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Aesthetics, Nature and Religion: Ronald W. Hepburn and His Legacy

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Editorial Note

On 18–19 May 2018, a symposium was held in the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Aberdeen to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the death of Ronald W. Hepburn. The speakers of this event – Arnar Árnason, Guy Bennett-Hunter, Pauline von Bonsdorff, Isis Brook, David E. Cooper, Cairns Craig, Douglas Hedley, James MacAllister, Michael McGhee, Fran Speed and Endre Szécsényi – discussed Hepburn’s oeuvre from several perspectives. ¹ For the current enterprise, the collection of the revised versions of their papers has been supplemented by the contributions of other scholars who had been unable to attend the symposium. These papers together with a bibliography of Hepburn’s published works amount to two journal volumes: the current issue (vol. 10) contains the first part of our collection, the second is forthcoming in the next one (vol. 11).²

Ronald William Hepburn was born in Aberdeen on 16 March 1927, he went to Aberdeen Grammar School, then he graduated M.A. in Philosophy (1951) and obtained his doctorate from Aberdeen (1955), his tutor was Donald MacKinnon. He taught as Lecturer at the Department of Moral Philosophy at Aberdeen (1956–60), and he was also Visiting Associate Professor of Philosophy at New York University (1959–60). He returned from the United States as Professor of Philosophy at Nottingham University. In 1964, he was appointed as a Chair in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, between 1965 and 1968 he was also Stanton Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion at the University of Cambridge. From 1975 until his retirement in 1996, he held the Professorship of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh. He died in Edinburgh on 23 December 2008.

His philosophical interests ranged from theology and the philosophy of religion through moral philosophy and the philosophy of education to art theory and aesthetics. “Taken over his career – as Stephen Watt writes –,”

¹ On the occasion of this anniversary, there was another academic event organized also by Endre Szécsényi: a three-paper panel ‘The Roots of Environmental Aesthetics in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: in Memory of Ronald W. Hepburn’ presented by Emily Brady, Cairns Craig and the organizer, chaired by Alexander Broadie, in the 31st annual conference of the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society at the University of Glasgow on 21 July 2018.

² I am grateful to Peter Cheyne and Cairns Craig for their help and support.
Hepburn’s work represents an impressive exploration of what remains after the abandonment of a theistic worldview. His work has been seminal in the development of environmental philosophy and in extending the understanding of aesthetics beyond the experience of the art object.3 Indeed, he has consensually been considered ‘the founder of the discipline’4 of the environmental and everyday aesthetics, based on his papers of the 1960s in which he pioneered these aesthetic approaches. In the most recent historical narrative of modern aesthetics, Paul Guyer devotes a sub-chapter to Hepburn; this one-and-half-page long article in his monumental enterprise undoubtedly expresses the historian’s appreciation (especially, if we consider how many significant theoreticians of the twentieth-century history of modern aesthetics are disregarded). Guyer discusses Hepburn’s contribution to modern aesthetics in the chapter ‘Aesthetics and Knowledge of Nature’ together with Allen Carlson’s and Malcom Budd’s theoretical achievements. Guyer almost exclusively relies on Hepburn’s most-cited paper ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’ of 1966, and concludes that Hepburn’s ‘account of the aesthetic experience of nature seems to draw upon Kant’s analysis of aesthetic experience in general while supplementing it with emphasis upon the possibility of emotional response as part of such experience’.5 Beside Immanuel Kant, of course, Hepburn too exploited insights and ideas that have been presented by Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, Rudolf Otto, Iris Murdoch, John Niemeyer Findlay, Mikel Dufrenne, or the early Romantic poets just to mention a few from amongst the authors who had significant impact on his aesthetico-theological or aesthetico-mystical thinking.

Hepburn never dealt with these various fields separately, instead, he was deeply interested in their overlaps and mutual impregnations which led to the formation of a characteristic philosophical language and vocabulary. In Emily Brady’s words: ‘In his exploration of the links and boundaries between the aesthetic, moral, and religious, he was drawn to a particular set of ideas: wonder, imagination, the sublime, freedom, life’s meaning, mystery, respect for nature, and the sacred’.6 He was not an expert of a certain philosophical

area, rather he was a *philosophes* in the ancient Greek sense of the word, his ‘philosophical and personal lives [were] intimately connected, shaping each other significantly.”

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December 2018

Cover: Ronald W. Hepburn. A detail of a photograph taken by his younger son on the celebration of his 80th birthday in York in March 2007. By courtesy of Mrs Agnes Hepburn.

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7 Ibid.
Ronald W. Hepburn’s Agnosticism

Mary Warnock

In what follows, I shall concentrate on one of Ronald W. Hepburn’s major works on the philosophy of Christian religion, *Christianity and Paradox;* first published in the United Kingdom in 1958, two years before the death of J. L. Austin, and when the impact of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work was at its height. Hepburn's aim in this book was to explore the effect of linguistic philosophy on theology, or rather on the perceived intelligibility of discourse concerning God in the Christian religion. The date of his book is significant, and explains the somewhat limited range of his concept of theology; for the hugely influential book, Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus Christ and Mythology* was not published in English translation until 1963 (though Hepburn may well have been aware of Bultmann's work before this date, for the publication in England of his *Kerygma and Mythos* was as early as 1948). But at any rate, the idea of ‘demythologising’ the gospels had not become the integral aspect of theology that it later became. Indeed, Bultmann himself first used the term, ‘to demythologise’. I remember attending a series of classes entitled *Myth,* given by the theologian, Maurice Wiles, in the 1970s, in which he was moving towards his view that God played no active part in the world, after his first act of creation; and that the miracles recorded in the gospels were all to be treated as myth or legend, though there was a good deal of reluctance among the mainly clerical members of the class to abandoning the Empty Tomb.

In any case, for much of his book Hepburn is chiefly concerned with the meaning, if any, to be attached to the word ‘God’ itself, in the light of the insights about meaning, and the uses of language for purposes other than making statements that characterised the analyses of linguistic philosophy. On this issue, he comes out of his discussion, he says, as a regretful agnostic. But he insists that ‘agnostic’ be taken seriously: he does not know whether or not there is a God, or what God would be if He existed; and he is ready to change his mind. Towards the end of the book, he seems prepared to accept the

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teaching of Jesus of Nazareth as an intelligible account of, or at least a pointer in the direction of the nature of God, and as our nearest approach to encountering God. For he rejected as strictly meaningless existentialist accounts, such as Martin Buber’s, of direct encounters with God, in an ‘I–Thou’ relationship, for Buber the only way there was to know God.2

Other things have changed since 1958. For instance, the number of regular church-goers has markedly declined. And this has, in itself, led to some attempts to make Christianity more ‘accessible’ such as translating the Latin Mass. The most obviously misguided of these was perpetrated by the Anglican Church itself in the rewriting of the services of the Book of Common Prayer in the 1980s, which, though popular with some church-goers (and deeply unpopular with others), seems to have done little to bring in new believers. Partly as a result of this decline in numbers, but for other reasons as well, the 1960s and ’70s saw a growing attempt at more radically rethinking Christian doctrine than one that any purely philosophical fashion could bring about. A perhaps precipitating factor here was a book entitled Honest to God, which was published in 1963 by John Robinson.3 This book caused great scandal among traditional church-goers, and was very widely read. At the time, Robinson was Bishop of Woolwich, and though he was told by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, that he should consider his position, he nevertheless remained bishop until his retirement. He argued that, while the image of God had generally been brought down from that of an old man in the sky, it still needed to be brought nearer, within ourselves, or perhaps even dispensed with altogether, if the Christian religion were to survive. Later, from the 1970s until the beginning of the twenty-first century the Cambridge philosopher and College Chaplain Don Cupitt wrote a flurry of short, popular books, notably, Taking Leave of God of 1980 and After God: the Future of Religion of 1997. There is certainly no hint of such a demand for radically rethinking the basic doctrines of Christianity in Hepburn’s work of 1958. Instead, there is a call for caution, so that we do not fall into speaking nonsense when we speak of God. How are we to distinguish what is muddle and can be resolved by clear thinking, from what is deep mystery, and must remain, as acceptable paradox? This is the problem he sets out to solve.

In his book, Hepburn does not directly refer to Wittgenstein’s three lectures on religion, delivered in Cambridge in 1938. But this is not surprising. They fall chronologically between his early and his late work; and they

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exist only in the form of notes taken by Yorick Smythies who attended as a student. The only thing that we can be fairly certain of his having said is that religious people and non-religious people do not contradict each other. But is this a look ahead, as the Oxford theologian, and later Bishop of Durham, Ian Ramsay, supposed, to the different Language Games and different forms of life of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*? Ramsay, who was obsessed by Wittgenstein, hoped that here was an opening for the religious and the secular to co-exist peacefully, side by side, as different forms of life, which could not properly understand one another, just as, according to the *Investigations*, if a lion could speak, we would not understand him. Hepburn did not take this line; and Wittgenstein’s Cambridge lectures were, as far as we know, long before the gradual putting together of the *Philosophical Investigations*, even of the preliminary *Blue Book* and *Brown Book*, which were passed from hand to hand in Cambridge and Oxford during the 1950s.

There is one thing, however, that strikes one today about Hepburn’s 1958 theological writing: it is curiously unhistorical. By this I do not mean that he is not interested in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. As I have already said, he thought that through what we can know of him we can get the best approach that we can have to an existential encounter with God. It is rather that he seems to read the gospel accounts of Jesus’s life almost as if they were ordinary biographies. He was not apparently struck by the vast difference between the gospel-writers and ourselves, the huge gulf that lies between our way of thought and theirs. The theologian, Dennis Nineham – who died aged 94 in 2016 (and who had had the same philosophy tutor in Oxford, Donald MacKinnon, as was Hepburn’s in Aberdeen) – put the matter thus, forty-one years ago:

the characteristic religious difficulty today is a metaphysical difficulty, at any rate in this sense: where men seem to need help above all is at the level of the imagination; they need some way of envisaging realities such as God, creation and providence imaginatively in a way which does no violence to the rest of what they know to be true. They need to be able to mesh in their religious symbols with the rest of their sensibility in the sort of way supra-naturalist and messianic imagery meshed in with the sensibility of first-century people.

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Part of Nineham’s ‘metaphysical difficulty’ is that the nineteenth century brought about a revolution in historiography, almost as great as the revolution in biology. In order to understand history, we now believe that we need not only to be carried along by a good story. We demand more. As R. G. Collingwood put it, in his *Idea of History* of 1942, we must strive to ‘think the thoughts’ of the historical persons we study. We must never suppose that what was taken for granted by them is taken for granted by us; nor that what we assume is what they assumed. Thus between us and the authors of the Gospels stands a host of presuppositions about God’s interventions in the history of the world, the expected future of mankind, the signs and wonders that were to be expected, into which we must think ourselves back if we are to understand the spirit in which they, variously, wrote. We must try to think like first-century Jews. We must think ourselves into what prophesies were being fulfilled, what promises kept, and for whom. This is why I complain that Hepburn’s treatment of the Gospels is unhistorical. It treats them as familiar, not deeply alien. (It is, admittedly, quite hard, for those brought up to the kind of parallel universe of a Christian religious education, such as my own and Hepburn’s, to acquire an adequate sense of their strangeness).

For example, Gospel-readers have to make a decision as to what they are to think of miracles. Indeed, for educated people, this is hardly a decision any more: miracles do not occur. Far more than post-Darwinian biological science, it is the non-occurrence of miracles that makes it impossible for modern readers to take the gospels as literal truth. (After all, Darwin did more to upset people’s ideas of the Old Testament than the New). David Hume’s argument against the occurrence of miracles remains standing: you need to weigh the reliability of the witness against the improbability of the miracle’s having occurred; and there is never a witness so reliable as to come off best. (Hume’s *Essay on Miracles* was to have been published as part of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* of 1748, but was held back, as too damaging to his reputation, though it leaked out, and prevented his appointment in any academic post, and was not in fact published until after his death). Hume records that he first used this argument in conversation while walking with a Jesuit priest, with whom he was lodging in France, where he had gone to write his *Treatise of Human Nature*. The priest was telling him the story of a recent local miracle;
he was appalled by Hume’s argument, and pointed out that, if it were valid, it would apply as much to the gospel-writers as to local witnesses. Upon which Hume brought the conversation to an end, and went indoors to his room, to write his *Essay on Miracles*. We, still more than Hume, are brought up and educated to respect the primacy of science. If something occurs that seems inexplicable, we assume that it has not been properly described, but that given time and patience it can be brought into line with natural laws. It is a dilemma for religion to have to pretend that such a broadly scientific attitude to events in the world can be put on one side at will; and yet this is what seems to be demanded of us, in reading the gospels.

We can be sure, however, in our reading of the New Testament, that Jesus and his disciples were all Jews; and that the disciples went to Jerusalem some six weeks after the Crucifixion. There, following the commission of Jesus, they started to establish a new religion which they referred to as the Way. It was first named ‘Christianity’ in Antioch before the end of the century (though it is not clear exactly when). By this stage, at any rate the disciples will have called themselves Christians, and the gospel was being preached to Jews and Gentiles alike, though the Jews were increasingly rejecting it. So, by the end of the first century AD, Christianity was a new religion, and it spread rapidly until the accession of the emperor Constantine (312 AD), who, after a miraculous vision, made it the official religion of the Roman Empire. But, because Jesus and his disciples had been Jews, and it was as a Jew that Jesus had been crucified and had claimed to have been resurrected from the dead, an indefinite amount of the Jewish faith came over into the new religion, including the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of God. The God who had been the God of the Chosen People, the Jews, but also the Creator of Heaven and Earth, and the only true God, was still the only true God, and the Creator, but Gentiles and Jews alike were now his children, and could be redeemed from sin by belief in Christ. In the *Acts of the Apostles* there is evidence of some initial disagreement about whether Gentiles who became Christians had to abide by Jewish law – did they have to undergo circumcision? Did they have to be strict with regard to what food they might eat and what feasts they must observe? But gradually Christianity prevailed over Judaism in its own sphere, and the two sets of rites and rituals became separate. Christians were left, however, if not with the Jewish Law, still with the God of Abraham, the Creator of the world, a person, with a now newly declared interest in the redemption of his people, a people now potentially embracing as many as could be reached by the gospels.
This, then, is the God whom Hepburn, in his newly sharp linguistic mood, was seeking, and whom he tentatively failed to find in 1958. And he manifestly was not alone. There are now innumerable lapsed Christians, even agnostics or atheists, who nevertheless call themselves Christians (as well as a large number of people who have never encountered Christianity, or any other religion, at all). In his new book, Robert Reiss, a former Canon of Westminster, intends to offer comfort to people who loved the Anglican Church, but who were unable to believe in the literal truth of the gospels, or the creeds they recited in Church. It is an account, to me most illuminating, of the writing of the different gospels, the order in which they came, and the specific purposes for which they were probably composed. And it accomplishes a comprehensive task of demythologising. There was no miracle left, not the incarnation, the virgin birth nor the resurrection, still less the lesser miracles such as turning water into wine, or walking on the sea, in which the faithful any longer had to believe. Having disposed of all the miracles, however, Reiss still professes a belief in God.

It is less than clear, to me at least, what this belief amounts to, and how well it might stand up against Hepburn’s linguistic scepticism of 1958. Reiss follows the theologian, Paul Tillich, in asserting that human existence is necessarily ‘grounded on’ the existence of God; but recognizing that this is not in itself an especially perspicuous statement, he also adduces certain considerations which, he thinks, may lead us in the direction of a transcendent Deity, even if one of which or whom we can say little.

One such consideration is what Reiss regards as the otherwise inexplicable fact that human beings can understand one another when they speak. Now this is a very strange argument, and I may be guilty of misunderstanding it. I mention it, however, because it is certainly one that would have been rejected by Hepburn. Until this point, Reiss has seemed to regard human beings, like other animals, as unified creatures, the mental and the physical conjoined in the brain which is an enormously complex physiological organ, but a physiological organ nonetheless, offering no possibility of dualism, or a soul detached from a body. But in discussing human consciousness, or mutual understanding, as a pointer to God, he seems to revert to a total Cartesian dualism, the human individual being divided between the thinking and the spatial aspects, the res cogitans and the res extensa, completely different substances one from the other. Human communication was indeed a huge problem for René Descartes and

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the empirical philosophers who followed him, John Locke and David Hume among others. For according to them, when we perceive something we receive a mental entity in our mind, and it is to this entity, idea or impression, that our words ‘directly’ apply. And my impression is necessarily different from yours as it is in my mind and not yours, just as my pain is not felt by you. So how can we ever refer to anything that is common to us both? But the very revolution in philosophy which Hepburn witnessed, starting with the German phenomenologists, Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, and culminating in the later work of Wittgenstein, meant that human communication was no longer a mystery: we communicate because we are language-users, and language essentially refers to the common world we share. We do not, as Descartes, Locke and Hume supposed, learn the meaning of the word ‘red’ from the observation of a private red patch, referred to variously by philosophers as an ‘idea’, an ‘impression’, or a ‘sense-datum’, which only I can see, while you alone can see a different patch for yourself. If this were really so, it would indeed be questionable how my red relates to your red, and it might require a miracle for us ever to communicate with each other. But this is to mistake the nature of language. In fact, words are learned first and foremost by being related to the outside world (and only actually tentatively and with some difficulty to inner experience). If we each indeed had a private language it might take a miracle-performing God to account for our ability to understand one another. But given the essentially public nature of language, no miracle is needed to explain our ability. Once human beings evolved to adopt an upright stance, a long throat and a palate subtle enough for the articulation of words, then, though God might have set up the world, as some theologians would have it, in order that this might happen, no further intervention by God need be supposed. This was, after all, the great discovery of German phenomenology, that human consciousness is ‘intentional’, that is to say directed towards something other than itself; it is always, and at all times, consciousness ‘of’ something in the world.

In 1939, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, then close colleagues, went to Germany to visit Husserl about whose phenomenology they were beginning to hear. When he returned, Sartre wrote a short article in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which he edited with Merleau-Ponty. He was plainly in a state of high excitement. He had discovered a philosophy that was in revolt against what he called the ‘digestive’ view of perception, the Cartesian account in which he and Merleau-Ponty had been educated, according to which a subject...
was sucked into the consciousness of the beholder, to become a mental entity, an idea or impression:

Husserl persistently affirmed that you cannot dissolve things in consciousness. You see this tree, to be sure. But you see it just where it is: at the side of the road, in the midst of the dust, alone and writhing in the heat, eight miles from the Mediterranean coast. It could not enter your consciousness…7

Material things do not change their nature and become mental things in being perceived. ‘We are […] delivered from the “internal life” […] since everything is finally outside, everything, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others, […] it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men.’8 There is no third thing, no mental entity inside us which is what we ‘directly’ see. And there is thus no mystery here, to lead us to God.

Wittgenstein, though not prone to admit to having read the works of other philosophers, had read Husserl and understood the idea of intentionality. The things we do with language, the way language works, had become as much part of his philosophy as it was of Austin’s, by the beginning of the 1950s. He understood completely that we do not each have a private language, that indeed there can be no such thing as a private language, where each of us looks into a little box of our own, with something, or indeed perhaps nothing, in it, which we cannot share. We are not referring inwards when we talk, but outwards, just as Sartre had realised. And Ronald Hepburn would certainly not have been impressed by Reiss’s pathway towards God, via the need for a miraculous explanation of the existence of inter-intelligible human language. He understood linguistic philosophy far too well.

Nor, I suspect, would Reiss’s other pointers, the human pursuit of goodness, or truth, or the human sense of transcendent beauty, fare any better; for it is obvious that there is a human capacity to aspire towards such ideals, and they will serve as pointers to a transcendent God only to those who are already believers. Are we really to say that those who follow such ideals could not do so if there were no God? Let alone if the God of Christianity did not exist? This is surely a non-historical absurdity. Once again, those who are inclined

8 Ibid., 5.
Ronald W. Hepburn’s Agnosticism

on other grounds to assert the existence of God will call him in aid to explain these and other ideals, which are shared by many human beings. But others will ascribe them to the development in human beings of an imaginative power to conceive of such values: an increase of the aspects of life about which human beings are inquisitive, a separation and abstraction of the concept of morality from that of instinctive behaviour, and an appreciation of the fact that some things are to be valued for their own sake. All this is quite distinct from the idea of the God of Abraham. Hepburn quotes from St Augustine’s De Trinitate: ‘God was “good without quality, great without quantity, a creator though he lack[ed] nothing, ruling but from no position, eternal yet not in time”.’\(^9\) His question is simply whether such paradoxes make any sense. And he concludes that they probably do not.

