire someone for standing up for their moral beliefs at great personal cost, *even when we don't agree with the content of those beliefs*. Often this admiration takes the form of appreciating the *strength of their commitment*. Think of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, saying (probably apocryphally) "Here I stand, I can do no other." Luther claims he simply has no choice; his conscience compels him. If you find anything to admire in this figure, it needn't depend on you thinking Luther had the morally correct answer. It's simply that we respect a person who honestly grapples with the sincere demands of conscience, and we make some allowances for this in our esteem.

Fourth, moral persuasion. When we want to convince others to change their behavior, we try (first) to present them with moral reasons, rather than simply employing whatever causal levers will work. We regard it as *a better outcome* that a person act rightly because she came to see the moral force of reasons rather than merely being scared by the contingent threat of punishment (Rini 2018). This is, again, because we take seriously their claim to be phenomenologically bound to do other than what we wish, and we prefer not to resolve that impasse by relating to them through mere contingencies.

I take these all as examples of social practices in which we partly defer to people's self-reports of being bound by morality. This doesn't mean we immediately sign on to whatever social policy is

favored by their commitments, but we *do* give them more leeway than a person caught shirking social norms simply to satisfy a strong preference. I suggest that we do all of this *because* we recognize in the other person's report an echo of our own feeling, at other times, that we morally *must* do something that others disagree with. Our social practices allow attacks of conscience to excuse uncooperative behavior because we need to continually reflect back to one another external validation of phenomenological necessity, even when we don't agree on the substantive details.

So: our social practices presuppose the truth of phenomenological necessity. Yet they also, at the same time, presuppose the truth of our contingent nature. This point about social practice is what drives Hume's theory of moral responsibility. Hume famously claims that our holding one another morally accountable is not only *compatible* with causal determinism, but in fact *relies upon* our implicit assumption that "the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature". When people form expectations about others, "they take their measures from past experience, in the same manner as in their reasonings concerning external objects; and firmly believe that men, as well as all the elements, are to continue, in their operations, the same that they have ever found them" (Hume 1748, § 8.16-8.17). In the *Treatise*, he insists that unless a person's actions emanate from "some cause in the character and disposition of the person" then "it is impossible he can, upon its account, become the object of punishment and vengeance" (Hume 1738, § 2.3.2.6).

Hume's claim is that we constantly presuppose that other people's behavior is just another of the contingencies of the universe. 'If left to her own devices, *then* she will never do the right thing. But if you put pressure on her, *then* she will step up and do what must be done. But not him – he's a different case. If he's pressured, *then* he just falls apart.' Come to know a person, and you come to know the circuit diagram of contingencies between input treatment and output behavior. We talk – and think – this way about one another all the time.<sup>15</sup>

Isn't there an inconsistency here? How can it be that our social practices simultaneously take phenomenal necessity seriously, as a thing apart from ordinary motives, and *also* implicitly regard people as always manipulable by mere contingencies?

Luckily for us, there's no divine avatar of consistency looming over human social practices. There's nothing forcing us to make all the ways we engage with one another line up neatly to one metaphysical standard. And that is fortunate indeed for our need of an ambiguous second-personal perspective, from which we are all both contingent furniture of the universe and beings truly bound by the utter necessity of our moral experience.

I am now paralleling Strawson's famous end-run around the problem of causal determinism. Strawson claims that we have two ways of relating to others: the 'participant attitudes' that treat people as fully responsible for their conduct and the 'objective attitude' that regards them as mere causal problems. Normally we reserve the objective attitude for people whose capacity for action seems defective in some way – the drunk and otherwise disorderly – but Strawson perceptively notes that we have the *option* of wielding the objective attitude against perfectly normal people – at least for a time:

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<sup>15</sup> Two contemporary philosophers who've immensely enriched this Humean point are Arpaly (2003) and Calhoun (1989; 2004).

We look with an objective eye on the compulsive behaviour of the neurotic or the tiresome behaviour of a very young child, thinking in terms of treatment or training. But we can sometimes look with something like the same eye on the behaviour of the normal and the mature. We have this resource and can sometimes use it; as a refuge, say, from the strains of involvement; or as an aid to policy; or simply out of intellectual curiosity. Being human, we cannot, in the normal case, do this for long, or altogether. (Strawson 1962, 10)

The objective attitude is a social tool, one we can deploy to escape those strains of involvement, but it is not one we can employ often. We naturally revert to social practices that presuppose participant attitudes. And the same is true for our attitudes to contingency and phenomenal necessity. Both are socially available to us, though neither is realistic as a permanent way of life (not even for Sherlock, who is not real after all).