It has to be said, of course, that there are believers, including, doubtless, many of the clergy, for whom there is something deeply satisfactory about their inability to explain these contradictions. They do not want to be able to understand what they are saying. It is enough for them that they feel a personal relation with this God, who goes about with them as someone to whom they can confess when they do wrong and express gratitude when they feel thankful for their lives or the beauties of the seasons. Their belief in God is something they carry round with them rather as some pre-school children are accompanied by a companion: it is difficult to say whether this person is believed in in the same way that, say, the child’s parents and siblings are believed in; but the companion is a presence, can sometimes be blamed when things go wrong, and definitely has to be taken into account by others, as well as the child herself. I remember having to drive home past a particular house in order to drop my youngest daughter’s companion, Squeeky, because he was staying the night there. And, of course, people who believe in God in this way are reinforced in their wordless and, on the whole, comfortable companion-ship by the regularities of the church year, the rituals and language of church services and the morality that is central to Christianity. But it was this half-belief that compelled Hepburn into regretful agnosticism in 1958.

It is time, then, to see what is left of Christianity if the miraculous is removed. If we discount the somewhat mysterious belief in a God who is the centre of Hepburn’s paradoxes, and to whom Reiss still rather desperately clings — somehow at the heart of things, somehow a person (though no longer necessary for the creation of the world; for, convinced as he is of the existence

\(^9\) Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, 16.
of numerous universes other than our own, Reiss holds that the conditions for the existence of life could have arisen by chance) –, if we discount all this, there is the acknowledged fact that Jesus of Nazareth was the inspiration of what became a new religion in the first century AD. This religion was known to St Luke, if he was the author of the Acts of the Apostles, as the Way, and it had separated itself from the Judaism of its founder by the end of the century. So we must ask from what this inspiration sprang if not from the miracles that were performed in its name? The answer must lie in the revolutionary morality preached by a charismatic Jewish teacher, highly critical of the state of the Jewish religious community of his own time, and believed by his disciples to be the Messiah, promised in the Jewish prophetic tradition. One must not forget that St Paul's letters were the texts written most closely in time after the death of Jesus, and it is these letters, and those of Peter and John, that probably reveal most about the birth of the new religion and its breaking away from Judaism. Some have thought St Paul and Platonism to have been the main components of Christianity. And yet, patchy and internally contradictory as the gospel stories are, and doubtless written with rather different audiences in mind, there is no reason to believe that they were deliberately misleading about the revolutionary nature of the moral teaching of Jesus. This is shown in some of the reported sayings such as the beatitudes, and the parables such as the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. These seem themselves enough to be the foundation of a new religion. It seems to me, therefore, that it was from such moral teaching that the new religion drew its inspiration; and the morality of Jesus, a morality of the heart, was set in explicit opposition to the kind of law-governed morality of the Pharisees, which had become empty and formalistic. It was this new morality that the stories of the miracles were designed to reinforce. So it is one more paradox of Christianity that it is these very miracles, the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, that now serve to call the whole of Christianity into doubt. Theologians have been far readier to acknowledge this than members of the practising clergy, who very seldom raise questions about the truth or otherwise of items of doctrine with their congregations, though they may once have learned about them in theological college.

In the passage from Nineham that I have already quoted, he remarks that modern people need help to be able to make sense of the idea of God, an idea that was perfectly familiar to first century Jews. And it is generally assumed that the idea of religion is dependent on the idea of God or gods. Indeed, the opening words of my book of 2010 read "The idea of God (or of gods) is
essential to religion, and without it religion would not exist.” Yet now I begin to think I was wrong. (And indeed, when I wrote these words, I was forgetting Buddhism.) We must remind ourselves yet again that Jesus was a Jew, and the Jewish faith was indeed faith in God, both as creator of the world, and as the giver of the law to his chosen people, the people of Israel. As we have seen, there was discussion among the disciples and with St Paul of the extent to which gentiles who adopted the Way were bound by the Jewish Law, and this could not have been settled all at once, or all in one manner. Obviously, since Jesus was the Messiah, and the fulfilment of the prophecies, there could not be complete discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New, but perhaps the God of Israel could not be transferred between the Jewish and the Christian faiths without major modification. Perhaps we should consider whether God is the centre of the Christian faith as he undoubtedly was of the Jewish. It is not, after all, a minor change, to switch from being a God with a Chosen People – always at hand to help them when they suffer oppression or to lead them out of exile – to being a God indifferently for all the people in the whole world. What does this even mean? Perhaps the new Christianity really needs a more abstract idea at its centre, less imbued with history and with particular personality. Perhaps Christians are barking up the wrong tree when they start their creed by asserting that they believe in God.

And there is an obvious candidate for the *sine qua non*, the central tenet of the Christian faith: the idea of love. This is, of course, not a new idea. It is the idea that caused such scandal in 1963 when expressed by the Bishop of Woolwich in his *Honest to God*. Later, in the 1980s and 90s, Cupitt’s books spreading from Cambridge explored the same ideas. And, at the very birth of Christianity, it was the idea expressed in the first century AD, in the first Epistle of John: ‘Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is Love’ (1 John 4:7–8). The Epistle-writer emphasises that this is not a new commandment, but the commandment that the disciples had been given from the beginning, and therefore that which they were commissioned by Jesus to teach to the whole world. If God can be said to be Love, then perhaps Love can stand in for God.

I believe, therefore, that it is perfectly possible to profess Christianity, while admitting to agnosticism or even atheism, as long as the value of loving one’s neighbour is paramount, bad though many Christians may be at carrying out

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the commandment. There has surely never been a period of history when the evils of hatred are more clearly to be seen; and the virtues of forgiveness, generosity and a sense of community may seem to take on a positively sacred nature that would justify their place at the heart of religion. For religions are, after all, necessarily, a creation of the human imagination; no other animals conceive of them. So gods are created in our own image, or in the image of our own best aspirations. It is not, therefore, as we are often told, that morality must derive from Christianity or not exist at all. It is rather that the values of Christianity derive ultimately from morality, which long pre-dated it; but they derive specifically from the morality of love, as preached by Jesus. To believe this, we do not need to believe in God. But we may call ourselves Christians, none the less.

Finally, the lasting value of Ronald W. Hepburn’s work seems to me to lie in his never-failing conviction that it is the imagination which alone can explain the uniquely human sense of the wonderful and the transcendental, whether experienced in the context of religion, or of our engagement with the natural world and our ‘aesthetic appreciation of nature’. That is an insight that it is valuable still further to explore.

The University of Cambridge
Is the Sacred Older than the Gods?

Guy Bennett-Hunter

At least since Anaximander’s *apeiron*, there have been philosophical questions about what, if anything, preceded the gods.1 But, as far as I know, the precise question that I address in this essay was first explicitly asked by Ronald W. Hepburn, in his essay ‘Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics’.2 He cites two sources for his question: Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard. While, in his ‘Letter on Humanism’, Heidegger does not ask the question in so many words, he does make some characteristically suggestive remarks in this direction:

In such nearness [i.e., of Being], if at all, a decision can be made as to whether and how God and the gods withhold their presence and the night remains, whether and how the day of the holy dawns, whether and how in the upsurgence of the holy an epiphany of God and the gods can begin anew. But the holy, which affords a dimension for the gods and for God, comes to radiate only when Being itself beforehand and after extensive preparation has been illuminated and is experienced in its truth.3

Bachelard is more explicit. In his *Poetics of Space*, in the context of a discussion of a poem by Pierre-Jean Jouve, he writes: ‘Pierre-Jean Jouve’s “forest” is immediately sacred, sacred by virtue of the tradition of its nature, far from all history of men. Before the gods existed, the woods were sacred, and the gods came to dwell in these sacred woods.4

In his essay, Hepburn is interested in the actual and potential relationships between religious and aesthetic uses of the concept of the sacred. Which leads him to the question: Does the concept have a valid meaning – an aesthetic meaning, say – that is logically independent of (and therefore might have preceded) the religious one, which seems most strongly associated with the metaphysical belief that God or the gods exist? In other words, is the sacred older than the gods? It is important to note that Hepburn’s approach to this question is synchronic, rather than diachronic. He is not so much interested in the historical development of ideas as their logical relationships. He helpfully provides further explication of what the rather poetic affirmative answers of Heidegger and Bachelard are actually claiming, as he reads them:

In less poetic terms, it is being claimed that we can make sense of ‘sacred’ without having already ‘grasped’ deity. ‘God is holy’ is not an analytic truth. If it were analytic, believers would be unable to rejoice in his holiness, singing ‘Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus’ with thankfulness and wonder. The logic here is parallel with the familiar analysis of ‘God is good’. To be able to praise God for his goodness, or to see ‘God is good’ as ‘news-giving’, cannot be simply a linguistic matter. ‘Sacred’, then, will also be logically independent of the concept of deity – ‘older than the gods’; and does it not follow that it is a concept we can deploy whether or not there is a God?\(^5\)

While he does not provide a definitive answer, Hepburn adumbrates his view on whether this claim is correct. In this essay, I set out my own answer within the guidelines that Hepburn’s sketch has laid out.

1 The sacred and the gods

In order to address the question, we must first ask, what does Hepburn mean by ‘the sacred’ in the familiar religious sense? He specifies six elements:

(i) A cognitive disclosure of a non-temporal divine reality that pervades the universe.

\(^5\) Hepburn, ‘Restoring the Sacred’, 116.
(ii) Following Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, a reference to something other than the forces of nature.

(iii) Yields access to a sense of life as meaningful or worthwhile.

(iv) Worthy of respect or veneration; not to be used as a means to ends.

(v) Ineffable.

(vi) Indispensable work done by background beliefs – e.g., refers to something actualised in God.6

We can see that many of these elements of the meaning of the sacred imply, if they do not actually refer to, God or the gods. They all seem, at first glance, compatible with the belief that God or the gods exist. The first, second, and fourth elements strongly imply a divine object of some sort. The ‘background beliefs’ mentioned in the sixth are metaphysical beliefs – and God is explicitly given as the exemplar of an object in which a sense of the sacred is typically actualised. Even the fifth element of ineffability (which I shall discuss in more detail), Hepburn explains in terms of an ‘ineffable intentional object’, which might well be a god. Here, he shares the perspective of many theologians, who explicate the notion of divine ineffability in the same terms. This series of strong connections between the sacred and the gods that Hepburn draws in the course of defining the former concept leads him, perhaps rather predictably, to sketch a negative answer to our central question. Referring back to belief in the existence of God or the gods, he writes, at the very end of his essay:

> to hold those religious-metaphysical meanings consistently in abeyance inevitably draws off much of what attracts us to the term ['sacred'] in the first place. Perhaps centuries of Christian theism have so impregnated 'sacred' with its religious relational qualities – belonging to God, emanating from God – that those strands are by now unsuppressible, cannot admit of bracketing, but reassert themselves whether we like it or not, and no matter whether the sacred was or was not older than God or the gods.7

We may note that Hepburn does not quite tell us whether he thinks the sacred is older than the gods – but he gives us reason to think he doubts it.

6 Ibid., 113–14.

7 Ibid., 127.
involved in treating the concept of the sacred as logically independent from the concept of deity, given how intimately the two concepts have been associated with one other – and for how long.

2 Why the sacred is older than the gods

My own answer tends in the opposite direction because I think quite differently about the concept of ineffability, which appears as Hepburn’s fifth element of the meaning of the sacred. It is worth pointing out that his move here is not unusual – the concept of ineffability has been an integral part of almost every philosophical discussion of religious experience since the early 1900s, when William James identified ineffability as one of the five ‘marks’ of mystical experience. I think that together with the third (the one about yielding access to a sense of life as meaningful), this element is of greatest importance when it comes to understanding the meaning of the sacred. I am also of the opinion that, rightly interpreted, these two complementary elements are logically incompatible with all the other elements that Hepburn lays out for us.

Firstly, my reasons for attaching such importance to the notion of ineffability owe to an argument put forward by David Cooper. That argument concludes that the only way we can terminate the regression regarding meaning that results when we search for ultimate meaning is by appeal to the concept of ineffability. It is only by appeal to the concept of ineffability, therefore, that we can explain the meaning of Life as a whole. And I agree with Hepburn that, if the concept of the sacred has any meaning at all, it will be as an appropriate designation for that which supplies ultimate meaning and therefore explains the meaning of Life. If this is right, then the meaning of the concept of the sacred must be equivalent to that of ineffability. Here, the concept of ineffability is understood to refer to what in principle resists conceptual grasp and literal linguistic articulation. And meaning is defined as a relation of appropriateness that something has to a context broader than itself, and ultimately a relation of appropriateness to human Life. Very briefly, this is how Cooper’s argument goes.

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10 The capitalization, which I adopt here, is used by Cooper to evoke Wilhelm Dilthey’s ‘das Leben’, which rules out purely biological senses of the term.
If the meanings of things, the concepts and values with which we invest them, must be explained in terms of their contribution to human concerns, practices, and projects – and therefore ultimately in terms of their relation of appropriateness to the human perspective (the world of human Life to which those practices and concerns themselves contribute) – how can Life itself and as a whole be said to have meaning? The answer is: only by placing it in a relation of appropriateness to what is beyond itself, independent of the human contribution, and ultimately real. This ‘beyond’ cannot, without circularity, be invested with the concepts and meanings that constitute Life – which it is invoked to explain – therefore it must be ineffable.

Secondly, the problem with Hepburn’s explication of ineffability in terms of some object is incoherent because it implies a familiar self-reference antinomy. In the literature on ineffability, it has been pointed out *ad nauseam* that we must be able to say enough about a putatively ineffable object to secure reference to it, identifying it as that to which the ineffability applies. And if we can say even this much about an object (as we must of any putatively ineffable object) that object cannot be ineffable by definition. In other words, even the bare, essential claim ‘$x$ is ineffable’ seems enough to violate the ineffability of $x$. Cooper’s argument implies, to similar effect, that it is impossible, without circularity, to invest the ineffable with the concepts, meanings and values, with which Life itself (and *its* constituents) are invested – whose meaning is already in question. From the phenomenological and pragmatist philosophical perspectives on which I draw, the concept of existence must be included among these. Here is Leszek Kołakowski reading the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl “Existence” itself is a certain “sense” of an object. Consequently it would be absurd […] to say that an object “exists” independently of the meaning of the word “to exist” – independently of the act of constitution performed by the consciousness.”

And finally, from a different (but complementary) philosophical angle, Silvia Jonas, in her recent study of the metaphysics of ineffability, has thoroughly dismissed ‘objects’ (alongside ‘properties’, ‘propositions’, and ‘content’) as plausible candidates for the relevant, non-trivial kind of ineffability.

If my views on the importance of the concept of ineffability and the incoherence of the notion of an ineffable object are right, those ‘religious-relational

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qualities’, which Hepburn rightly notices have impregnated the term ‘sacred’ for centuries, begin to evaporate. If the sacred has to be ineffable in order to be sacred, and if the term ‘ineffable’ cannot by definition be coherently applied to any objects, then an experience of the sacred cannot be the experience of some object, including any gods. It follows that the concept of the sacred, not only can but must be regarded as logically independent from the concept of deity.

The sacred is indeed older than the gods.

Silvia Jonas suggests that we understand the metaphysics of ineffability in terms of ‘Self-acquaintance’, an experience in which the ‘object’ turns out to be nothing other than the ‘subject’ – our primitive point of view on the world, for which there are any objects at all. I think it is for this reason that, in the closing pages of her book, Jonas begins to use the terms ‘experience of ineffability’ and ‘ineffable experience’ interchangeably. If the ‘subject’ becomes the ‘object’ of an experience which for that reason shipwrecks the subject–object distinction, it will in that case seem quite natural to say that an ‘ineffable experience’ amounts to an ‘experience of ineffability’ and vice versa.13

From a different angle, I follow phenomenologists like Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel to argue to the same effect: that the relevant kind of experience, an experience of ineffability – which we might call ‘religious experience’ – shipwrecks the subject–object split. That split is best viewed, with John Dewey, as a useful distinction to be transcended rather than a dichotomy.14 Marcel distinguishes between a ‘problem’, which can be dissolved by rational thought, and a ‘mystery’, which eludes such objectification. He defines a mystery as ‘a problem which encroaches upon its own data’.15 And the ineffable dimension of reality that Jaspers significantly calls ‘Transcendence or God’ is for him strictly interdependent with human existence. Both existence and Transcendence are modes of reality as a whole, which he calls ‘the Encompassing’. While we could, for the provisional purposes of analysis, say that Transcendence lies on the objective side of the encompassing, and existence lies on the subjective side, Jaspers insists on their interdependence. There is no existence without Transcendence: human existence is only realized in the presence of Transcendence, and Transcendence is, as it were, created

in the same moment that it is revealed to us. Jaspers sets this out as follows: “The encompassing that we are confronts the encompassing that is Being itself: the one encompassing encompasses the other. The being that we are is encompassed by encompassing Being, and Being is encompassed by the encompassing that we are.”

Not only is the sacred older than the gods, but the word ‘sacred’ cannot coherently be interpreted to refer any object at all. Twentieth-century theology has coped with this disconcerting fact by means of a post-Heideggerian move known as the critique of ontotheology (‘ontotheology’ being the jargon for a system of theology in which God is regarded as a being, especially the Supreme Being). Theologians have continued to use the traditional theistic language, while continually reminding the reader (with varying degrees of success, it has to be said) that the word ‘God’ does not refer to a being. Among others, Paul Tillich,17 Simone Weil,18 John Macquarrie,19 and Vito Mancuso20 have all argued (I think rightly) that, if we are to think of God as the explanation for everything that exists, the sacred ground and source of Being itself, we cannot also think of him as one of the things that exist – a thought which would introduce circular reasoning into theological explanation. And this is, of course, a thought that has much more ancient roots in Christian Neoplatonism, as well as branches that extend far out to the fringes of orthodoxy.

We can tell from the fact that they do not completely jettison the traditional theistic language (though they radically modify theistic concepts) that these contemporary theologians have recognized something important: while the concept of the sacred may be logically independent of the concept of deity, it does not follow that the language of deity is completely irrelevant to the concept of the sacred. So, I now want to set out some thoughts on how the relationship between the language of deity and the concept of the sacred should be construed. This task will involve some contextualization of the metaphysical language that Hepburn observed to have dominated for ‘centuries of

Christian theism’ – a language whose resonance he thought ‘unsuppressible’ when considering the concept of the sacred.

3 The concept of the sacred and the language of deity

So my question is: how best to resolve the tension between a concept of the sacred as ‘older than the gods’ (logically independent of that of deity) and the likely unsuppressible language of metaphysical theism? Given that the sacred is indeed ‘older than the gods’, Hepburn assumes that the familiar problems with metaphysical theism constitute a strong rational demand to jettison theistic language completely – or at least regard it as outdated and completely irrelevant to the concept of the sacred, which is best restored to its more rationally acceptable aesthetic context. But he justifiably regards this demand as unrealistic, given how deeply entrenched theistic language is in the history of Western thought. I admire Hepburn’s pragmatism, but given his inability to accept theism, he is caught in a dilemma. We cannot accept theism, given the familiar rational problems with it, but neither can we realistically jettison theistic language, given its cultural entrenchment. What, then, do we do? I have been arguing that the central role of ineffability precludes us from understanding the sacred in terms of objects – for example, in terms of theistic beliefs. So, if the sacred is indeed older than the gods, and theistic language is indeed unsuppressible, we need some account of how that theistic language (and other forms of religious expression) should be heard in relation to the concept of the sacred.

For our theological critics of ontotheology, this account is provided by theories of religious symbols. Such theologians maintain the identification I affirmed between the concept of the sacred and that of ineffability. This implies that it is, in the words of Tillich, ‘an insult to the divine holiness to talk about God as we do of objects whose existence or non-existence can be discussed’. But, for these religious thinkers, it does not follow from this, in turn, that religious expression should be abandoned – just reinterpreted in symbolic terms, in order that it may become an iconic form of expression, rather than a conceptually idolatrous one.

There are many reasons to be dissatisfied with a symbolic reading of religious expression, and I cannot go into detail here. But I want to contrast the

22 For more detail, see Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience*, 67–75.
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Briefly, the main problem is that symbols are objects which symbolically represent other objects, even if these objects are imaginary and do not exist outside the symbolic representation. To take a prosaic example, a symbol operates like a road sign indicating a nearby tourist attraction. But the concept of the sacred evokes an ineffable reality that transcends the subject–object distinction and is no representable object. It is therefore incumbent upon the defender of religious symbols to explain how a symbol (which is something within the subject–object distinction) can represent, or otherwise manifest, a transcendent reality that is unconditioned by that distinction. In my view, this is an impossible task. What we need are Jaspers’ ‘ciphers’, which are similar to symbols, but, crucially, have an ambiguous relationship to the subject–object distinction. It is by means of this cardinal ambiguity that Jaspers thinks ciphers embody ‘Transcendence or God’, which outruns that distinction, enabling us to transcend it.

Ciphers embody Transcendence, which is ineffable, in the only way that it can be embodied – they do not consist in statements about it, or otherwise represent it. Jaspers provides two metaphors to help us better understand how this happens: one of ‘language’, the other of ‘physiognomy’. Ciphers, he says, are the language of Transcendence (not Transcendence itself). This metaphor stresses the intimacy and immediacy of the relationship between ciphers and transcendence. It is not that a cipher is Transcendence, any more than the phonemes of a language are what a sentence of that language means. But Transcendence needs ciphers to be realized, just as linguistic meaning needs concrete phonemes. But unlike symbols and spoken languages, the language of a cipher is untranslatable and remains indecipherable. What a cipher embodies does not exist outside it and is not independently accessible. When T. S. Eliot says in The Waste Land, ‘I will show you fear in a handful of dust’, only the most pedantic reader would try to translate the poetry into prose, insisting that Eliot made a category error because a handful of dust cannot literally contain fear. When we read this phrase as a cipher of the ineffable, we see that the poetic language evokes what is already there, embodied in the sonority, the emotional and cultural resonance, of the poetry itself.

The physiognomic metaphor corrects the balance. Jaspers describes how a person’s involuntary gestures express something of his or her being. Similarly, with ciphers, Jaspers writes, ‘all things seem to express a being […] we
experience this physiognomy of all existence.²³ Whereas human physiognomy arguably expresses something that’s accessible in other ways (through empirical psychology, say), Transcendence is accessible only in and through its cipher physiognomy. Jaspers says, ‘This transparent view of existence is like a physiognomic viewing – but not like the bad physiognomy aimed at a form of knowledge, with inferences drawn, from signs, on something underneath; it is like the true physiognomy whose “knowledge” is all in the viewing.’²⁴

But human physiognomy is arguably just the same. Is what an angry gesture expresses located in some separate mental shrine beyond the angry person’s body? Or is the anger inescapably bound up with, and realised through, the body and its gestures? Fellow phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer both argue, in Gadamer’s words, that ‘what a gesture expresses is “there” in the gesture itself […] [it] reveals no inner meaning behind itself’.²⁵ Giving the example of a heated conversation with an angry person who is expressing his anger by gesticulating and shouting, Merleau-Ponty observes that ‘I could not imagine the malice and cruelty which I discern in my opponent’s looks separated from his gestures, speech and body’.²⁶ He continues, with poetic eloquence:

None of this takes place in some other-worldly realm, in some shrine located beyond the body of the angry man. It really is here, in this room and in this part of the room, that the anger breaks forth. It is in the space between him and me that it unfolds. I would accept that the sense in which the place of my opponent’s anger is on his face is not the same as that in which, in a moment, tears may come to his eyes or a grimace may harden on his mouth. Yet anger inhabits him and it blossoms on the surface of his pale or purple cheeks, his bloodshot eyes and wheezing voice … And if, for one moment, I step out of my own viewpoint as an external observer of this anger and try to remember what it is like for me when I am angry, I am forced to admit that it’s no different […] I am forced to acknowledge that this anger does not lie beyond my body,

²⁴ Ibid., III, 134.
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Whether or not Merleau-Ponty is correct about human physiognomy, the point of Jaspers’ metaphor remains: ciphers are significations without there being any object signified. As he puts it, ‘Signification is itself only a metaphor for being-a-cipher’. 28

So ciphers are ambiguous with regard to the subject–object distinction. Like languages, they are cultural phenomena that are both created and appropriated by us. Without us, there would be no ciphers. Yet ciphers must be appropriated from cultural and intellectual traditions that are older and greater than we are. In the terms of the subject–object distinction, Jaspers says, ciphers are subjective and objective at once. 29 It is through this ambiguity, which symbols lack, that ciphers can embody Transcendence, which outruns the subject–object distinction, eluding our cognitive and literal linguistic grasp.

Ciphers lie not only on the border between subject and object but also between the aesthetic and the religious – a boundary that greatly interested Hepburn and even motivated the question that I have been addressing in this essay. Ciphers are what George Steiner, in an aesthetic context, called ‘real presences’ – the meaningful embodiments, in printed letters, brush strokes, and so forth, of an ineffable, transcendent reality that can be embodied in no other way. For Steiner, close attention to the way in which meaning is ‘incarnated’ in works of art – analogous to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist – raises the question of an ultimate guarantor of meaning, which we might choose to evoke using theistic language. Note that it does not provide us with a definite answer to this question, nor does it imply the existence of a being called ‘God’. In his essay ‘Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions’, Hepburn quotes Steiner as he raises the twofold question ‘Is there or is there not God? Is there or is there not meaning to being?’ 30 Hepburn (and he is not alone) sees an impermissible conflation here. He asks, ‘could one not affirm that meaning exists, without thereby affirming that God

27 Ibid., 83–5.
exists also?"31 The same query underwrites James Wood's strident critique of Steiner's notion of Real Presences and his naïve conclusion that 'in the end all [Steiner] offers is a hedged secularism written up religiously'.32 But Steiner is not here making an attempt at modus ponens. The point is that questions in a theological register (but not answers) are prerequisite to a full understanding of the meaning of artistic creation – and, indeed, of meaning in general. The ultimate guarantor of meaning turns out to be an ineffable reality that cannot be described (religiously or otherwise), only bodied forth in ciphers: works of art, literature, pieces of religious language, and ritual performances – phenomena which evoke but do not describe.

The fact that ciphers are untranslatable into other terms brings to mind Jaspers's published debates with the New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann, who attempted to 'demythologize' religious myths, translating their meaning, which he viewed as symbolic, into the secular terms of the early Heidegger's existentialist philosophy.33 If religious myths are best seen as untranslatable ciphers rather than symbols, then it will be impossible to demythologize them without hollowing out their religious meaning, leaving only an empty shell behind. But Bultmann's premise remains valid: that we no longer share the ancient world view out of which the New Testament texts emerged. Jaspers concurred that, in the ancient world, the cipher language was also the public language – as he put it, 'It was the air you breathed.'34 Belief in spirits, for example, was taken for granted. On this, too, Hepburn is very instructive. In his essay, 'The Gospel and The Claims of Logic', he points out that the difficulty is not just that ancient beliefs are no longer 'in the air' but that beliefs are no longer warranted in the same way. ‘What serves in the New Testament account as the grounding and certifying of revelation is, to us, part of the collapsed world view itself.’35

The solution to this state of affairs is not to demythologize religious expression, nor abandon it entirely. (If Hepburn is right about its persistent cultural entrenchment, then abandoning it was never a realistic option.)

31 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious', 103.
34 Jaspers, Philosophical Faith and Revelation, 104.
Rather, we should re-read it as a cipher of Transcendence. Jaspers strongly resisted the idea that there could ever be a definitive system of ciphers, but he allowed that a system of thought could be read as a cipher among others.\(^\text{36}\) When discussing the theological implications of his theory, Jaspers described the metamorphosis that the reading of religious expression as a cipher would effect. ‘Dogmas, sacraments, rituals would be melted down, so to speak – not destroyed, but given other forms of conscious realization. […] Not the substance, but the appearance in consciousness would change. Philosophy and theology would be on the road to reunification.’\(^\text{37}\)

In conclusion, we cannot know whether the language of theistic metaphysics is unsuppressible, as Hepburn supposed, but we may observe that it has so far proved remarkably resilient, even to the deconstructive spirit of demythologizing. But assuming that Hepburn was correct, the answer is not to take theistic language literally and become mired in the hackneyed rational difficulties of old-style philosophy of religion. Neither is it to reject the language as false or formally meaningless, barring all access to the sacred, understood in terms of a most likely non-existent divine object. Nor is it to demythologize the language, retaining it only for the purposes of translation into the secular terminology of aesthetics or Heideggerian philosophy. The answer is rather to read religious language (and I think religious expression more generally) as ciphers of Transcendence, which may body forth the sacred in the only way that it can be bodied forth. This ‘melting down’ of religious expression does not immediately destroy theistic language but allows it to be differently interpreted, to appear in consciousness in altered forms. Jaspers was hopeful that, carried on in relation to religion, this process of cipher-reading could clear the overgrown path between Athens and Jerusalem. Whether this reunification will eventually suppress theistic language altogether remains to be seen. In answer to the question raised by Ronald Hepburn, then, not only is the sacred older than the gods, but it may outlive them as well.

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Religious Experience, Imagination and Interpretation:
A Case Study

Peter Cheyne

What is beyond all question is that in the field of religion, imagination must be accorded an enormous role, seen as an indispensable agency without which the claims and teachings of religion could never be communicated at all – far less arrestingly or memorably expressed.


‘You Scottish theologians are always talking in parables.’

R. D. Laing

1 Hepburn on religious imagination and interpretation

Without imagination, Ronald W. Hepburn argued, we cannot move from our ordinary concerns in their familiar, transient setting, to thoughts ‘on a cosmic scale and with a cosmos-transcending being’.1 Whether through icons, metaphors, or symbols, imagination is in this view a necessary power for the life – and not merely for the discourse – of religion and religious experience. Yet this very strength as a mode of relating to the transcendent, a mode that sees in and through surroundings – thereby gaining an elevated, symbolic significance – is also the root of what makes imagination a liability, being ‘too ready to leap abysses in understanding and argumentation’.2

Hepburn adhered to an essentially Kantian understanding of imagination, furthered by an appreciation of S. T. Coleridge’s famous distinctions concerning the concept. In Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, the ‘necessary’ imagination3

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2 Ibid.
is needed for the perception of an external, orderly world. This imagination synthesizes both a priori concepts (such as being and causality) and empirical, learned concepts (such as dog and table) with what is intuited in sensation.

For Kant, this synthesis of intuition and concept requires imagination in a mysterious process that he called transcendental schematism, being ‘a hidden art [eine verborgene Kunst] in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty.’ Kant’s synthesis necessary for meaningful experience is therefore for him an ‘effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.’ Beyond this necessary imagination is the more creative, aesthetic imagination, which can aim beyond all possible phenomena towards a view of ultimate reality. This aesthetic imagination can envision sublime ideas to represent – and stimulate – the rational ideas of God, free will, the immortal soul, and other such metaphysical entities or ideas (noumena) that have always been fundamental to religion.

For Coleridge, these two degrees of imagination become the primary and the secondary imagination, alike distinguished in kind from the mere fancy, which for the British poet-philosopher renders the artificial manipulation of ‘dead’ images and concepts. The primary degree is for him the deeper, more spontaneous mode of imagination necessarily possessed by every human being as the ‘living Power’ and ‘prime agent of perception’; the secondary exists in artists and thinkers who are conscious of symbols in their work and who exercise a more voluntary control over this capacity than that required for the primary degree. Coleridgean primary imagination infuses into human experience not only quotidian empirical concepts such as ‘dog’ and ‘table’, or a priori ones such as ‘triangle’, but also what Coleridge refers to as ‘divine ideas’, providing what Hepburn would later refer to as a ‘cosmic scale’ with thoughts moving towards ‘a cosmos-transcending being’. Coleridge’s primary imagination not only provides that Kantian intuition–concept synthesis necessary for meaningful experience, it also appears as the imago dei, the quality or capacity in the human mind that is most similar to God, enacting ‘a repetition in the

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5 Ibid., 273 (A141, B180–1).
6 Ibid., 211 (A78, B103).
finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. This profoundly ontological imagination reaches towards ideas and noumena beyond empirical and transcendental (‘substance’, ‘cause’, etc.) concepts and can imbue an infusing sense of transcendence.

Hepburn similarly describes imagination heading for these higher reaches. Thus:

in its insatiable nисus for going beyond – ‘transcending’ – imagination does not draw back from seeking to transcend the entire phenomenal world, the world of lived experience: at the very least to animate and keep alive the thought that, although such transcendence is literally and necessarily inconceivable, it is nevertheless an insuppressible extension of imagination’s concept-transcendence.

Yet while, Hepburn argues, it is incoherent to refuse the kind of transcendence involved in inferring other minds from people’s behaviour, there is no ‘comparable incoherence’ if we ‘refuse to transcend world, to God’. This asymmetry means that religious imagination is not ‘necessary’ in the way that coherent, everyday perceptual and socially interactive imagination is. Neither is religious imagination, in Hepburn’s Kantian view, the best road to ideas experienced or intimated in their sublime aspects.

For Kant, ideas of reason are transcendental components of the mind that do not necessarily have real correspondences. They represent the traditional metaphysical entities and powers, including the self, freedom, the cosmos, God, eternity, infinity, etc. As non-empirical, organizing concepts they serve to regulate knowledge. The situation as Hepburn gives it, however, is not quite so simple as saying that reason and the free, moral self succeed in thinking the rational ideas where imagination would be overwhelmed and humiliated.

For in order to stimulate the ideas of reason into activity and experience their power and significance as beyond phenomena, it is necessary that imagination throw its hands in the air, so to speak, with the person undergoing the experience feeling this as a defeat of the human imagining and anticipating powers. As Hepburn acknowledges, in experiences that transcend a readily graspable whole, ‘Imagination […] is (notoriously) thwarted and overwhelmed’. Yet

9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Findlay’s Aesthetic Thought and its Metaphysical Setting’ in
without the attempt of imagination and its concession of defeat, there is no appreciable, living sense – no experiential cognition – of what it means to transcend and be transcended. Kant, too, acknowledges the role of imagination in sustaining these rational, non-empirical objects, as he sees these regulative but non-constitutive ideas as ‘entirely outside the bounds of any possible experience’, with each idea serving as the ‘focus imaginarius’ for hope in justice, for example; for a moral reality; for the possibility of a unified science; for perpetual peace instituted in a kingdom of ends; and for the possibility of divine recompense for eternal souls.

Because of these aesthetic, imaginative connections between images and transcendent ideas, religious experience, even as a mystical encounter with (or impression of) the transcendent, need not itself be utterly inexpressible beyond any chance of articulation and communication. The experience consists largely in impressions, emotions, spontaneous interpretations, and any of these, though difficult to convey – given the extraordinary nature, by definition, of the experience – can nonetheless be accorded careful, if usually tentative, expression. The worry of betraying – blaspheming against, or trivializing – the encounter or impression can prompt the narrating experiencer to correct turns of phrase that are misleading or else inappropriate to the mood or some other quality in the experience. In the recounting, there is also an intellectual duty to question not only any subsequent interpretation, but also one’s more or less immediate, spontaneous interpretations at the time. Whether one is culturally Roman Catholic, Jainist, Mahayana Buddhist, Shintoist, or Australian Aboriginal, the experiencer will have spontaneous interpretations and associations related to his or her background knowledge and upbringing given a group of sensations, mental images, direction of thoughts, and so on within some physical and social situation. Moreover, whether one is theist, atheist, or agnostic, there will be a further level of interpretation when one subsequently recollects the experience. As Hepburn says, ‘a religious commitment may be initiated, animated, and renewed by vividly felt and lived-through personal participation’, though, because of ‘[h]uman fallibility’, that ‘experience may have to be sifted, respectfully but critically appraised’. It should also be noted that for some, religious experience can lead to conversion or

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confirmation, as it did for me, rather than stemming from prior doctrinal commitment.

The difficult yet important task regarding subsequent self-interpretation of religious experience is, as Hepburn says: ‘To hold to, not to betray, the unconceptualizable, unimageable transfigurations of experience, neither forcing them into alien moulds nor ruthlessly rejecting them: this can be seen as faithfulness to an inner religious logic, not an expression of scepticism.’

Hepburn’s language here is charitable, understanding the great value of the religious experience, and giving it the requisite leeway between being forced ‘into alien moulds’, such as inadequate though familiar stereotypes, and being rejected, presumably as nonsense. Between these two points, beyond which the experience is either abandoned or compromised beyond recognition and rendered bereft of its original meaning, the recounting of the experience still has a good deal of space for approximation, retaining room to play with possible expressions and a wide but not unfeasible field for interpretation.

Aiming for an optimal latitude like that suggested by Hepburn, I shall attempt to steer between treating religious experience as either ‘raw’ and uninterpreted, or as necessarily soaked with theoretical, doctrinal understanding – both interpretive constructs that I take to be hypothetical extremes. My account therefore opposes constructivist views such as those of Steven Katz, the champion over many years of the latter type of view. Katz argues that so-called mystical experience could never support religious beliefs since any way of characterizing it already draws on some such belief. While I agree that even spontaneous experience is to some extent shaped through concepts, memory, education, culture, and so on, and is therefore mediated by an inevitable degree of interpretation, much of the experiencer’s background religious doctrine, whether imagistic or abstractly conceptual, can be bracketed out of the narrator’s account, as I shall attempt to do in section 2, returning to discuss the ramifications of that bracketing in section 4. In section 3, understandably the longest, I outline possible interpretive content and theoretical perspectives, ‘added layers’, that have been bracketed from the account itself. For the remainder of this essay, then, within a leeway licensed by Hepburn, I shall recount and examine – in itself and in relation to relevant theories – a religious experience of my own, which at the time and for many years after I thought

I should never share publicly for fear of misrepresenting or demeaning it. I relate it now with a view to seeing how close we may get to the original and valuable essence of the experience without becoming caught up in the tangles of interpretation.

2 The account: ripples fine and far spreading

From my late teens and throughout my twenties, I had experiences that I find entirely natural to describe as mystical. The first time, my every nerve, thought, and tendency seemed to shoot in all directions throughout the universe, instilling a physical sense of interconnection. Since then, the interim periods of ordinary life appeared comparatively mundane, yet were nonetheless enriched. I have ever since remained convinced that all of life’s episodes potentially comprise one mystical experience. ‘One’, not separate – these experiences seem to establish key nodal points of intensely significant transcendence, whose pulses persist as an undercurrent through the stages of life. This conviction can be found defined in the dictionary under sacramentalism, as the ‘theory that the natural world is a reflection or imitation of an ideal, supernatural, or immaterial world’ (OED).

An occasion around five years later, perhaps the most significant, was not of this outward expansion from within, but of being touched, seized rather, from without, as if by an intelligent ray of light, yet there was nothing visual to the experience. The presence was felt on my soul, and my body-soul, and the spirit-matter weave of my mouth, tongue, and lips were perilously caught up, as if I were a fish hooked. The presence had the power, I felt, to unravel entirely the thread of my existence and that of the whole universe in one prolonged tug. My soul stood long moments beside what I sensed to be a divine, living ideal, terrified I deserved no place in its awful and perfect presence. A tactile, non-visual image came to me of a perfect line, like a ray of silver light whose perfection, a rectitude in a moral and in a mathematical sense, made me cower in my own crookedness. I feared it would test me, and, if I were found to be a failure, overly in error through my own willed defects, I would be entirely unravelling, and perhaps the entire world with me. Though this seems a grandiose thought, a Talmudic saying occurred to me: that if to save one soul is to save the world entire, then perhaps the obliteration of a soul might entail the annihilation of the universe. This fear was illustrated to me in a very physical sensation, anticipating what seemed to be the possible
disentanglement of my whole being from all earthly attachment. The feared
anticipation was of my soul-body becoming unravelled like wool pulled from
a knitted jumper, first slowly, then faster so that the total knitted fabric of the
universe would unravel with it, everything, in all its patterned colour, variety,
and interconnections returning to the one perfect straight line to which it
owes its existence. I stiffened, resisting the pull of this thread on my tongue
and mouth, attempting to straighten my back and neck, mimicking an image
of rightness, hoping that bodily correction could help straighten out my inner
dialogue and attitude too. Here, more centrally within and realer than anything
else, was this presence. The term ‘inner’ had no meaning with respect to this
presence, for it was present to inner and outer alike. Pausing on this mystery,
my lips warmed and I felt a pulse of its being.