We are now nearly able to say just what is so bad about causal debunking: it attempts to wield the tool of contingency analysis in a way akin to the objective attitude. But so far we've seen only that this is *unusual*. We need one more piece of theory to see why it is objectionable.

### **Goffman and contingency inattention**

If we really want to understand social practices, it might be best to look beyond philosophy. Erving Goffman was one of the giants of twentieth century sociology. His book *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) provides a range of conceptual resources for making sense of how we treat one another.<sup>16</sup> Goffman's key insight is to posit 'gatherings' as ontologically distinct entities, constituted by seemingly trivial social practices. Our norms of etiquette, politeness, etc. might seem inconsequential, but in fact they "give body to the joint social life sustained by a gathering, and transform the gathering itself from a mere aggregate of persons present into something akin to a little social group, a social reality in its own right" (1963, 186). In fact, this constitutive relationship makes it very important to us that people go along with our social niceties. Goffman explains:

A particular gathering, as a gathering, may have hardly any significance at all... [C]oncern for the rules governing behavior in social situations derives from the fact that infractions may be taken as a sign that the offender cannot be trusted to refrain from exploiting his position in the situation for purposes of assault, interference or accosting, even though the original infraction itself may be felt to be harmless. Hence, those who practice a particular involvement idiom are likely to sense that their rules for participating in gatherings are crucial for society's well-being – that these rules are natural, inviolable, and fundamentally right. And these persons will need some means of defending themselves against the doubts that are cast on these rules by persons who break them. (1963, 234-5)

Notice the self-conscious irony of this framing. Goffman, of course, is aware that norms of etiquette and politeness are extraordinarily contingent – much of his book consists in cataloging the endless varieties they take in different societies at different times. Yet when Goffman points out that people treat the rules as "natural, inviolable, and fundamentally right" he is not exactly scorning this view. After all, treating these contingent rules as if they were necessary is exactly what allows for the

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<sup>16</sup> Philosophers have made surprisingly little use of Goffman. A notable exception is David Velleman, though he draws more on another of Goffman's books, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In part due to the shared influence from Goffman, some of what I say here overlaps with Velleman's *How We Get Along* (2009).

constitution of gatherings. The pressure to preserve social relations is so strong that it can override otherwise important moral considerations. Our entire form of social life relies upon this:

Even when two persons have great moral cause for mutual animosity they are likely to be willing to exchange a few civil words if brought together unavoidably... This minimal courtesy has a special significance for us, for a failure to exchange this kind of greeting exposes such persons to the situation at large as two persons who are filled with hostility to each other, and not with the mood of the social occasion. To cut someone is thus to express lack of respect for the gathering at large, to display flagrant insensitivity to the minimal solidarity the gathering demands from all its participants. (Goffman 1963, 116)

The prototype case is a nice dinner party, easily spoiled by standoffish nemeses, but Goffman intends the point much more generally. Pointedly refusing to treat one person with politeness is not *just* an insult to that person – it is an offense against the entire gathering, whose very existence *as* a gathering depends upon according ostentatious seriousness to an absurd grabbag of utterly contingent expectations.<sup>17</sup>

Maybe now you see where I am going. Our solution to the antinomy of contingency is just another set of seemingly dispensable social practices: special attitudes toward conscientious objection and hypocrisy and moral courage – as if we all really took seriously claims of phenomenological necessity. But when we adopt a third-personal perspective on these practices, they instantly seem arbitrary and unreal; it's contingencies all the way down, just like etiquette. And then, yet again, lingering on *this* point is itself a failure to uphold the norms that keep us all, together, going.

Goffman introduces an especially useful concept for understanding our attitudes toward one another. *Civil inattention* refers to the practices by which strangers acknowledge one another without taking it too far: “one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one’s attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design” (1963, 84).

Exercising proper civil inattention is an everyday skill, yet requires a careful balance – and getting it wrong is surprisingly consequential. Attending to a person too much may amount to the “hate stare” that southern American racists directed at African Americans taken to be intruding on social contexts reserved for whites. And refusing to acknowledge a person’s presence at all amounts to “nonpersons treatment” that may be felt as an extraordinary insult – or a powerful punishment (Goffman 1963, 83). Goffman borrows a vivid example of the violation of civil inattention from Charles Dickens, who recorded his experience one evening in Baltimore:

After dinner we went down to the railroad again, and took our seats in the cars for Washington. Being rather early, those men and boys who happened to have nothing particular to do, and were curious in foreigners, came (according to custom) round the carriage in which I sat; let down all the windows; thrust in their elbows; and fell to comparing notes on the subject of my personal appearance, with as much indifference as if I were a stuffed figure. I never gained so much uncompromising information with reference to my own nose and eyes, the various impressions wrought by my mouth and chin on different minds, and how my head looks when it is viewed from behind, as on these occasions. (Dickens 1961, 136-7, as quoted by Goffman 1963, 152)

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<sup>17</sup> For a related set of ideas, see Calhoun (2000)..