No cleverness or sophistication could stand up to this presence, so my
only attitude before it was one of a childlike sincerity that has given up trying
to hide any deception or guilt. But then, as soon as my resistance softened, a
gentler form came to me. But that is not quite right; rather, I turned in fearful
hope, and it was there. I felt loved, however unworthy, as if my soul’s head
were on its bosom. Yet still afraid of another encounter with the awful, perfect,
rectilinear form, a third appeared, giving enthusiasm to renew my optimism
and energy to stand again in the stark presence of the Supreme. Moving from
one to the next, I tick-tacked in a smoother, knitting-together reverse of the
feared tick-tack unravelling of my self and world. This joining series of move-
ments seemed to stem from the forgiving, loving being who encouraged me
to turn to the energizing, inspiring enthusiasm, whose inspiration moved me
in turn to stand for a few moments before the original, fearful, perfect being. I
persisted in this triangular motion from one to the next for some time, moving
back and forth between the soft, loving form and the inspiring, energizing one
before I had the courage and confidence to face the fearful first.

Other occasions, on different calendar dates, were of a heightened sense of
the repercussions of actions. Even acts of attention, discernment, and perception
that would ordinarily seem minute were revealed as filled with potential
for good or ill. They imparted a sense of the seemingly infinite significances
and moral weight of how we face, perceive, and act with respect to our imme-
diate surroundings, and the wider, living world. Ordinary life is afterwards
transformed, but a normality of sorts returns. Familiarity, as it flows gradually
back, becomes revealed as a less intense mode of the connection and meaning
experienced in the powerful, elevated modes. It is therefore difficult to count
or separate mystical experiences, at least in the terms that my personal account
suggests. But it seems that periods of forgetfulness of the intensity can be used to mark extraordinary experiences, one from another. They are, nonetheless, connected below the surface, with that ordinariness being like the sea that only apparently separates islands in an archipelago.\[17\]

Like ripples, the experiences of connection felt closer to ultimate reality, but still a way off. They impressed me with the sense that I have much to learn; the reason to believe that there is indeed much to learn; and the conviction that it all matters, even in the apparently slightest details. Those experiences felt like they were the more real, and the mundane experiences were inescapably a part of them. The intense mystical episodes are as wave crests of the rippling liquid, with the periods of mundane living, the plateaus. Yet the plateaus of ordinary time have their infinitesimal ripples too: fine and far-spreading, and shimmeringly beautiful. Only their intensity, not their substance, is lesser, and these same ‘particles’ rise also, into the higher peaks.

People do not usually talk about these things. How many does one sit and sup with, not knowing they too have experienced something like this? It seems now that in the lengthening plateau periods, one ought to be bringing up, educating and orienting, the here where and when one is, children, students, and so on, but also one’s physical surroundings, one’s own feelings even, in aesthetic sense, sense of humour, enjoyment, desire, and fun, so that nothing is turned away from the cultivating light.

3 Added layers

The sense of these episodes being one mystical experience – life itself with its peak moments, yet all one substance and being – is for me a given. Such claims concerning the profound insight and interconnectedness with each other of mystical encounters stand, I suggest, in the category that Ludwig Wittgenstein calls ‘propositions that hold fast’, ‘hinge propositions’ about which a world picture turns and is articulated, but which cannot be removed without the whole thing coming apart. Such propositions do not simply stand in isolation. Wittgenstein talks rather of a ‘nest of propositions [Nest von Sätzen]’, with his

\[17\] In a parallel description, relating art to ordinary experience, John Dewey says: ‘This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations.’ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York, 1958), 3.
expression emphasizing, it seems to me, the sense of what one holds onto as forming a habitation, a tenable base from which we live our lives and view the world: ‘When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) […] What I hold fast to is not one proposition but a nest of propositions.’\(^{18}\) The oneness, for me, of religious experiences would remain a central article of faith irrespective of there being support for it beyond my experience. This conviction sits within a nest of propositions, some of which are indicated by Hepburn, that includes the oneness of ‘ordinary’ experience within the nodal points of the extraordinary. I said article of faith, but would not say of belief, for this lived revelation of the oneness of religious experience and the consequent, more gradual revelation of the oneness of ordinary experience with it, is too experientially indubitable to be believed or disbelieved. External agreement in the views of others, then, does not so much confirm, or even support, as lend a sense of spiritual community, providing opportunities for further, discursive and contemplative exploration.

Talk of the spiritual here in no way implies a physically detached or cerebral modality of experience. As I noted, the impressions and sensations in my experience were intensely physical and tactile, and hence were very much ‘bodied’. As such, I view them in the light of what Hepburn, after Karl Jaspers, called the ‘immanent transcendent’, which I shall discuss at the end of section 4. I was pulled; tugged; felt an initial unravelling, or a tangible anticipation of this; tried to straighten out; intuited enveloping or nearby presences as soft, harsh, rectilinear, etc. There was nothing essentially visual to the experience, and this lack of visual orientation attests to a more primordial kind of event. There is a mystical tradition, exemplified, for instance, in the writings of Jakob Böhme, in which tact and taste are on the top of the hierarchy. The prioritizing of these internal senses emphasizes a more proximal, intense, qualitative dimension that contrasts as more inner and primitive against the distal, spatially extended aspects given in primarily visual experiences (e.g. in ‘visions’). I am drawn to add that it seems inappropriate to use the past tense in relation to the experience. The sense is that it remains and ought to remain in the permanent now, the mood of the present tense that is most fitting for mathematics, for example. While biographically the past tense here is natural, the series of religious experiences leaves me with the abiding impression that they are ‘one’ and that they are not merely in ‘the past’.

The sense of these religious experiences being connected in such a way as to comprise one mystical experience relates in obvious ways to my earliest mystical episode, where I felt as if every nerve were shooting out in an array of cosmic interconnection. This kind of experience is related to what philosophers and poets such as Plotinus, Coleridge, and Wordsworth have called ‘the One Life’ – to which Hepburn also refers positively\(^\text{19}\) – and the feeling of connection that humans, co-evolved with this vibrant cosmos, have with it.

Plotinus believed that ‘[Some part or other of the intelligible world] is present in everything.’\(^\text{20}\) Continuing, he asked: ‘But how, then, is it [i.e. the intelligible (noumenal) world] present? As one life. For life is not in the living being only up to a point, being then unable to reach all of it; but it is everywhere.’\(^\text{21}\) In harmony with my experience of rays of energy radiating as if from every nerve and reaching through the cosmos, Plotinus – whom I had neither read nor heard of aged seventeen, when that early experience occurred – illustrates the unity of forms in ‘the One’ when he describes how:

> the lines which touch the centres themselves […] are nonetheless each a centre, which is not cut off from the one first centre […] and yet they are all together one. […] If then we liken all the intelligibles to the many centres, leading back to the one centre where they are all unified, they appear many through the lines, not because the lines have produced them, but because they reveal them. […] [They provide] us with an analogue for those things which by contact with the intelligible nature appear to be many and to be present in many places.\(^\text{22}\)

In a wonderfully intellectual-aesthetic response to his neo-Platonic studies, after reading, especially, the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, Coleridge affirms this Plotinian one life, proclaiming:

> O! the one Life within us and abroad,  
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where…\(^\text{23}\)

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21 Ibid., VI.5.12.1–3.
22 Ibid., VI.5.5.12–23.
Soon after, Wordsworth, one of Hepburn’s favourite poets alongside Coleridge, echoes the latter’s thoughts on ‘the one Life’, with his:

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\begin{align*}
\text{sense sublime} \\
\text{Of something far more deeply interfused,} \\
\text{Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,} \\
\text{And the round ocean, and the living air,} \\
\text{And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,} \\
\text{A motion and a spirit, that impels} \\
\text{All thinking things, all objects of all thought,} \\
\text{And rolls through all things.}^{24}
\end{align*}
\]

A year later, in his first (‘Two-Part’, 1799) version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth wrote how ‘in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was joy’.\(^{25}\) This sense of connection and oneness is an instance of what Hepburn called the human ‘nisus toward the unitive’.\(^{26}\) Among many others, it was shared also by Romain Rolland, whose famous ‘oceanic feeling’ – reductively analysed by Sigmund Freud – was felt physically as a merging with the material universe. Yet it connects also with whatever is in and behind that material universe, Spinoza’s *natura naturans* (nature naturing, creative nature) that Coleridge once characterized as making ‘the great book of […] Nature’, in his interpretation, ‘likewise a revelation of God’,\(^ {27}\) with ‘the Language of Nature […] a subordinate Logos’.\(^ {28}\)

Concomitant with the sense of cosmic interconnection in the mystical experience I recount, and the added theological thoughts it set off, there was a strong sense of self-discovery as a moral being, and what it is to be such a being. As in Kant’s account of the sublime in the third *Critique*, my being overwhelmed by impressions of magnitudes and forces led to a deeply felt discovery of the realm of reason and ideas and of being a moral being. In the intensity of the experience, I grasped in a most vivid way that we are

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26 Hepburn, ‘Findlay’s Aesthetic Thought’, 210.
responsible for the ramifications of even our apparently tiniest intentions and it occurred to me that these intentions are acts of the mind in motion that align one’s moral orientation with the good or else tip it further out of alignment. This central responsibility belongs to the free self that not only responds to questions (from oneself or others) and situations with verbal answers or practical actions, but which also adjusts its orientation to attempt to evade responsibility or return to it through changes in what Martin Heidegger called comportment and mood, and in attitudes of what Jean-Paul Sartre called good and bad faith. Shifting my outlook and attitude while sensing how this veered towards and away from honestly facing the fearful presence of the absolutely morally right left me with a sense of the impossibility of being a merely passive or unengaged being, since every physical or attitudinal movement that one can enact or leave undone lies within the self’s sphere of action.

On the human attitude before deity, Kant observes that:

In religion in general submission, adoration with bowed head, and remorseful and anxious gestures and voice, seem to be the only appropriate conduct in the presence of the Deity, and so to have been adopted and still observed by most people. But this disposition of the mind is far from being intrinsically and necessarily connected with the idea of the sublimity of a religion and its object. Someone who is genuinely afraid because […] he is conscious of having offended […] a power whose will is irresistible and at the same time just, certainly does not find himself in the right frame of mind to marvel at the greatness of God, for which a mood of calm contemplation and an entirely free judgment is requisite.29

The logic is attractive, but the disjunction around which Kant composes his description does not quite align with my account. In my mystical experience, I could anticipate with a natural fear my possible disintegration, and perhaps that of the whole physical cosmos. Yet the justice and unwavering rectitude of the fearful presence was also intuited, and in an attitude of marvel and reverence. This perspective from which one may see through and beyond fear to marvel at absolute rightness is a self-overcoming whereby the moral orientation is discovered in a pure form. Yet in my experience, it was not reached by the stoical rigour that Kant recommends, but rather from a humility that accepts that

29 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 146–7 (Ak. 5: 263),
one’s whole self and world be unravelled as the cost of setting right wrongs. In retrospect, that aspect of my experience seems like an Abrahamic test of faith, walking up the mountain to the moment of sacrifice only to find it has instead been a test to reveal to the experiencer the inner nature and undertaking of faith.\textsuperscript{30}

Kant goes on to say that:

> when [one] is conscious of his upright, God-pleasing disposition […], those effects of power serve to awaken in him the idea of the sublimity of this being, insofar as he recognizes in himself a sublimity of disposition suitable to God’s will, and is thereby raised above the fear of such effects of nature…\textsuperscript{31}

It was not, however, stoical rectitude or uprightness in myself that I found to be pleasing to the fearful presence, since in comparison to this absolute rectitude, I could not pretend to be correct. As Søren Kierkegaard wrote, in the title to his concluding, religious section of \textit{Either / Or} (the brief ‘Ultimatum’, or last word): ‘in relation to God we are always in the wrong.’\textsuperscript{32} The God-pleasing disposition found within was rather the combination of three states: awe at the absolute rightness of the fearful presence; an outflowing of love and trust before the kind, forgiving one; and enthusiasm for life, taking encouragement effusively from the inspiriting form.

Another compelling coincidence between my experience and that of others is a similarity of image and expression to C. S. Lewis’s account of his religious conversion in his autobiographical \textit{Surprised by Joy} (titled after a Wordsworth sonnet). While I describe a ‘presence […] felt on my soul’, with ‘the spirit-matter weave of my mouth, tongue, and lips […] perilously caught up, as if I were a fish hooked’, Lewis says: ‘And so the great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue.’\textsuperscript{33} Lewis’s image seems to be entirely metaphorical, though it is perhaps a condensed parable, alluding to Christ’s image of the disciples being called to God’s work to become ‘fishers of men’.\textsuperscript{34} In the experience I underwent, however, my mouth, tongue and lips literally were the focal point of a tactile experience, though I do not doubt,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{30} Genesis 22:1–19.
\bibitem{31} \textit{Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment}, 147 (Ak. 5: 263).
\bibitem{34} Matthew 4:19.
\end{thebibliography}
on reflection, that, however mysteriously, these sensations and their intimated meaning were effected at a subconscious level through the imagination. But was imagination the source or the medium?

A theist who believes that at least some mystical experience involves being touched by God might claim that here divinity acts upon the human imagination. A more agnostic approach would be to emphasize activity on the human side, viewing mystical experience as an imaginative seeing of profound meaning and interconnectedness in the cosmos. This latter describes Hepburn’s position. While carefully emphasizing an agnosticism that sees such experience as ‘possibly involving illusion’, Hepburn acknowledges that ‘mystical experience […] yields profound insight into the fact of an ultimate cosmic unification achieved eternally in a single divine intuitive vision’. Consonant with my account, Hepburn is drawn to claim that the peak, mystical moments punctuating the plateaus of the ordinary – which he calls the ‘everyday, attenuated experience of the world’\(^\text{35}\) – are irresistibly found by the mind, or interpreted by the aesthetic imagination, to express ‘one and the same’ ontological state. Thus he formulates ‘the thought that the (to us) distinct moments of heightened awareness are to be linked in the mind as insights into one and the same unitive mode of being. When they occur, these strands impart particularly high solemnity to the total experience.’\(^\text{36}\)

At the imaginative level – often held, by Kant and Coleridge, among others, to involve subconscious operations – is a gap into which any number of theoretical approaches can be inserted to interpret and explain the experience, its images, and its meaning. A Freudian psychoanalyst, for example, would interpret the episode as a straightforward though intense cathexis of fixated psychosexual energy (libido) that gave only a subjective impression of being fixed by a higher, transcendent power, God. That impression would be explicable, according to the psychoanalyst, as a secondary revision that helps to keep repressed whatever early childhood, oral-stage trauma (breast weaning, perhaps) was making itself felt through being remembered and reinterpreted on the body.

Indeed, with just this sort of explanation, Freud interpreted Rolland’s mystic sense of oneness with the universe, described by Rolland as a ‘spontaneous religious sentiment’, ‘the feeling of the “eternal”’ that gives to oneself and the

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\(^{35}\) Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics’ in Pauline von Bonsdorff and Arto Haapala (eds), *Aesthetics in the Human Environment* (Lahti, 1999), 166–85, 141.

\(^{36}\) Hepburn, ‘Findlay’s Aesthetic Thought’, 208.
world an ‘oceanic’ sense of existing ‘without perceptible limits’. Rolland insisted that ‘the experience is imposed on me as a fact. It is a contact.’ Freud, however, offers an alternative interpretation, because for him:

The idea of men’s receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them through an immediate feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in attempting to discover a psychoanalytic – that is, a genetic – explanation of such a feeling.

In Freud’s alternative, psychoanalytic interpretation, the solidity of our ego felt as something apparently permanent with ‘clear and sharp lines of demarcation’ is in reality a fragile and ‘deceptive’ construct, because the ego actually merges into the unconscious out of which it is formed and ‘for which it serves as a kind of façade’. The state of being in love, felt almost as a pathology in respect only of its difference from the normal sense of the ego as clearly distinct from others, is both a reversion, Freud says, to a prior state of ego indistinctness, and a revelation of mental continuity with the id. Love, he continues, and the ‘oceanic feeling’ described by Rolland, enact a return to the primal unity experienced at the breast as the normal state of being at one with the mother. Given a Freudian analysis, then, my experience would be interpreted along the lines of the ‘oceanic feeling’ of ego dissolution combined with the sharp pain (the penetrating, potentially world-dissolving tug on the mouth and tongue) of the threatened permanent removal of the breast. Yet Freud’s reductive interpretation which tells what he thinks the oceanic feeling must amount to can readily be criticized as prejudicially foreclosed from its outset on the grounds that his prior assumptions are innocent of the experience itself. Taking this line of criticism is not to assert that only first-person accounts may reach an understanding of the experience, but rather that any inquiry into experience must be open to first-person accounts as further insight into the phenomenon itself and its effects. The naturalistic approach

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 253–4.
of putting aside the first personal as subjective and epistemically irrelevant gives only an illusory impression that the alternative is thereby more objective and true. The remarkable aspects of the experience speak for themselves and thus their descriptions are, though assertoric for the hearer, apodictic for utterer if they are formulated as accurately as possible. Therefore, even if agnosticism regarding ultimate commitments is replaced by a sterner scepticism, aspects of mystical encounter such as unity, perspicuity, and the sense of their interconnection remain. That is, as Hepburn affirms, since no scepticism ‘compels the sabotaging of the[se] aspects […] the mysticism will be attenuated but not destroyed’.  

As if anticipating Freud yet opposing his atheistic assumptions, Coleridge also provides an account drawing from early childhood of ‘the Origin of the Idea of God in the Mind of Man’. He argues that nature evolves everywhere from within, in a synthetic process that is ‘opposite to the analytic and reflective processes of the mechanical understanding.’ With such a psychosynthesis, if we may so call this theoretical opposite to psychoanalytical explanation, Coleridge traced to the infant at the breast, without slipping into naturalistic assumptions, the human sense of cosmic connection and the yearning for a divine beyond. Commencing in the infant’s ‘first Week of Being, the holy quiet of its first days […] sustained by the warmth of the maternal bosom’, he conceived the ‘first dawns of its humanity […] in the Eye that connects the mother’s face with the warmth of the […] bosom’, and the ‘thousand tender kisses’ that ‘excite a finer life in its lips’, where ‘language is first imitated from the mother’s smiles.’ Anticipating Jacques Lacan’s Freudian mirror stage, in which the infant’s first recognized ‘self’ is that of the mother and not of itself as a separate being, Coleridge notes that: ‘Ere yet a conscious self exists, the love begins; and the first love is love of another. The Babe acknowledges

41 Hepburn, ‘Findlay’s Aesthetic Thought’, 208.
42 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Opus Maximum, ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi (MS c.1819; Princeton, 2002), 119.
43 Ibid., 120.
45 Coleridge, Opus Maximum, 121.
This development leads to ‘Faith, implicit Faith, the offspring of unreflecting love [...] the antecedent and indispensable condition of all its knowledge’. Love of the mother may be, for Coleridge, the archetype, or original model, of all future knowledge and relationship, yet he does not commit the genetic fallacy of assuming that all possible experience of faith and similar intuitions of oceanic oneness indicate nothing more than this innocent state of blissful infancy. Instead, he argues from this individual yet universalizing first love that the ‘reverence of the invisible, substantiated by the feeling of love [...] is the essence and proper definition of religion, is the commencement of the intellectual life, of the humanity’. 

While both interpretations commence from theories of infantile development, Freud’s approach is to analyse a presumed illusion, whereas Coleridge provides a phenomenology of faith. The hermeneutic problem appears not to be the naively construed riddle of how to reach, per impossibile, experience that is free of interpretation and self-reflexive attitudes, but rather the puzzle of prising apart the added layers of secondary revisions, to borrow a Freudian term – and indeed tertiary ones added by academic discussion – from the fundamental experience and its related ‘propositions that hold fast’. Beyond what the subject takes to be the indubitable core of the experience, a great multiplicity of often contradictory ramifications branches out in a potentially dizzying array of divergent metaphysical, doctrinal, and other interpretative possibilities. Underlying this confusing plurality, as Hepburn reminds us, we must not forget the deepest layer of complication, namely, that while the mystical ‘felt immediacy may be striking, [...] it may implicitly draw upon already learned concepts’. At this point, the hermeneutic circle seem to spin without friction, as if confirming the distinction (to be discussed at the end of section 4) between multiple, undecidable interpretations in the humanities and the grounded method and decidable facts in the natural sciences. In order, then, to focus on a more achievable goal, I shall attempt not to settle on any ontological level as fundamental, but rather to consider whether removing the tangles of secondary interpretation affords a greater degree of clarity. Granting that primary interpretation is always made as the experience occurs, and is therefore probably impossible to disentangle, one should still expect that disentangling secondary revision would allow the essence of the experience to

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47 Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, 121.
48 Ibid., 127.
be revealed in its own imaginative logic, so it can be fairly assessed on its own merits, shorn of illustrative details and potentially falsifying literary devices – such as personification – added after the event.

4 The strange vitality of the symbol

Wittgenstein remarks: ‘Philosophy unites the knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties.’ As a metaphor for simple versus tangled thinking, straight and knotted string is a usefully intuitive, hands-on image. The unknotted string, free of tangles, is flexible, and can easily be followed from one end to the other. However, the knotted string is substantially the same as the unknotted one, except that it has become confused, caught up in itself. Knots and tangles – the latter a looser variety of complication than the former – in string and in thinking are possible because of the inherent flexibility of the string and of the mind, and their reflexive ability to double up and wrap around themselves. We shall keep this imagery in mind as we think about religious experience and its self-interpretation by the experiencer.

While there are demarcating, salient points about religious experience, they share with every other kind of experience the fact that, however beyond ordinary temporality they seem, they are dateable, occurring within a series anywhere between the birth and death of the individual human being. This does not detract from the fact that time itself is understood, intuited, or inwardly constructed very differently during a religious experience (and sometimes thereafter, though less intensely), suggesting concepts such as Meister Eckhart’s ‘eternal now’. In the kind of religious experience I am concentrating

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51 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 302. James outlines ‘four marks’ of mystic experience with the first two always present, namely ‘ineffability’ – ‘no adequate report of its contents can be given in words’ (in conveying my own account, I optimistically disagree) – and a ‘noetic quality’ that provides ‘insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect’. The next two marks of the mystic, James says, are often, but not always present in religious experiences: transiency – ‘Mystical states cannot be sustained for long’; and passivity – ‘the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance […] as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.’ These qualities (save for my reservations about ineffability) are found in the experience that I related in section 2.
on, this shift in the experience of time is accompanied by what is taken to be a noetic quality, or intellectual intuition, that connects to eternity. Within the cognitive, intuiting, self-interpreted flow between birth and death, the religious experience arises in its particular form as an outstanding phenomenon — a shining showing, or \( \textit{phainómenon} \), as that which shines forth, from ‘\( \textit{phainō} […] \) to place in brightness’, as Martin Heidegger correctly etymologized;\(^{53}\) the word ‘revelation’ has the same sense. Nonetheless, such extraordinary appearances and impressions are composed from the same stuff of life as even the most ordinary, common-or-garden experience. Everything available to consciousness is something immanent, though the experience is felt to add up to one of transcendence.

An image from Coleridge is helpful here, related to the knotted and unknot-ted string metaphor, but more fluid and energetic. The knots in a string are its salient features, though composed of the same stuff as the rest of it; likewise, impressive patterns, eddies for instance, in a flowing river are composed of the same water as the smoothly running stretches. In these and similar kinds of looping pattern, the salient feature or phenomenon is created by a reflexive action of the substance upon itself. In Coleridge’s Heraclitean cum romantic-sublime image of a pattern repeatedly forming in a rapidly flowing river, there is a good metaphor, or rather symbol, of the salient experiences that arise in the flux of life. For the romantic poet-philosopher, the epiphanic can be revealed in the everyday through the power of universal symbols viewed through what Hepburn called the religious or metaphysical imagination:

River Greta near its fall into the Tees – Shootings of water thread down the slope of the huge green stone – The white Eddy-rose that blossom’d up against the stream in the scollop, by fits & starts, obstinate in resurrection – \textit{It is the life that we live}.\(^{54}\)

Four years later, he revisits both the scene and the image:

The white rose of Eddy-foam, where the stream ran into a scooped or scalloped hollow of the rock in its channel – this shape, an exact white rose, was for ever overpowered by the Stream rushing down in upon it, and still obstinate in resurrection it spread up into the Scollop by


fits and starts, *blossoming* in a moment into full Flower. – Hung over the Bridge, & musing considering how much of this Scene of endless variety in Identity was Nature’s – how much the living organ’s!

Coleridge’s meditation, musing as he hung over the bridge, gets to the quick of the question concerning the imagination and interpretation involved in transformative experience. The Christian idea of resurrection is brought into his experience of the eddy-rose, yet the phenomenon is itself an instance of obstinate, perpetual resurrection (resurgence), and not merely a metaphor. The effervescent water, always, repeatedly, on the edge of solidifying for a moment into a glassy rose, always then breaking down again, can represent the persistence through constant change of human institutions, projects, selves, and the living, changing body. Yet it is itself a persisting whole that can be perceptually and conceptually picked out, albeit one composed of ever-fleeting particles. This ratio of sameness and difference is precisely what makes it a symbol – perhaps even a symbol of symbolism itself – rather than a metaphor or artificial analogy. The symbol does not just represent something by analogy, inevitably requiring displacement or separation of tenor from vehicle. Rather, the phenomenal object in the symbol is itself a member of the set of that which it symbolizes in one epitomizing and arresting image – in Coleridge’s example, the perpetual resurrection of form through constant change.

Seeing ‘the life that we live’ in the eddy’s resurging rose pattern is no mere projective identification. Natural pattern here symbolizes a persevering poíēsis that is exemplified also by the self’s holding together through life’s vicissitudes. Neither pattern (eddy rose or human life) is necessarily the more ontologically basic, and this helps us avoid anthropomorphism, as the universal form itself – namely, persistence through constant change – is what is fundamental to both. Coleridge’s symbol of the white eddy-rose in the river as ‘the life that we live’ can symbolize also the salient, extraordinary moments, episodes, or ‘peak experiences’ which Abraham Maslow described as those: ‘rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving, exhilarating, elevating experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality, and are even mystic and magical in their effect upon the experimenter.’

55 Ibid., entry no. 1589, October 1803. The *OED* notes that while a ‘scallop’ is a certain form of shell-fish (or else its shell), and that ‘to scallop’ is ‘to shape or (cut) out in the form of a scallop shell’, the variant ‘scollop’ is now confined to ‘an object of the shape of a scallop shell’.

Both ordinary experience, and the extraordinary, rare plumes that arise within its stream, are composed of the same plain water, so to speak. The life-changing consequence is that once experienced, glimpses of the extraordinary in less spectacular, smaller fractals can appear ever onward in what was previously considered plain, normal, even insignificant. From the foregoing, I shall finally hazard a definition free of denominational doctrine. Religious experience is ordinary life reaching or perceived in an intense pitch of significance that surpasses the personal or biographical with a sense of cosmically wide-reaching correspondences and implications that present an insight or revelation into universal reality beyond the ordinary limits of perception. Doctrinally uncommitted (the insight could be illusory), this characterization is consistent with Hepburn’s view that such experience can ‘carry one well away from the self-confining’ and into the ‘nisus toward the unitive’. Expressing this agnostically, he argues that:

if the ‘upper world’ is to be seen as an imaginative construction from the aesthetic and mystical experience here and now, then it is man’s remarkable task to be witness to […] the mystically transformed vision of the world.\(^{57}\)

From plain and pressure-patterned water, we return to both religious and ordinary experience as being composed from the stuff of life, which, on the phenomenological level, takes the immanent form of sensations, suggestions, memories, maxims, principles, hopes, fears, allusions, presentiments, and so on. All of these are perhaps inevitably subject to interpretation, often at the very moments they occur, rather than, say, ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ to be rekindled, as Wordsworth considered the origin of poetry. Even spontaneous thoughts and sentiments can be reflected in the moment or in an immediately successive train of consciousness. Sensations themselves – a nagging pain, a tickling feeling, grit in the shoe – can alter in significance and in the way they affect our mood if we change our attitude toward them, as in the fairly simple case of learning to enjoy running through a stitch. Amid such considerations, it soon becomes clear that there is no such thing as the plain, naked sensation untouched by the patterns or tangles of self-interpretation.

Religious experience and the insights of what Hepburn called ‘cosmic imagination’ are, it seems, inevitably filtered through one’s understanding.

\(^{57}\) Hepburn, ‘Findlay’s Aesthetic Thought’, 210.
and prejudices by exposure or adherence to a particular religious tradition and its traces in the surrounding culture, such as the romanticism that deeply influenced Hepburn. As Hepburn says, cosmic imagination in its ‘mental appropriating’ of phenomena displays not only ‘ingenuity and unconscious resourcefulness’ but also a ‘proneness to illusion’ as we find and use symbols to articulate ‘our own scheme of values’. Thus most readers of my account of my own central religious experience will likely have read suggestions of the Christian Holy Trinity into the three person-like forms that appeared in it, namely the fearful, perfect rectilinear presence that seemed like it could unravel the entire universe in one sustained tug of the cosmic thread being the Father; the softer, forgiving figure in whom I could find rest and familiar love being the Son; and the encouraging, inspiring force of enthusiasm being the Holy Spirit. Yet names and visible appearances were not given in the experiential flow; and, to use Edmund Husserl’s term for his phenomenological method of getting ‘back to the things themselves’, I bracketed cultural and religious knowledge from my account of the actual occurrence, save any that was active in the experience itself at the time. It could well be that at the time of the experience, my imagination subconsciously constructed, using Kantian syntheses of concepts and intuitions, elements of thought and sensation along pre-schematized lines of Christian thinking. Such preconfiguration would, however, be impossible to bracket out, these schemata being received by the experiencing subject from the other end of the filter, and not added by the conscious subject. Thought-inflected or concept-saturated perception, to borrow an image from Peter Strawson, deriving from simple sensations to relatively more conceptual structures, ought not to be bracketed out if it appears in the experience itself of the account. Yet, to return to Wittgenstein’s analogy, just as a knot can be loosened by twisting tight one end of the string to free it from a self-looping constriction, knots in our thought can be loosened by tightening our descriptions to make them more precise and less expansive (narrowing one end of the string), thereby making room to push through the self-reflexing coil.

Given the inevitability of this kind of conceptual, culturally relative construction, one might argue that the practices, tenets, and discourse of

and around a particular religion get too much in the way of even the direct experience, let alone its recollection, for it to count as anything other than subjective interpretation. That rather pessimistic view of the value of religious experience freely accords it existential value, perhaps allowing it even the very highest. But that is an easy concession from the objective, methodical point of view, for which existential value is entirely subjective and counts for little. Subjective evaluation in that sense is relegated to the secondary category of the interpreted, and even, with all the complexities and lack of objectivity it entails, to the more problematic category of the self-interpreted.

This sceptical attitude, which I touched on at the end of section 3, can be found in various philosophical sources. Perhaps Wilhelm Dilthey exemplified it most starkly with his strong distinction between *Verstehen* – ‘understanding’ in the humanities or human (‘spiritual’, in Dilthey’s German) sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*, sense of subjectively grasping the import and implications of life situations, culture, poetry, and so forth – and *Erklären*, ‘explanation’ and ‘clarifying’ that provides a causal account arrived at through an objective methodology such as that epitomized in the natural sciences. The inevitable ‘prejudices’ entailed by the subjective perspectives of humane knowledge can be taken, however, in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s positive view that far from closing off experience, ‘the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices […] constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience […] our openness to the world […] whereby what we encounter says something to us.’

Further, as I hope I have gone some way in showing, the knots entailed by the reflexivity of self-interpretation can be loosened by making experiential description as precise and phenomenologically bracketed as possible. This approach is to mitigate, not deny, the self-reflexive complications that impinge not only on subjective, humane knowledge as science, but also as history. The path I steer, then, is between the Scylla of constructivist, projectivist scepticism and the Charybdis of interpretive charity. To follow this course is to aim for a synthesis of *Verstehen* and *Erklären*. Such a synthesis in the description and examination of religious experience can proceed through three stages, as I have done in this case study. First, one removes, where possible, the accreted

secondary and tertiary revisions of first-person accounts. The next step is to identify symbols in the experience and assess how they apply to personal and social life, nature, and cosmos. Third, one then examines similarities with other accounts in mystical writings; literary and mythical narratives; and scientific (including psychological) and philosophical discourse. The comparison is not to collapse mystical accounts reductively into literary and mythical ones, but to discover and explore underlying forms, as, for instance, in the Jungian analysis and discussion of archetypes, or in the existential interpretation of religious texts, whether in demythologized form or by remaining with the symbols (or ‘ciphers’) of religious myth. Such methods can help us to ‘hold to […] the unconceptualizable, unimageable transformations of experience’ that Hepburn saw as the correct attitude to religious experience in a logic that ‘negates all substantializing and localizing of transcendence, all repetition in the transcendent of the concepts and categories of the life-world’ and, ‘to hold to, to stay with, the strange vitality of the symbol’.

This symbol, with its strange vitality, is how Hepburn refers to what Jaspers calls ‘the cipher’, being ‘that in which transcendence and a mundane being are unified at one time’. Here, transcendent reality ‘shows in the cipher and stays hidden all the same’. Human action, Jaspers affirms, with its directedness towards value and its essential incompleteness, is the cipher in which transcendence ‘shows most directly and clearly’. Dropping much of its existentialist terminology, Hepburn adopts and adapts this outlook of the historical, situated individual experientially, aesthetically, and intellectually encountering intimations of transcendence with varying degrees of directness and intensity. Like Jaspers, Hepburn emphasizes both the lack of proof of objective transcendence and the importance, nonetheless, of intimations of transcendence, especially, for him, in mystical-aesthetic encounters with nature that engage the metaphysical imagination. Discussing ‘glimpses of the eternal, 

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66 Ibid., 111, 113.
67 ‘There is nothing demonstrable about a metaphysical experience, nothing that might make it valid for everyone.’ Ibid., 114.
“spots of time”, or visionary moments as basically transformations in our apprehending of the temporal self, Hepburn argues that:

It is possible […] that these aesthetico-mystical phenomena afford a clue to the understanding of the mystical in a wider sense. The central feature of mystical experience, on such a view, would be seen as that *nisus* to the ever more concentratedly unified, freer of brute inexpressiveness; together with the surmise that progress in this direction is necessarily incompletable. As essentially a set of transformations of the here-and-now, it is altogether dependent upon here-and-now materials.68

Returning, as he so often does, to the experience of the *nisus*69 – the yearning drive – toward the transcendent and the unitive, Hepburn finds it an undeniable datum present not only throughout philosophical and religious traditions, but also in peak aesthetic experiences. Though the *nisus* drives toward experiences ‘freer of brute inexpressiveness’, where the opaque given becomes translucent with a transcendence directly apparent to the experiencer, one never reaches a perfect transparency – the ‘direction is necessarily incompletable’. With his sense of transcendence rooted in aesthetics, that is, in his analysis of the experience of feelings and encounters (especially in nature), and not in doctrine or any metaphysics of substance, Hepburn insists that ‘the only transcendence that can be real to us is an “immanent” one.’70 Here he again refers to Jaspers, for whom ‘the possibility of experiencing being proper requires an immanent transcendence’, since ‘it takes reality to reveal transcendence. About transcendence we can know nothing in general; we can hear it only historically, in reality. Experience is the font of transcendent ascertainment’.71 The stuff of the experience is always the stuff of the world, diaphanous but never dissolved. Reminiscent of Kant telling Plato that his speculative dove needs the resistance of an earthly atmosphere for its wings to

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68 Hepburn, ‘Findlay’s Aesthetic Thought’, 209.
69 In his ‘Aesthetic Experience, Metaphysics and Subjectivity: Hepburn and “Nature-mysticism”’ (published in this volume), David E. Cooper notes that several of Hepburn’s responses to this “nisus” or transcendentual urge remain constant throughout these papers [on aesthetics], covering almost forty years.
cleave the air and ascend, Hepburn emphasizes that ‘without […] particular modes of earthiness, there would exist no such ethereal, emotional quality’ in even the highest aesthetic encounters. The ripples and the plateaus are made of the same plain water, and not a drop of it can be said to truly, empirically transubstantiate, to shake off its mundane substantiality. The stuff of experience remains immanent, Hepburn is rightly adamant, but its sparkle, he admits, and our imaginative transport with it, is an immanent transcendence.

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72 ‘The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space. Likewise, Plato abandoned the world of the senses because it posed so many hindrances for the understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding. He did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support, as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his powers in order to get his understanding off the ground.’ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 129 (A5/B8–9).
73 Hepburn, ‘Finnlay’s Aesthetic Thought’, 209.
74 I am grateful to J. Gerald Janzen, Michael McGhee, David E. Cooper, Yuriko Saito, and Endre Szécsényi for perceptive comments which have improved this essay.
In his exploration of the links and boundaries between the aesthetic, moral, and religious, he was drawn to a particular set of ideas: wonder, imagination, the sublime, freedom, life's meaning, mystery, respect for nature, and the sacred. […] Hepburn often remarked that one’s philosophical and personal lives are intimately connected, shaping each other significantly.

1 Finding the first person plural

In this paper I attempt a rapid tour d’horizon of these ‘links and boundaries between the aesthetic, moral and religious’, tracing out some of the connections I should want to make myself, in the spirit, I hope, of Hepburn’s exploration. I draw on an essay about T. S. Eliot by the poet, Ted Hughes, as well as, more predictably, on Immanuel Kant’s third Critique. I conclude with brief reflections on King Lear’s youngest daughter, Cordelia, as an exemplification or symbol of how moral ideas can be enshrined in the particular representations of the imagination. But I want to begin by endorsing Hepburn’s thought that ‘one’s philosophical and personal lives are intimately connected, shaping each other significantly’, as Emily Brady puts it.

One of the formative texts of my schooldays was Thomas Mann’s 1903 novella, Tonio Kröger.2 It traces the isolation of the adolescent writer in his alienated self-consciousness, suffering from his acute awareness that what distances him from those he is awkwardly and mutely attracted to, Hans Hansen and then Ingeborg Holm, is their innocence of his intense inner life. His experience, and that of Stephen Daedalus3, spoke to my wounded adolescence, caught between poetry, desire and Catholic dogma, to the felt absence

3 James Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916; Harmondsworth, 1960).
of an answering echo in others as I sought to understand and express my estrangement – it was the dramatic, adolescent individualism beginning to see that what seemed particular and even peculiar was a more common predicament than one can had conceived. Kröger's predicament was summed up ironically by his artist friend, Lisaveta, who told him he was 'ein verirrter Bürger', a bourgeois gone astray, ironically because that dismissive judgment is itself to be judged in the light of the whole narrative. And perhaps that narrative can only be judged in the perspective thrown up by the First World War.

In his Nobel Prize autobiographical note Mann said of the Great War that it ‘forced me into an agonizing reappraisal of my fundamental assumptions, a human and intellectual self-inquiry.’ Whatever we think of the terms of Mann's own reappraisal, it is characteristic of such self-inquiry that it is forced upon us by events, by crises that undermine certitude, the confidence of our sense of self and of humanity, of our ‘fundamental assumptions’ – and our capacity for action. The reappraisal, the self-inquiry is what constitutes the beginnings of philosophy, and though personal it is not a private event, but is conducted, as it were, in the first person plural by those who acknowledge this common predicament.

2 A name and a human voice

In a powerful essay on T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes refers to the ‘desacralized landscape’ that followed the Great War and in doing so echoes Mann's talk of an 'agonizing reappraisal':

The undertow of Eliot's early tortured self-examination was the knowledge that this had irreversibly happened, that religious institutions and rituals had ceased to be real in the old sense, and that they continued to exist only as forms of 'make-believe', ways of behaviour rather than of belief. A new kind of reality had supplanted them [...], the whole metaphysical universe centred on God had vanished from its place. It had evaporated with all its meanings.