Civil inattention is a constant of human social interaction, a kind of background condition to all the social practices our gatherings rely upon, and its violations are signal failures of groundrules respect. And – I claim – our moral practices have a very similar role for *contingency inattention*. We acknowledge one another's contingent nature, just enough for Humean practices of mutual accountability to remain viably influential. But drawing extravagant attention to our contingency is a fundamental violation of the tenuous practices that bind us together in external validation of our experience of phenomenological necessity.

This is why Sherlock Holmes is an asshole. Much as he might stare at your face for too long, attending to your headshape and posture like the curious men of Baltimore leering into Dickens' carriage, he also stares for too long into your contingency. Dispensing with mysteries of motive and action, he rudely directs the audience's glare onto your phenomenal necessity and shows it, ultimately, for nothing necessary at all. You knew it all along, of course, just as Dickens knew his head was oddly shaped. But we rely on others to help us maintain the pretense that we are neither entirely odd-looking nor entirely contingent. And Sherlock the asshole fails to provide this reassurance.

So, as we will now see, does anyone who wields causal debunking to settle moral disagreement.

### **Debunking as defection**

Attempting to causally debunk another person's moral beliefs amounts to selectively suspending external validation of their experience of phenomenal necessity. It exposes one person to a form of existential vexation that none of us can truly weather. For that reason, it amounts to a type of defection or disloyalty. A person who sincerely attempts to convey the experience that her will is necessarily bound by moral requirements will naturally feel oddly assailed when met with the suggestion that her values can be explained away as mere contingencies.

Philosophers may be poorly situated to appreciate this point. Exposing our moral beliefs to abnormal antagonism is a professional hazard to which most of us have become neurotically inured.<sup>18</sup> And I want my philosopher readers to really *feel* what it at stake. So I will need to provide a demonstrative debunking of something else that philosophers value, something other than morality - perhaps one of the most esteemed values in the self-ascribed identity of analytic philosophers. Yes, let's invite Sherlock over to the armchair. It is time to causally debunk philosophical rigor.

(I assume that you, dear reader, are an analytic philosopher who does care about rigor. If not, to get the full effect you'll have to imaginatively construct a parallel case aimed at something you do value. Meanwhile, keep reading -- because if you're the rare philosopher who *doesn't* valorize rigor, I suspect you're going to enjoy what's about to happen.)

First, here is a distal evolutionary explanation for your valuation of rigor. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar (1997) has extensively studied the evolutionary origins of human talking behavior. Most of our talking is casual social gossip: who did what with whom. It seems we adopted this practice as an

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Haidt, citing empirical evidence, says that "If you are able to honestly examine the moral arguments in favour of slavery and genocide (along with the much stronger arguments against them), then you are likely to be either a psychopath or a philosopher." (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008, 196).

efficiency gain on our primate ancestors' demonstrating their social loyalties through endless hours of mutual fur-grooming. We do the same with mere chatter. That allows us to support much larger social groups on a relatively small brain.

But: if chatter is just about keeping tabs on one another, why do some people spend so much time talking about abstract things like metaphysics? Simple, Dunbar suggests: it is signaling behavior, like the peacock's flagrant tail. If you have the resources to waste on idly abstract chatter, you must be a pretty good genetic investment. So that's all there is to it. When you praise analytic philosophy's ability to parse reality into nice clear rigorous abstractions, all those glittering propositional variables, you're just puffing up your ingrained simian mate selection.

Second, a mid-distal historical explanation for why we care so much about rigor. Most of us were trained by people (who were trained by people) who spent time at places like Oxford and Harvard in the 1950s. Here's something we know about those mid-century philosophical savants: many of them were obsessed with puzzles. In her study of how academics evaluate cross-disciplinary research proposals, sociologist Michèle Lamont quotes a geographer informant identifying the origins of analytic philosophy's peculiar nature:

I did a degree at Oxford and I did philosophy, politics, and economics. I decided it was pretty sterile then, and I think it's become even more awful since... All these guys who taught me had been taught traditional history of philosophy, Kant and Hume, and so on, Descartes. But they dropped all of that because they heard there was this linguistic philosophy without any historical background, so you didn't get any sense of philosophy as an ongoing human preoccupation, what function did it play. Instead it had turned out into a way of solving puzzles... These guys had all been in British intelligence in the war, so they all love to sit around thinking up clever things to say, and that's a pretty goddamn sterile way of life. (Lamont 2009, 66-7)