Hughes later adds an interesting self-correction:

"We have no problem nowadays in seeing that the God-centred metaphysical universe of the religions suffered not so much an evaporation as a translocation, it was interiorised. And translated. We live in the translation, where what had been religious and centred on God is psychological and centred on the idea of the self…"

This is rough and ready, familiar stuff, and the contrast is too stark – after all, the idea of the self is hardly absent from the old God-centred metaphysical universe. This seems to be the announcement of a project, and we have to ask, what is involved in, what are the terms of, this living ‘in the translation’? Although Ronald Hepburn does not address these remarks of Hughes, we shall see that he has a view about its tenor and direction. The Death of God had occurred decades earlier, but shattering world events, the Great War, or the Holocaust, for instance, sometimes turn intellectual events into cultural ones, where catastrophe and its reverberations through our certitudes pass down the generations. ‘For the first time in his delusive history,’ Hughes remarks, ‘[mankind] had lost the supernatural world. He had lost the special terrors and cruelties of it, but also the infinite consolation, and the infinite inner riches. In its place he had found merely a new terror: the meaningless’. He goes on:

"We see now that Eliot was the poet who brought the full implication of that moment into consciousness. It formed the features of his genius […]. And it decided his unique position in the history of poetry. That desacralized landscape had never been seen before. Or if it had been glimpsed, it had never before been real. Eliot found it, explored it, revealed it, gave it a name and a human voice. And almost immediately, everybody recognised it as their own."

His poetry, indeed, was the giving it a name and a human voice. But how does Eliot pass from this desacralized landscape after the Great War to the Anglo-Catholicism of his later years, from ‘headpiece filled with straw’ to ‘the hint

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6 Ibid., 274.
7 Ibid., 269.
8 Ibid., 269–70.
9 I am grateful to Professor Cairns Craig for emphasising in discussion that Eliot was nevertheless hardly immune from religious doubt.
half guessed, the gift half understood’ of Incarnation? Hughes talks of the tradition in which the shaman comes at the moment of tribal disaster, declaring that in Eliot’s case (he has been comparing him with Yeats) ‘the tribal disaster […] was presumably just that convulsive desacralisation of the spirit of the West’.10 But pace Hughes the tribal disaster is not simply the desacralized landscape, which it nevertheless encompasses: what is convulsive is the catastrophe of war, the human depravity and stupidity which overwhelms the imagination, overwhelms like a tidal wave the settled certitude of a traditional world picture, the real terror of meaninglessness.

The common predicament is both the fact of the tidal wave and the cultural and moral destruction that it leaves in its wake. It is this loss of certitude and direction and the recognition of human depravity and our own powerlessness and complicity that is the condition of the agonised reappraisal mentioned by Thomas Mann. The shamanic work of the poet is the long, gruelling process of interior and ritual enactment by which the poetic self of Eliot emerges, a tortured body, like St Sebastian, ‘bound to a stake and pierced by many arrows’11 emerges through the ordeal of sacrificial death and dismemberment towards resurrection. Yeats talked of the ‘sages standing in God’s holy fire’, Eliot of being ‘[c]onsumed by either fire or fire’. But since we are talking of translocation and translation the question is, what constitutes death and resurrection?

3 Losing its imaginative hold

In a Royal Institute of Philosophy conference at Liverpool in 1991 in which Ronald Hepburn wrote a paper on the religious imagination12, his Edinburgh colleague, James P. Mackey, remarked of his fellow symposiast:

Yes, indeed, he seems to say […] claims about the nature and activities of imagination might well succeed in the sphere of religious belief, if we had something additional, some actual evidence for the actual existence of a divine object which we could then claim is in this way, however tentatively, apprehended. But, he implies no such evidence is

11 Ibid., 273.
produced in the course of these excursuses on religious imagination. Hence we know much about imaginative ways of knowing, but we do not know if any divine object is ever known by these, what we claim to know in imagination is, then, not known of God; and assumptions about God's existence are left without the evidence which would make at least that much about God (viz. God's existence) known.13

Hepburn's position is rather more nuanced than this suggests. His claim is that the religious imagination, if it is to remain 'religious', has to be understood in a realistic spirit, as about God and our human relationship to him, even if his existence cannot as they say 'be proved'. He addresses the strategy of giving up the 'attempt to “attach” the images to a self-revealing transcendental deity' so that 'talk about deity, transcendence, revelation themselves are (wittingly) internalised [in an echo of Hughes's 'interiorized'] within the structure of images and myth'.14 He remarks that 'if an actual divine origin for the images is, in fact, deleted, the images become a “background”, prompting, regulating and meditatively sustaining the attitudes and evaluations that now constitute the religious orientation'. They would be regulative ideas, functional rather than referential. But what are these 'attitudes and evaluations' that Hepburn is referring to? He talks of 'existential notions', as he puts it, of 'authenticity, self-scrutiny, integrity, agape, the avoidance of self-deception'.15 If the religious imagination is no longer thought of as in some obscure way revelatory of the relationship between God and his creation, then it becomes their regulative, sustaining 'background'. But why then talk anymore of a religious imagination? Hepburn makes this point clearly, acknowledging, in an echo of Hughes, and citing Colin Falck, that deleting imagination leaves us in a 'stripped and bare landscape',16 so that, as Falck observes, there is 'a need for the redeeming of the “mechanised and de-sacralised world of practical life”'.17

Hepburn then glosses the famous Wittgensteinian remarks about the Last Judgment, saying, rather pointedly, that:

[i]f this image has a hold on my imagination, I shall orientate my reflection and my practice, my self-monitoring, by reference to it. I rather

15 Ibid., 137.
think, however, that if I were to see it as no more than that – an image with a hold on my imagination, whose role is to regulate my conduct and accountability – it would come to lose its imaginative hold. (My emphasis – M. M.)\textsuperscript{18}

This seems a just assessment, and the loss of its hold on the imagination is precisely the cultural reality that Hughes seeks to address. If it is just an image without some admittedly obscure reference to an obscurely conceived Day of Judgment, then surely, to use Hughes’s language, it simply evaporates and it is unclear that it can be ‘translocated’ or ‘translated’, again becoming now a merely picturesque means of referring to the absolute seriousness of ethical demands – without subscribing to the doctrine of eternal reward and punishment. On the other hand, it is surely optimistic to suppose that those for whom the Last Judgment grips the imagination, and those for whom it does not, nevertheless share a common moral universe. The role of the picture may secure the possibility of dialogue between the theist and the secularist, though it seems unlikely. The loss of the Last Judgment in this sense is more than the loss of a picturesque representation of moral seriousness: it represents a fundamental shift of consciousness, and it makes Hughes’s talk of ‘translation’ and ‘translocation’ seem too facile: ‘we live in the translation, where what had been religious and centred on God is psychological and centred on an idea of the self – albeit a self that remains a measureless if not infinite question mark.’\textsuperscript{19}

But we should pause here. The religious imagination may indeed be represented as revealing the relationship of God to his creation, particularly his human creation, but by that token it encompasses the relationship of humanity to God, the relationship of human beings to each other, their fellow beings and the planet. Indeed, to invoke that compromised word ‘spirituality’,\textsuperscript{20} it is an orthodox thought that the criterion of the spiritual state of an individual or a community is their conduct, their demeanour towards one another. The religious imagination embraces, seeks to articulate and express, the transformations of subjectivity and intersubjectivity we still think of in terms of an imagery of death and resurrection, flesh and spirit, regeneration, metanoia, and

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 138–9.
\textsuperscript{19} Hughes, Winter Pollen, 274.
\textsuperscript{20} ‘Compromised’ because it is prematurely rejected on the grounds that it is inextricably tied to a theological conception. But one could talk of ‘interiority’ or ‘subjectivity’ or even of the disciplines of therapeia.
the dramatic shifts that can occur in our attitudes to mortality and contingency. It includes the existential notions that Hepburn mentions, of ‘authenticity, self-scrutiny, integrity, *agape*, the avoidance of self-deception’ but includes also what he *does not* mention here, the therapeutic or spiritual agenda of *sozi de soi*, the care of the self, the striving towards self-knowledge, the resolution of the inner conflict, confusion and doubt which are the conditions of the possibility of exemplifying Hepburn’s existential notions, the dark and strenuous struggle with the passions whose tumultuous collective eruption was the real tribal disaster.

Now Hughes has taken the loss of the traditional understanding of religious language as a *fait accompli*, as the new cultural reality: we are no longer living in that God-centred world, as he puts it. So, again, what is left of the ‘religious’? What would constitute a ‘translocation’, a ‘translation’ of religious language? The translocation would seem to be from the metaphysical world to the psychological and the self. But this seems a pointless, even impossible transposition, as though all that language and imagery of transcendence and of deity could really cross over into an application to ‘the self and the psychological’, as though what was previously ‘the self and the psychological’ emerges unchanged and unscathed. The real situation is that of a foundering selfhood in need of compass and direction. The criterion of selection for Hughes is inner necessity: there needs to be some element of need, of sifting forlornly through the debris for fragments of sense, rather than a wholesale and unproblematic transposition. In other words, what *does* keep its hold on the imagination, and under what conditions?

The *regulative* function that Hepburn thinks is the consequence of detaching religious language from transcendence and deity has a serious flaw: what it ‘regulates’ are attitudes and evaluations that we are *familiar with already*, whereas the imagination *feels its way* in territory we are *not* familiar with already. By Hepburn’s account, the religious becomes the cultural adumbration of existentialism. This was the familiar charge against the demythologisers. But if the imagination is conceived merely as a heuristic device for presenting and supporting ideas that we understand already and independently of the images — ’authenticity, self-scrutiny, integrity, *agape*, the avoidance of self-deception’ —, then we neglect, as I have just hinted, a quite different role for imagination, as a mode of exploration and discovery of possibilities of self-transcendence and transformation that although they were originally imagined within the terms of a religious consciousness, are capable of recovery, and, it seems to me, this is Hughes’s project. Here the imagination is involved in the representation
of the struggle to overcome the forces, personal and collective, that tend to undermine the possibility of ‘authenticity, self-scrutiny’, etc. The crucial point is that whereas Hepburn refers us to notions we are familiar with already, the conditions for their possibility are precisely unfamiliar. Someone who offers a ‘translocation’ or ‘translation’ in the Hughesian manner seems to be exploring the possibility of some continuity of use for language and imagery that was thought to have foundered with the world view that was superseded in the trauma of the desacralized landscape, a bridge across the divide between the old order and the new.

Hughes had remarked that we lived ‘in the translation, where what had been religious and centred on God is psychological and centred on an idea of the self’, but as we have seen he qualified this: ‘albeit a self that remains a measureless if not infinite question mark’: precisely something that the imagination explores, but explores, as I should want to add, in the discovery of attitudes, orientations, intentionalities that we are not familiar with already, but which transcend the limits of that egocentric self-enclosure which obstruct their possibility. We should not suppose that we all know already what is implied by talk of the psychological and the self. Hughes’s comment is suggestive of possibilities of self-transcendence and self-knowledge beyond our current scope, possibilities that make essential reference to what is disclosed in the imagery of the purification of desire, the death and resurrection adumbrated by the visions of the shaman. But the imagery leads and beckons towards possibilities only guessed at, it does not tell us in a picturesque manner what we already know.

So, there will be limits to this talk of translation and translocation. Hepburn himself was clear that we cannot lift all that language of atonement, redemption, ransom from the traditional imagery of Christianity. But by that token, the kind of exploration that Hughes refers to takes what it still needs from traditional imagery. The application to ‘psychology and the self’ is a matter of what the searching and fractured self needs to reach towards in the process of death and resurrection – a language for something that really happens, as Wittgenstein might have said, and cultural Christians might well find themselves reaching for the visionary notion of the Christ or see point and significance in the silence of Jesus before Pilate. When Yeats addresses the ‘sages standing in God's holy fire’, it is a solecism to retort that there is no God, because the processes of purification stand in need of expression, even as the terms of that expression continue to change as the formations of
selfhood are undermined and transmuted, in an agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

4 ‘dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination’

Hepburn’s position also confronts a further remark of Hughes:

and the word ‘divine’, with its relatives, can never be more than a convenient finger-post pointing towards those orders of experience which mankind goes on stumbling into, in terror and awe.21

In his discussion of Eliot, Hughes had reached for the idea of the poet as shaman. But what he says here about ‘orders of experience’ and ‘terror and awe’ echoes Kant’s language in his Critique of Judgment, where he talks about the sublime as ‘dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination’22 and how ‘the imaginations finds itself at the edge of an abyss in which it fears to lose itself’. 23

In his Liverpool conference paper Hepburn introduces the third Critique in the following terms:

Kant can speak of ‘the might of imagination’; but he can also offer a theory of the sublime in which it is crucially imagination that is – not triumphant – but humiliated, overwhelmed by great magnitudes or energies of nature: and it is through the contrast between awareness of imagination overwhelmed and awareness of reason and the free moral self, which are by no means overwhelmed, that the oscillatory, dual experience of fearful exhilaration, sublimity, is generated and sustained.24

But one should also recall the young William Wordsworth’s tying up the boat by the lake and returning with ‘a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being’. The idea is of something still beyond our scope, ‘orders of experience’ as we might say, still beyond expression, but by that token giving

21 Hughes, Winter Pollen, 285.
23 Ibid., 107 (§27).
us a sense of present limit we might not otherwise have. I am not sure that imagination is either triumphant or humiliated, though in the Kantian scheme it is certainly overwhelmed by these great magnitudes and energies: what is important is how the imagination responds. Kant compares this experience of the sublime with the products of what he calls artistic genius. Such works of art are precisely disruptive of a settled sense of self, of particular subjective formations, in just the way that the imagination is overwhelmed by the sublime in nature, but they demand and can indeed induce a crucial quality of attention:

nature is not estimated in our aesthetic judgment as sublime because it excites fear, but because it summons up our power (which is not of nature) to regard as petty what we are otherwise anxious about (worldly goods, health and life), and hence to regard its power (to which in these matters we are certainly exposed) as exercising over us and our personality no such dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them.

As Hepburn points out, in the Kantian experience of the sublime, we become conscious of ourselves as moral beings. The easily neglected point is that in the process Nature ‘summons up our power […] to regard as petty [klein] what we are otherwise anxious about (worldly goods, health and life)’. This refers us to a reversal or revolution of attitude, from one in which these anxieties are dominant, to one in which they are in abeyance. But in favour of what?

The object of attention is brought out in Kant’s description of ‘the poetic achievement’, which ‘invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty […] of regarding and estimating nature as phenomenon in the light of aspects which nature does not afford us in experience, either for sense or understanding.’

Or, perhaps less ponderously, and resuscitating the ‘dead metaphors’ in Kant’s prose, ‘it strengthens the mind and lets it feel its power […] of looking at [betrachten] and judging nature as appearance [Erscheinung] from points of view [nach Ansichten] which it does not itself offer either for sense or understanding’.

25 The phrase ‘die Menschheit in unsere Person’ is perhaps better translated as the ‘humanity in our own person’, which connects better with what Kant says elsewhere about treating the humanity in our own person – as an end.
26 Kant, The Critique of Judgment, 111 (§28).
27 Ibid., 191–2 (§53).
28 Ibid.
This ‘strengthening of the mind’ consists in an achieved perspective on the objects of experience, which then has to be given expression. However, the crucial poetic, perhaps even shamanic, ground lies in the space between finding expression for a possible perspective and coming to inhabit it. The point about the shamanic role, which is of course also a matter of public ritual, is that the poet also offers ‘finger posts’ of language through the ordeals of lived experience, because they have been there already.

The points of view belong to the sphere of Reason. But this operates as a metaphor for what Kant says about aesthetic ideas representing ideas of reason. The artist shows genius to the extent that their imagination represents some phenomenon but shows or reveals a perspective on it. Crudely, and to use one of Kant’s examples, a talented artist might display the attractiveness of ‘fame’ as an object of desire or inclination; whereas genius displays this attractiveness as part of the totality, it strives to bring to conscious moral expression.

The remarkable thing about Kant’s account of his ‘rational ideas’ is that as well as ‘God’ and the ‘soul’, heaven and hell, they include the emotional lives of human beings: the poet ventures to interpret to sense [versinnlichen] the rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc. Or, again, as to things of which examples occur in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all vices, as also love, fame and the like, transgressing the limits of experience he attempts with the aid of an imagination which emulates the display of reason in the attainment of a maximum, to body them forth to sense with a completeness [in einer Vollständigkeit sinnlich zu machen] of which nature offers no parallel.29

Thus Hepburn’s ‘humiliated imagination’ compensates by seeking to emulate reason, striving to show phenomena with a ‘completeness’ that is not available within nature. That Vollständigkeit will include the perspective on it that is captured flickeringly in the array of related images that the particular representation evokes, and it is this which shows us the phenomena ‘according to points of view’ which they do not themselves offer ‘either for sense or understanding’. The artist’s representation instantiates the phenomenon but its imaginative power consists in its evoking Ansichten that can only be shown. What the artist depicts shows what cannot be depicted. The rational idea of

29 Ibid., 176–7 (§49).
love, for instance, is only available to us through the medium of the imagi-
nation, whose aesthetic representations evoke the whole phenomenon through
the multiple aspects displayed in the particular, but evocative image or represen-
tation. Yeats gives us a sense of this in two lines from Byzantium:

Those images which yet
Fresh images beget.

The salient point is that ideas are mediated by imagery and that these ideas,
thus mediated, show us – allow us to contemplate – some aspect of human
life. Two things happen here – we see a totality, but we also discover an atti-
idue to that totality, and Kant seems wholly aware of this double aspect. The
crucial thing, though, is that it is all done through the particular, the concrete
universal. The temptation is to assume that we have these ideas of reason at
our disposal already and that the issue is how best to ‘present’ them through
the imagination, ‘interpret them to sense [versinnlichen]’. This would again make
our symbolism or imagery merely heuristic, a way of presenting what we know
already, whereas it seems more plausible to think that it is entirely the other way around.
In the case of ‘fame’ or ‘love’ and so forth, the exploration of the possibilities
is an activity of the imagination, and the exploration is essentially open-ended.
Our access to the ‘rational idea’ of love is wholly through the Vollständigkeit of
the imagination, even though we may be tempted to think of it as somehow
the intellectual summary of what is presented and displayed.

But what about the rational ideas of God and the soul, heaven and hell,
and so forth? Part of the point of Kant’s calling them ideas of reason is to
emphasise that we can only ‘think the idea’, they are not objects of knowledge.
This contradicts the classical notion that although we cannot know what God
is, we can come to know, through reason, that there is a God. What seems
plausible is that there is a sense in which even if we can only at best form an
inadequate idea of God, we can form an idea of the world as phenomenon,
as an object of attention, as a creation, indeed, and, moreover, that we can
experience it as an object of wonder. But is it plausible? Wonder is directed
at particular things, this sunset, this new born infant, and so on, but they are
also often exemplary, emblems of a world that is evoked in the particular.
Such wonder can lead us towards the formation of the idea of some Being that
both transcends this world and is in some way responsible for it, the idea of a
Being which is therefore beyond our powers of representation. But this idea
has taken the form of a loving vision of what is an object of wonder – the
world – imaginatively conceived as a work of the creative imagination by a supreme artist, or, as in the case of Michelangelo’s Adam, an overwhelmingly powerful but tender father.

What is thus represented in this leap of the imagination has struck human beings with the force of truth, to use an expression of Wittgenstein, and the tribal disaster, according to Hughes, consisted in its shattering. However, wonder, awe and terror can survive the shattering of the terms of this leap, and the communicable residuum is the idea of the world, the Earth and its inhabitants, exemplified in evocative particulars, as objects of providential care, the projection of a real attitude that we can in rare moments achieve and discover. But the notion of the concrete universal is crucial. A landscape or an infant can give us a sense of the whole and the wonder we feel as we contemplate the landscape or hold the infant is a wonder at the world so particularly exemplified. If Hughes is right and we ‘live in the translation’, then it is an interim in the sense that the representation of a god figure brings the earth and the starry heavens into view as objects of care and of wonder. A theist may take this as a symbol of a transcendent figure who watches over us, but it is also the image of a possible perspective on the world, the focus of a form of a feeling whose intentional object is the world, the earth and the starry heavens. The wonder is one of the things that motivates someone to see the environment as an end of action, despite the “interests” and passions that stand in the way, the possibility of care stifled or overlain by dispositions that are inimical to its expression in action, as we shall see in the case of Lear and Cordelia, where we descend from global vision to exemplary images of power, oppression and love.

5 Towards a Cordelian ethics

It is time to return to ideas of psychology and the self. When we start to reflect philosophically upon ‘morality’ we are all too likely to find a moral language ready to hand but which for all that belongs to a conception of moral life which ought really to have been brought into question, along with our own relationship to that language. The salient, received form is that of the language of requirement, permissibility and prohibition. And the question is, why do we think that this kind of language captures the essence of moral life? Of course, we acknowledge promptings of pity or compassion or solidarity, but access to them becomes distorted by the only language of necessity that is available to
us, that of the imperative, the voice of command to which obedience is owed, the sort of unwilling willingness encapsulated in Kant’s Imperative.

In William Shakespeare’s narrative poem of power, lust and rape, The Rape of Lucrece, the object of Tarquin’s lust is not a flute-girl from his own household, the injustice of whose obligations would pass unremarked, but the virtuous, patrician wife of an indiscreet fellow soldier boasting in effect that he has something that Tarquin has not. Partly it strengthens the thought that she belongs to another man, that she is Collatine’s, his exclusive and beautiful treasure, faithful and therefore unavailable, so the object of envy and a challenge to Tarquin’s vanity. There is perhaps the thought of the enjoyment of taking someone by force, who will chastely protest but will finally yield. There would also be revenge, for an affront to his vanity, yes, but also for a yet to be spoken and only dimly recognised criticism of his way of life that has therefore to be stifled and overwhelmed. And rape is the paradigmatic act that seeks, not necessarily for sexual reasons, to humiliate and have one’s power confirmed, to put the woman in her place, possess the female body and silence her voice: unless it speaks in terms of a script you have approved in advance.

The two older daughters of King Lear, Goneril and Regan, know how to speak the approved language; rather than speak truth to power they say what power wants to hear, knowing also, as the loyal Kent does, that ‘power to flattery bows’, even as they seek to possess it. But Lear knows how to silence the voices both of Kent and Cordelia, neither of whom are prepared to say what he wants to hear, neither of whom, in fact can speak the language that is required. Later he learns that he cannot silence the real language of calculation and personal advantage that is liberated in Goneril and Regan by his loss and their acquisition of power.

When Lear on the cusp of his own self-dispossession fatally divides up his kingdom and finally turns to Cordelia to ask her what she can say to draw a third more opulent than her sisters, she famously answers, ‘Nothing, my lord’: ‘Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth’. Even if she saw and desired the advantages it might bring, it is something that she cannot do. What I suggest is that this Cordelian voice is the authentic ethical voice, as it is situated in the world as we still find it. Such a voice is not essentially female, of course, it is human, but under certain conditions its symbol is the female just because that is one of the main voices that is suppressed. In the confrontation between Lear and Cordelia, she refuses to speak and he cannot comprehend the language of the other.
But in saying all this I hope to begin to undermine a conception of ethics that unconsciously represents itself as male in order to be heard (represents itself thus also to itself), as the voice of and the obedient response to military male authority, the voice of the absolute ruler, what is ordered, commanded, demanded, required – and permitted or allowed. It may use the grammar of power and obedience to subvert that power, but in order to do so it needs to recognise that such is the case. Kant’s great Categorical Imperative, which makes arbitrary domination the paradigm issue of morality, is conceived as a self-addressed command, as though Kant could not quite see a sense of freedom beyond the power of obedience to a law one prescribes for oneself rather than one prescribed by arbitrary, more powerful others. He remains implicated in that from which he seeks to free himself, and this needs to be seen and acknowledged. Nevertheless, he accurately portrays a divided psyche in which contrary impulses need to be restrained in the light of a more or less subdued but native concern for the welfare of others, others for the sake of whom actions are carried out, and not, therefore, for the sake of duty. By contrast the true Cordelian voice is not so implicated, and cannot begin to seem plausible to others who inhabit the ambience of arbitrary power. As Kent takes his leave, banished by the imperious Lear, his parting remark is ‘Freedom is hence, and banishment is here’. There is no freedom for the human subject in the atmosphere of absolute power such as is still exercised by Lear: it is a state of banishment for the ‘subject’, and this is a remark about the inner life as well as the more obvious outer. One is only allowed a certain language, there is a limit on what may be expressed which puts pressure on what can be.

When Cordelia takes leave of her sisters, committing her father to their ‘professed bosoms’, Regan replies ‘prescribe not us our duties’, a brilliant, gratifying grammatical dissonance as an appeal to the heart is roughly mistranslated into the language of prescription. The point of this is that such a language of duty stands over against an alienated, contrary subjectivity, there to constrain an unruly will, though there is fat chance that it will constrain Regan’s. But a Cordelian ethics, speaking the language of inner necessity, provides the very form of a subjectivity, a formation of the will, rather than a constraint upon it, a direction of and not a direction to the will. More to the point she speaks out of a sensibility formed around pity which in Shakespeare is a perspective as well as a virtue. When she first sees her father again, asleep in a tent in the French camp, she describes him with the eyes of pity, as an appropriate subject of pity:
Had you not been their father, these white flake
Did challenge pity of them […]
[…] mine enemy’s dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire.

In effect a Cordelian ethics is an ethics of love, and it is love that can hardly make itself heard or must remain silent if it is not to be distorted. Sometimes it dominates consciousness, sometimes it is a helpless by-stander within it, sometimes it is overwhelmed. Ironically, Kent is able to act out of love only under cover, but has begun to subvert an imperial notion of duty by invoking its name in seeking to save Lear from himself and aligning himself with Cordelia. He has to go about in disguise in order to deal with Lear, in order to act for the sake of Lear’s best interests in secret. Kent acts heroically and with fortitude out of love for Lear, and thus out of inclination, but not as Kant conceives it, and he does not act for the sake of duty, though he uses its language as a front, but for the sake of Lear. But as Regan says of her father, ‘he hath ever but slenderly known himself’ and we witness the inner turmoil that follows the abrupt loss of power as the condition of that power evaporates and he stumbles through madness and grief towards self-knowledge, beginning to comprehend, through suffering, the language of Cordelia he could previously only dismiss with anger.

We may begin, in the first person, assuming the singularity of our predicaments, but human imagination and experience can lead us to see the universal in our own particular, to see that what we undergo is representative, in two connected senses: on the one hand, we may come to realise that we share a condition – and form an idea of it – and, on the other, see, through the impact of an immediate imaginative responsiveness, that the minute particulars of our own state are a symbol of that condition, a symbol because and just to the extent that it sets the mind in motion, to use a phrase of Kant’s. But the dynamic of symbolism may be exploited and evinced in a third notion of representation, in which the imagination seeks to capture fleeting thoughts and images and to represent and explore their structure and connections in artistic and literary form. This is poignantly the case with Cordelia and ‘the good Kent’. Shakespeare offers a representation of their predicament that allows both him and his audience to explore its features with a completeness or Vollständigkeit not available in nature.
Emily Brady cited Hepburn's remark that 'one's philosophical and personal lives are intimately connected, shaping each other significantly' and it is certainly the case that we have to draw on our own experience to recognise and grasp the network of moral distinctions that define the predicament that confronts Cordelia; understanding her reluctance to speak, her silence, requires an inwardness not available to her sisters, say, for whom her problems are opaque. One knows perhaps all too well how they might approach moral philosophy.

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Hepburn’s ‘Aesthetic and Moral: Links and Limits’ takes as its subject what he describes as the ‘important, elusive and complex relations’ between the aesthetic and moral domains. In the course of the essay, he examines a number of different commonly proposed relationships between the two areas of experience, each of which he rejects on the grounds that it fails to sufficiently distinguish the separate characters of the two. He, nevertheless, concludes by registering his reluctance to completely ‘dismiss the bolder claims that have been examined’, since he believes that such claims still point to ‘important overlaps’ between the two domains (x). The first part of the present essay will examine Hepburn’s treatment of these claims concerning the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral in the order in which he presents them. It will not attempt, at this stage, to systematically relate those claims, since Hepburn himself does not do so. The second part will argue that it is Hepburn’s commitment to moral realism that makes his rejection of such claims about the relationship between the aesthetic and moral a foregone conclusion, though also that this same commitment renders it difficult for him to escape a certain circularity in the arguments used to justify that rejection. The essay will end, then, by suggesting other grounds for justifying the distinction he argues for in rejecting some of the ‘bolder claims’ that have been made about the relationship.

1 Hepburn’s account

It is clear from the beginning that Hepburn feels there are legitimate grounds for at least considering an overlap between the aesthetic and the moral but also that a systematic treatment of this overlap is inherently problematic. He begins
by noting that many ‘terms of moral appraisal’ (‘gracious’, ‘gentle’, ‘beautiful’, ‘disgusting’, ‘repulsive’, ‘ugly’) have an ‘aesthetic aspect’, that there are concepts ‘such as self-fulfilment and life-enhancement’ that can be applied to both moral and aesthetic goals, and that at least some ‘terms of moral theory are also terms of aesthetic theory – unity, integrity, harmony, love’ (38). It is clear, then, from the outset that the topic is a fraught one. For, although Hepburn presents these usages merely as a piece of data to be accounted for, in fact the use of such vocabulary (particularly in the moral domain) is far from uncontroversial. If we consider, for example, some items from his final list – ‘unity, integrity, harmony’ – it would appear, then, that the two domains mainly overlap where they are at their most vague, for many of these terms are both difficult to define and/or only controversially included in either or both of the domains. As he remarks, the overlap between the aesthetic and the moral ‘is by no means an easy area in which to think clearly’, for neither the aesthetic nor the moral is a ‘static’ entity (39). Indeed, one of the striking aspects of Hepburn’s treatment of the question is that, despite his topic being the relationship between two domains, he does not begin by defining what those domains are, or at least appear to be, in themselves. This is, of course, unsurprising given the nature of the terms – ‘aesthetic’ and ‘moral’ – in question, but it is an omission that points to the signal difficulty of his enterprise, and one to which we must return.

Hepburn’s first example of a claimed relationship between the aesthetic and the moral is the thesis that, since virtue is beautiful and vice ugly, since ‘beauty and sublimity are brought into the world through the acts and in the characters, of morally notable agents, and diminished by those of the morally base’, it is possible to encapsulate the ‘supreme goal of morality’ in aesthetic terms: as the creation of ‘beauty of soul’ (40; 44). Hepburn begins his counterargument by rejecting Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s famous criticism of the ‘beautiful soul’ as too self-absorbed and obsessed with its own purity to engage in action. This may apply to some instances, he asserts, but ‘for an actual moral agent it would be possible for moral self-monitoring to detect what is going wrong in such a case, and to initiate correctives’ (41). Indeed, he concedes that ‘many moral concepts and appraisals can also allow, sometimes even invite, aesthetic appraisal’, so that the concept of ‘the beautiful soul’ can be understood as a ‘legitimate aesthetic transcription of the goals of moral life’ (42). However, he insists that it is only a transcription: just because it is possible to aesthetically appraise the moral life – the ‘character, actions and omissions of moral agents’ – does not mean that ‘we can or should re-think
the moral life as fundamentally an aesthetic enterprise, aiming primarily to provide aesthetic experience or fulfilment’ (42–3). After all, he points out, it is possible to ‘aesthetically appraise’ any object of attention; that we can also do so with actions and motives does not show that this is our principle way of appraising them. Indeed, in the case of actions or motives that we also experience as having moral significance, surely ‘the aesthetic here is essentially a response to the moral’ (44). He does not, however, rule out the possibility that there may be instances where ‘the moral seek[s] directly an aesthetic form of value’, though he does not offer any example of when this might be so (44).

If Hepburn’s treatment of the ‘beautiful soul’ suggests that he does not believe that aesthetic and moral appraisals can be co-extensive, he nevertheless still holds that there may be room for ‘a more extended place for the aesthetic within the moral than has been customary or traditional’ (43). One ‘obvious and important overlap’ between the two may, he believes, be found in ‘the place of love and the lovable in each’ (ix). Thus, having noted that theorists of the beautiful have often identified beauty with the aesthetically attractive, ‘the loveable’, and that the morally good has often been ‘summed up and unified – as it is in a Christian ethic – by love’, he now addresses the question of whether both domains may not be ‘presided over by love as their single and sufficient fundamental principle’ (45). As with his treatment of the ‘beautiful soul’, here too it is principally the identity of the ethical rather than the aesthetic that he appeals to in rejecting the thesis. While he does make the point that loveable beauty is ‘beauty’ only in a narrow sense, and not coextensive with the ‘aesthetically valuable’, which may be a matter of quite different emotions, such as those aroused by the ‘tragic, sublime, harrowing, ironical, farcical’, and so on, nevertheless, his main emphasis falls on the ways in which moral experience diverges, or can diverge, from the experience of love (45–6).

In part this is a matter of his interpretation of ‘love’, which is clearly different from the kind of caritas that Paul identified as the love that is the essence of Christianity. Love, writes Hepburn, can be ‘selfish, manipulatory, predatory, and lead to unfairness’, and, thus, itself require moral ‘monitoring’ (46). There are, then, ‘other principles’, beyond love itself, that are constitutive of morality: it is, he asserts, also a matter of ‘being fair, just and dutiful and according others their rights’ (45). His claim that the way in which ‘we should justly distribute our love is an irreducibly distinct and different matter from the requirement that we love’ is open to the objection that it is difficult to identify any motive for such just distribution aside from an attitude of universal benevolence that is, in turn, difficult to characterize except in terms of a selfless
concern for others’ welfare that, in the abstract at least, appears to be a form of love. (There must be a feeling that others’ feelings matter.) Nevertheless, it is true that morality involves a sense of obligation that is certainly not experienced as love. As Hepburn says, there are human relationships ‘into which love may vitally enter, but where love cannot by itself characterize nor determine the kinds of special obligations to which each gives rise. […] We continue to have irreducibly different obligations to our children, our students, to strangers, to an intruder in the night’ (46). Without subscribing to the moral realism that would set these obligations apart from any sense of obligation, we may nevertheless concede that such obligations certainly do not feel like love.

However, as with his discussion of the ‘beautiful soul’, Hepburn concludes by conceding that there may be an element of truth in the claim that love is an area of ‘overlap’ between the aesthetic and the moral (46). He allows Arnold Berleant’s points that ‘acceptance without judgement’, ‘personal exchange’, ‘a feeling of empathy or kinship […] a dissolution of barriers and boundaries, of communion’, and ‘heightened perceptual and sensual awareness’ are common to both the experience of love and the aesthetic (47). However, it is the identification of morality with love that is the principal problem. The ‘danger’ of such an identification, he writes, lies in the possibility of neglecting ‘the non-overlapping segments of morality’: ‘Here we need the structures and formal requirements of society, so as to sustain and protect it. We need laws and sanctions, and we may be a long way from plotting “a dissolution of barriers and boundaries”’ (48; 47).

Hepburn next turns to the idea that aesthetic and moral experience may be ‘epistemologically close’, so that aesthetic experience may ‘enhance’ moral sensitivity, insofar as the ‘attentive-and-contemplative giving of oneself to the object of one’s aesthetic experience […] is a close neighbour to moral self-transcendence’ and, thus, may ‘teach moral attitudes’ (x; 39):

It can plausibly be argued that the taking up of an aesthetic attitude, and the aesthetic experience that follows, can involve transformations of consciousness which carry us virtually to the moral standpoint. The objects of our aesthetic regard and enjoyment themselves hold us in a posture of respectful and other-affirming and other-valuing, and that posture may seem to merge with a moral recognition and respect for the other, the neighbour in the morally relevant sense. (58)
As with the previous theses on the overlap between the aesthetic and moral, he does profess some sympathy with this notion. He finds it ‘highly plausible’ but difficult to prove that an interest in, and enjoyment of, art of a certain appropriate complexity may enhance moral sensitivity (52–3). However, after a lyrical passage on how the experience of music often seems to ‘show us’ things about what is important in life, he concludes that the practical effect of such experience is limited, since a piece of music ‘really inhabits a world of its own’: a world without the ‘cheeks, limits, frustrations presented by other people, by things, by illness perhaps and the knowledge of mortality’ that influence how we really behave in the world (53). While there may be an ‘affinity’ between the two orientations, ‘it is entirely possible in aesthetic mode to value, affirm, even to respect in a limited way the objects of one’s attention – as spectacle, source of enjoyment, object of contemplation, [sic] without passing over to moral concern and moral involvement’ (58). Moral concern requires a ‘further shift of sense and of attitude’ based on ‘a sense of the worth [...] of the object, the other, in and for itself’, and this sense must be of a moral not an aesthetic nature (59).

Hepburn’s distinction here, while it may seem to presume the difference in order to establish a difference, could actually be seen as turning on the fact that moral experience is motivating in a way aesthetic experience is not. Aesthetic experience may motivate us to continue having the experience but there is really little more that we can do in relation to the object that would be appropriate to the feeling we have. Moral experience, in contrast, where at least it is constituted by a feeling that something is wrong, clearly expresses a desire that a state of affairs should be otherwise – even if that feeling does not (generally for practical reasons) actually lead to anything other than the feeling that the state of affairs is “wrong”. (This is a point we shall return to in the second part of this essay.) It might be objected at this point, however, that Hepburn’s stricture that moral experience requires a different kind of valuing of the object than is to be found in aesthetic experience, is not actually relevant to the thesis he is addressing. For, that thesis is not that aesthetic experience is moral experience, but only that the former leads on to, or makes us more prone to, the latter.

In fact, Hepburn’s objection to the idea of aesthetic experience enhancing moral sensitivity is rather different, and rather less direct, from the one I

2 Indeed, ‘my imaginative identification with the course of the music may […] take the form of fantasies of self-aggrandisement, from which little moral benefit may accrue’ (53).
have proposed above. Rather than appealing to the difference in motivation (or its absence) in the two forms of experience, he instead shifts the discussion to a distinction between the kinds of sensitivity that he feels each implies: contrasting the perception of ‘harmony’ in a work of art, and the perception of ‘unity in the self’ (54). He rightly points out that, in relation to the aesthetic, the word “harmony” is ‘often so abstract as to possess little informative content’ (55). However, it is not clear how the perception of ‘unity in the self’ is to be related to moral experience. What he does assert is that, in order to apply the concept of harmony in a moral context, we must already be able to distinguish what would count as a morally commendable harmony, which assumes that it is the moral experience itself that fixes the aesthetic character rather than the aesthetic character contributing to moral perception (55). What is a true ‘balance’ in terms of morality, he concludes, is ‘not at all illuminated’ by aesthetic criteria; rather it is ‘determined by moral and legal deliberation’, by questions such as ‘how grave was the wrong done, and would the failure to respond to that, with such-and-such a penalty, be an offence of inappropriate kindness?’ (55–6). Hepburn’s distinction, then, depends very much on contrasting feeling (the aesthetic) with deliberation (one aspect of the application of moral experience as feeling). (‘Moral deliberation’ is simply deliberation where it is not grounded in moral feeling.) The contrast does not, then, directly address the extent to which the aesthetic might constitute a preparation for the moral, since it does not address the question of how far aesthetic criteria might influence moral feeling. There is always the possibility that moral feelings may be grounded in aesthetic feelings. However, if such is the case, we would certainly not expect the subject to register the moral feeling as aesthetic in origin, since, in being experienced as a moral rather than an aesthetic response, it would already be exhibiting the difference in terms of motivational character that was described above. This, however, we shall return to later. For the moment, it remains to consider the last aesthetic/moral overlap that Hepburn discusses: the idea of treating one’s life ‘as an aesthetic object, a work of art in the making’ (x).