Lamont's other informants are less cruel, but nearly all agree that philosophy is a "problem case" in the humanities, characterized by what a philosopher informant calls "the ability to clarify a position or an argument to a degree that hasn't been done before, a certain kind of rigor in working through the implications and details of a position", and what everyone else calls "isolation", a "lack of common ground", and "absolutely unintelligible research proposals" (Lamont 2009, 65-6). The causal picture, then: analytic philosophers' valorization of rigor is just a defensive reconstrual of a disciplinary stretching back to post-war puzzle-fanatic founders who wished to reduce the world's complexity to manageable clarity: an arid sudoku-ization of human experience.

Third, a proximal explanation for valorization of philosophical rigor. Everyone knows there is a certain tendency toward the autism spectrum among the philosophical community. I'm not aware of any empirical evidence (philosophers are not a high priority for psychological study), but there is research linking the autism spectrum and mathematical ability (Baron-Cohen et al 2007). A prominent psychological theory holds that autism is an extreme form of a 'systemizing' style of thought that favors abstraction and formality. It is a plausible hypothesis that a discipline well-stocked with people who tend toward systemizing cognition will develop norms that uphold the value of rigor.

These are three causal explanations, ranging from distal to proximal, for the philosophical preference for rigor. None of them assume or imply that rigor actually *is* valuable in any way. Hence we have a strong causal debunking argument against the proposition that philosophical rigor has genuine

value.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it is simply something that analytic philosophers have been contingently induced to valorize by a confluence of evolutionary, social, and psychological factors.

Do you feel attacked? Have I been disloyal? I'm certainly not playing the game as one is supposed to. I haven't given you any direct argument against the disciplinary value of rigor, nor any proposal for what philosophers ought to value instead. Further, I'm sure you can guess that I've always been a bit suspicious of philosophical rigor and have been quietly collecting etiological ammunition against it for years. But then what about my own philosophical values? Why haven't I subjected *them* to this unforgiving causal scrutiny? No doubt there's some truth-indifferent story we could tell for how I came to esteem whatever it is that I want philosophers to do. So where do I get off treating the etiological vulnerability of rigor as something especially dubious, just because that favors my own inclinations?

Exactly. That is what selective causal debunking amounts to: opportunistically applying a universal solvent only against the favored values of your opponent. It's merely obnoxious in tussles over philosophical norms. But in the case of morality (for normal people anyway, if not philosophers) it goes beyond this. It is a strategic defection from contingency inattention, the social practices that provide us all with second-personal validation of our experience of phenomenal necessity. It is a weaponization of Strawson's objective attitude. It is how the Sherlockian asshole in each of us conspires to silence the inconveniently disagreeing deliberations of some other Hamlet.

### **Nietzsche's hand mirror**

I don't intend for any of this to suggest an absolute, deontological prohibition on debunking of moral judgments. My Kantianism does not extend that far. All I've claimed is that doing so is a kind of moral cost, not something that should be incurred simply to win an argument or to find a work-around to resolving substantive disagreement with sincere interlocutors.

There might be special cases where the effects of debunking are so important as to overwhelm the worries I've raised here. If, say, you come across a latter-day Hitler preparing to enact great evil, and you believe that the *only* way to stop him is to existentially addle him with speculative ruminations on the origins of his warped worldview in his failed artistic career, then go forth and do so with my blessing. But I think we should be careful about how often situations like that occur; most of the time we are engaging with reasonable and sincere moral agents, and for that reason most of the time we do better to engage with the substance of their beliefs, not simply their origins.

To the future delight of generations of high school existentialists, Nietzsche (1886/2009, aphorism 146) wrote: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." Fair enough. But what if you could hold the abyss in your hand, turn it away from your own eyes, and force others to enter its uncanny communion?

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<sup>19</sup> Truth-indifferent causal etiology is the standard form of global debunking in metaethics; see Mackie (1973), Harman (1977) and Joyce (2006). This is the same argument form used selectively in ethics by Greene (2008).

That is the fundamental aspiration of causal debunking in ethics. We find ourselves confronted by persistent moral disagreement with those whose phenomenal necessities diverge from our own. So we defect from the social practices that allow us all to sustain external validation of our first-personal perspectives. We turn the abyss on our opponents, hoping they will newly see themselves as we do: mere furniture of the universe, objective attitude defectives whose vaunted moral necessities are mere grubby contingencies. And we, safely behind the mirror, imagine ourselves untouched and upright.<sup>20</sup>

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