In dealing with the idea of one’s life as a work of art, Hepburn takes as his starting point Marcia Muelder Eaton’s assertion that aesthetic and ethical values are mutually ‘shaping and informing’: ‘Aesthetics’, she writes, ‘can become as important as ethics, because making an ethical decision […] is like choosing one story over another’ (52). However, Hepburn also refers here to
his own earlier ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, where he had himself made a similar point about the way in which fables, personal myths, and symbols can be ‘central components in moral self-understanding’ (57). Our moral lives, he concedes are not always guided by ‘rule, principle and maxim’ but often by such personal myths, by ‘self-image’, and by one’s sense of one’s own life as a narrative, that is, by ‘aesthetic conceptions’ (52). Moreover, he writes later of how he believes that ‘one of the closest and most serious of the rapprochements between aesthetic and moral’ are those cases where ‘some momentous moral vision is brought alive through the agency of great art’, where morality is not conveyed as a principle or precept but rather vividly presented or celebrated: ‘In such celebrations, we enjoy an experiential fusing or merging of moral and aesthetic thought and feeling’ (59). Though he does not draw the parallel, one can be found here between the contemplation of the art-work in such a case and the contemplation of one’s own actions or character where one is contemplating one’s own life as a narrative, a work of art.

However, despite his obvious sympathy with aspects of this thesis, Hepburn concludes, as with the previous theses, by emphasizing the dangers of accepting it too wholeheartedly. Again, too, this turns out to be a matter of wishing to avoid contaminating morality. Such aesthetic criteria as ‘coherence, comprehensiveness and the personal vividness of the symbols in which we may express to ourselves our life-goals, need to be supplemented’ by our ‘value-decisions’ (57). However, despite here contrasting aesthetic criteria with the ‘value-decisions’ of the ethical, suggesting that, while we passively experience the aesthetic, we actively construct the ethical, he also draws the same contrast from the opposite direction when he asserts that ‘there has to be a limit to the scope given to the created or constructed [aesthetic] component, and an indispensable place left for pure moral insight or moral cognition: a limit that is discernible and clear to the agent, not blurred or obliterated in a wholly constructed myth of individual selfhood’ (57). This distinction between what happens to us and what we do – with the aesthetic and moral alternately occupying one or the other of the contrasting roles – is only rendered more problematic by his ultimate reason for rejecting the idea of viewing one’s life as a work of art:

Our choice of life-style, with its aesthetically appealing symbols and its shaping – is essentially and irreducibly subject to moral appraisal.

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Aesthetic elaboration may make the implications of our choice more readily imaginable, its goals and guiding principles more vivid. But it can also glamorize morally unacceptable aspects: we may be dazzled by the attractiveness of the imagined and symbolized style of life. (57)

However, if it is true that our choice of life-style is 'essentially and irreducibly subject to moral appraisal', then there is no purpose served by recommending that it should be. Moreover, to make this distinction, in the abstract, between the inspiring vivid presentation of the moral and the dazzling attractiveness of what is immoral, presupposes a fixed moral point beyond our feelings of what should be. The question of Hepburn's moral realism is, however, one we shall turn to shortly, in the second part of this paper. Here it will be well to summarize his general conclusion regarding what can be said about the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral, in light of the preceding account.

Rather surprisingly, given that Hepburn has, as he says, tended to emphasize 'the irreducible differences' between the aesthetic and the moral, he ends by suggesting that while he may have given the impression that he was sceptical about the more ambitious writings on the relationship between them, nevertheless, he does not want to 'altogether discard the more speculative and visionary views', since there are, indeed, 'important overlaps' between the two domains (61; 60). However, he concedes that he sees 'no way of summing up the network of relationships between aesthetic and moral in any simple and short formula' (61). The only generalizations he ventures are that, if we insist too much on their separation, 'we deprive the moral of its most effective presentation, and art of its most serious subject-matter', and that, if we identify them too closely together, 'we may no longer be able to focus sharply upon the differences of logic and modes of appraisal that give each of them its separate identity' (61).

2 A non-realist account

In Hepburn's account of the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral, it is clearly moral rather than aesthetic realism that is emphasized. Though Hepburn asserts at starting that neither the aesthetic nor the ethical is a 'static'
entity, in the course of his analysis it is the aesthetic that turns out to be more malleable. In each case where he rejects the proposed overlap between the two domains, it is on the grounds that not to do so would be a threat to the authentic identity of the ethical: a contamination or encroachment by the non-ethical. We must always be on the alert, he writes, for ‘deceptive’ fusions of the two, ‘where for all their attractive pull, it is _extrication_ of the moral from the allurement of the aesthetic that is necessary’ (60). Aesthetic response, then, is here presented as a potential obscuring of the ethical _fact_. Thus, even where he writes of the area of overlap to which he is most sympathetic – the aesthetic presentation of the good – he warns that:

Enthusiasm for these phenomenal fusions of moral and aesthetic must not, however, oust critical caution […] We cannot rule out the possibility of equally notable, equally vivid aesthetic presentations of incompatible moral beliefs, of which only one can be true. (60 – my emphasis, J. K.)

He is even more direct when discussing the idea of one’s life as a work of art: ‘Morally speaking, we may not construct ourselves quite as we choose, but only within bounds set by the irreducibly non-aesthetic principles of morality, principles not fashioned but found’ (58).

Hepburn does at one point refer to ‘moral emotion’, as a contrast to the desire for aesthetic pleasure, but for the most part his emphasis, in drawing a contrast between the ethical and the aesthetic, falls on the autonomy of the latter from emotion: ‘moral thinking and acting should be centred simply on the prospect of the good to be done or the evil to be avoided, reduced or remedied through that action’ (43). Thus, although he mentions in passing the possibility of ‘a repugnance at the thought of dereliction of moral duty’, the ethical in the essay is principally distinguished from the aesthetic by the absence of any emotional investment (42). Hence, the distinction we have seen him draw between whatever balance between the aesthetic and ethical that aesthetic feeling itself might fix on, and the _true_ balance that can only be ‘determined by moral and legal _deliberation_’ (55–6, my emphasis, J. K.). While aesthetic experience is ‘self-rewarding and self-maintaining’, the moral, in contrast, is a matter of a ‘surpassing (or transcending) of the appearance and

5 Indeed, the very distinction he is drawing appears to oblige him emphasize the emotional satisfactions of the aesthetic to a degree that borders on outright _interest_; an emphasis that sits ill with his characterization of the ‘other-directed’ nature of the aesthetic response elsewhere.
behaviour of another person, in the recognition of the other's own experience; surpassing, transcending the evaluation of episodes in my life in terms of their perceptual interest and rewardingness to me, and making the other's own evaluation of their experience 'my own' (39). He acknowledges that there may be a 'teleological, goal-seeking side of moral endeavour', the aim of which is to produce certain states of mind (a sense that one has done right or avoided wrong), and that these states of mind may have an aesthetic aspect for the subject, though one that necessarily 'harmonizes readily with their role in the moral enterprise' (48). Nevertheless, as a moral realist, he also holds that there is a deontological aspect to morality:

[The] deontological (as concerned with such matters as justice, fairness, fidelity, standing by commitments once made, keeping promises and contracts even to one's hurt), is not itself primarily concerned with producing particular kinds of valued experience, but with redressing and rectifying wrongs, injustices, meeting the expectations a person has earlier aroused in others. It goes markedly against the grain of those moral concepts and performances to associate them with an 'aesthetic approach', insofar as that approach aims at finding enjoyment in its objects. (48)

This is a concept of morality that posits it as motivated solely by the inherent wrongness of certain actions. From the point of view of such a supposition concerning the grounds of moral experience (outside the self) there can be no question but that any counterweight to this obligation will constitute a falling away from morality. Thus, Hepburn can write that, while sometimes, from a teleological point of view, the aesthetic and the ethical will harmonize, 'there can be no relying on a constant coincidence of aesthetic self-enhancement and the morally right or best course or act' (49). To do what is right may require me to sacrifice 'some good I dearly wish to retain for myself', and thus it will demand a "leap" of moral concern: a leap beyond any of my own interests (49).

Before turning to my own examination of the problem Hepburn deals with in 'Aesthetic and Moral', and the way in which he deals with it, it will be well to signal what I take to be a fundamental philosophical divide between his view of the subject matter and my own, apropos this concept of moving beyond any of one's own interests. Indeed, it is a divide that Hepburn himself drew attention to over a decade ago. In a book on the sublime, I had described
that experience as a particular form of the ‘self-provision of pleasure through an act of the imagination’: a pleasure subjectively perceived as ‘devoid of self-interest’, though in fact depending on deep, and ineluctable, interests of the self. Hepburn, in a review of the book, responded to this point by asserting that, on the contrary, ‘some experiences of sublimity are very thoroughly other-directed, celebrating, wondering at astounding features of the world, a world with which we certainly interact but which is also irreducibly over-against us’.6

While I would not, of course, deny that the world is irreducibly over-against us, I cannot subscribe to the belief that aesthetic (or ethical) ‘qualities’ of the world are over-against us in the sense that Hepburn, in making this an answer to my own point, implies. Certainly, the qualities of the world that inspire one with aesthetic (or moral) feeling are independent of our emotions, but those emotions themselves cannot be independent of our interests. We may, at any particular moment in time, all agree (though it is unlikely we will) that $\alpha$ is beautiful and $\gamma$ is wrong, but this is still not equivalent to these things being beautiful or wrong in themselves. That is, I would say that while certain feelings (aesthetic, moral, affectionate) are experienced as other-directed, and cannot be experienced otherwise, to assert that they are essentially other-directed, in Hepburn’s strong sense of independent of our interests, is to assert too much. In short, to posit a leap beyond any of our own interests is to posit an effect without a cause.

The crux of the division, then, is this: Hepburn feels that, in our experiences of value, objects in the world meet us halfway; I do not. However, this is not to deny that both aesthetic and moral experience are constituted by the feeling that the value we attribute is purely a response to the qualities of the object independent of our interests: in order to have aesthetic or moral experience we must feel as if that experience were disinterested. In the process of becoming oneself, and, indeed, in order to become a self, objects in the world take on meanings for us, to the extent that we cannot experience them without experiencing that meaning. This is partly a human matter (for example, the obviously dangerous and thus frightening), partly cultural (for example, the sacred and thus profound), and partly individual (the realm of what is obviously taste). Moreover, given the nature of human consciousness, we can only make the very cruelest predictions as to what precisely any thing may mean to any particular individual; that is, what precisely their tastes, their

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sense of life will be. However, because this process of “finding” the world meaningful is essential to becoming human, once we have become human we will always experience the world as a world of meaning, that is, as if the world were meeting us halfway. It will, then, never be a matter of choosing what to find beautiful or wrong. We are not entirely free to “construct ourselves”. How, indeed, could we be, since choice would be impossible without criteria for choosing? In this sense, then, for each individual, and in an individual way, it is ineluctably as if value lay in the world itself. However, this is not equivalent to aesthetic or moral realism.

To return now to the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral, it is clear that, once the supposition of moral and aesthetic realism (the beautiful in itself, the wrong in itself) is removed, it becomes possible to point to at least one kind of case where the aesthetic and the moral do completely overlap. That is, once we can no longer disqualify an action from being either wrong or admirable just because we do not find it wrong or admirable, nor an object from being beautiful or disgusting solely because we do not find it beautiful or disgusting, we find there are many instances where we perceive responses that others take to be moral but which, to us appear aesthetic. Thus, for example, some people may admire the virtues of loyalty or integrity in themselves or others in precisely those instances where all another sees is unacknowledged self-aggrandisement or the fearful admiration of power. Likewise, many of the moral wrongs of some – female sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, consensual incest, cannibalism – may appear to others to palpably arise from, for example, disgust (unacknowledged fear), and not to be a matter of morality at all. (It is the way in which the true grounds of the feeling are not acknowledged, so that the value appears to belong to the world itself, that makes these responses aesthetic.) However, given that both moral and aesthetic experiences happen to us, so that we are all both aesthetic and moral realists in our feelings, the way in which we usually respond to such cases is to posit that the other is mistaken: that they have confused an aesthetic feeling with a moral one. The tendency is also to appeal to the concept of “real harm” in such cases. This overlooks the fact that, given that our moral responses are not experienced as a matter of self-interest, the only criteria for a real harm is that it evokes a moral response in someone: some individual perceives it as a real harm, and, therefore, as falling within the domain of morality. It is bootless to argue that x’s response is not actually a moral response, if x experiences it as a moral response. (Obviously, to argue that x should not experience it as such does nothing to remedy the situation.) Here, indeed, as was suggested before,
is the point at which it is perhaps most easy to distinguish the moral from the aesthetic domain: by comparing the way in which the two responses are identified, and distinguished, as they are actually experienced.

There are, of course, marked similarities when we compare the two in the abstract, the most marked of which is that both happen to us. That is, both are involuntary experiences of value that appear necessarily connected to the object or situation to which they are responses. Unsurprisingly, then, “explanations” of either tend to circularity, though, perhaps because there is not the same urgency with the aesthetic as with the moral, this is not so obviously the case with the aesthetic. We are quite content with the idea that this line of jaw or poetry is beautiful just because it is. With the moral, however, since we often want to quantify (to, literally, lay down the law) and persuade, it becomes an important matter to establish principles from which conclusions can be drawn: this is wrong because it is an example of that, which is wrong because […] and so on. Nevertheless, there comes a point at which the answer will be “Because it is just wrong”, and any further enquiry (“But why is unfairness wrong?”) will be answered either by a non sequitur (“You would not like it if it happened to you”) or simply by a (tacit) reference to the prevailing sensus communis. (This is why one can no more argue someone out of feeling homosexuality is wrong than one can argue someone out of feeling cruelty is wrong.) It is precisely this circularity in the explanation of both aesthetic and moral responses that points to the way in which they are both a matter of the projection of value onto the world.

With regard to the difference between the two areas of experience, this lies most decisively in the quality of the experience of each. Moral experience, as mentioned above, is motivating in a way aesthetic experience is not. Aesthetic experience may motivate us to continue having the experience (or, where negative, to escape from the experience) but there is really little more that we can do in relation to the object that would be appropriate to the feeling we have. Moral experience, in contrast, where at least it is constituted by the “perception” of a wrong, clearly expresses a desire that a state of affairs should be otherwise – even if that feeling does not (generally for practical reasons) actually lead to anything other than the feeling that the state of affairs is “wrong”. Moreover, it is specifically a matter of human actions, or the actions implicit in a certain kind of character (since we morally condemn character, too). It is because of this difference that there is a felt inappropriateness in allowing the two to overlap – an inappropriateness that is, indeed, reflected throughout Hepburn’s treatment. We immediately feel them as distinct. However, this is
an individual matter: it is not a matter of things in the world being distinct, but rather of our own responses being distinct. Hence the way in which we cannot help but feel that the responses of other's, where they seem to us to confound (our) aesthetic and moral, are a matter of error or bad faith.

This still leaves the question of why Hepburn, and many others, have nevertheless felt that there is some kind of common ground between the two: that it is not simply a matter of the mistakes or bad faith of others. In order to see how this might arise, however, we must go a little bit further into the reasons why there is the difference in feeling described above, and this will entail distinguishing the way in which the two different kinds of response (aesthetic and moral) are grounded.

Aesthetic experience is our emotional response to our spontaneous interpretations of objects as symbolic: our spontaneous sense of the meaning of the world. Moreover, it occurs only in those cases where we do not wish to consciously acknowledge that meaning, which is why the value appears as a quality of the object: we feel it is the object in itself that is beautiful or disgusting. Aesthetic experience, then, is not exclusively a matter of pleasure or reward. Feelings of, for example, disgust, boredom, depression, or even fear (in the form of phobia), are all a matter of experiencing the world aesthetically, in the sense that they are all a matter of the spontaneous interpretation of the world giving rise to a meaning that we do not wish to acknowledge. The motive for suppressing the interpretation by projecting the value onto the world will, of course, be very different in the case of positive and negative aesthetic experiences. In the former, the motive is to objectify the value and disown one's own role in it as far as possible; in the latter the motive is to contain the perceived value within a specific, avoidable, object. However, not only do positive and negative forms share a great deal in common in terms of the mechanism that makes them possible, but there is also the matter of the way in which, while they may be easily distinguishable at their extremes (say beauty and disgust), there is, nevertheless, a continuous spectrum between these extremes, in parts of which (the grotesque, for example) the overall aesthetic effect arises from both forms.

However, “aesthetic experience” is most often used now to refer to that subset of aesthetic experiences that we actively seek out and feel enriched by. (It was, for a time, even de facto restricted to the experience of art: an untenable usage.) Moreover, since the positive aesthetic experiences are much more

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7 Although Hepburn does often use the work of art as a paradigm case of aesthetic experience in ‘Aesthetic and Moral’, his own writing on the ‘reach of the aesthetic’
difficult to account for, and are, in any case, those that Hepburn deals with, I shall confine my remarks here mainly to those. In such cases, the object suggests a meaning, a sense of how the world is, that is extremely desirable but which we know cannot be true. This is the way objects of positive aesthetic experience mean, though what they mean always seems to exceed what can be said of their meaning. It is not, then, that the concepts involved are ineffable but rather that, for the sake of entertaining those concepts, we resist consciously acknowledging them, since to do so would make the wish-fulfilling nature of their meaning explicit, and render us incapable of entertaining them. Thus, we project the value of the concept for us, the emotional satisfaction it would give us were it true, onto the object (or, at least, some aspect of the object) that has spontaneously given rise to that concept. In this way we can entertain the concept without acknowledging that it is a concept.

It is important to put these observations into context, since it is easy to think of aesthetic experience (particularly in relation to art) as a contrast to “normal” consciousness. However, the discrete aesthetic experience always takes place within a continuum of experience that is already aesthetic. For, an aesthetic experience is one in which what makes our encounter with an object, whether real (for example, an artwork) or imaginary (for example, a memory), significant to us, that is, actually part of experience, is the unacknowledged symbolic meaning of that object. We are, of course, quite ready to expand the compass of the aesthetic, in this sense, beyond the rather narrow field of what is actually covered by aesthetics as a philosophical discipline: for example, to everyday design, objects of consumption, sex, religion, politics, and so on. However, this domain of what makes life meaningful needs to be expanded further: to our morality, our attachments, our goals, the very narrative sense of our life that makes it “our” life (and a “life” instead of just the experience of living). At this point, of course, unless one is committed to the idea of some irreducible, non-contingent core of individuality (a soul, for example), it becomes clear that the use of “our” is becoming untenable. What is being described is actually everything we are, so that to talk of an “I” that is experiencing these things is to introduce one more entity than is required. Rather it is the accumulated experiencing of these things that constitutes an “I”. This “I” may, of course, have discrete aesthetic experiences of the artwork/sunset type, that is, aesthetic experiences in which it is aware that it is “having an
aesthetic experience” (perhaps because the object is not so embedded in a context of specific desires as are the objects of the rest of its experience), but it does so only against the background of the rest of its ineluctably aesthetic experience. What the discrete, acknowledged, aesthetic experience does is alter the aesthetic sense of life we already have. (This is also the reason it is experienced as discrete.) The extent to which it does so is also the basis of the kind of value we place on that experience. For, the positive aesthetic experience is one that has moved us by somehow demonstrating to us the falsity of our previous aesthetic sense of existence. It has, in short, displaced one interpretation of life with another: a restricted and unhappy sense of life with a sense of life’s plenitude, its possible significance. This happens even though we were not aware – as, indeed, we cannot be – that our previous sense was a restricted one. It is not, however, a matter of truth except insofar as the previous sense of life was as much a matter of projection as the one that has replaced it.

The positive aesthetic response, then, expresses a desire for an ideal state of being, and does so through our spontaneous, unconscious, interpretation of an object as symbolic of this state. (The negative, by contrast, expresses an idea that cannot be consciously borne.) Arguably this is precisely the same case with the positive moral response: the way in which we respond in finding an action admirable but supererogatory. Indeed, I would argue that such responses simply are positive aesthetic responses, called “moral” only because the object of the response in such cases is human actions that involve that compassion or self-sacrifice apparently implied by morality per se (albeit that they here appear in an exaggerated form). Such actions inspire a feeling of longing (“Would that life were like this”) akin to the experience of the beautiful or sublime, and it seems quite natural to refer to them, or the agents responsible for them, in terms that certainly do overlap with the vocabulary of positive aesthetic experience.

Another quality of positive moral responses that suggests their essentially aesthetic rather than strictly moral nature – insofar as the aesthetic and the moral are discrete in terms of feeling – is the demonstrable lack of parallelism between negative and positive moral responses when considered as the same kind of response. The negative moral response – the feeling that something is wrong – is, as we have seen, quite distinct from even a negative aesthetic response in terms of the way in which it is experienced. It is a feeling that something should not be, and, insofar as its ostensible object is human action, it implies a desire for something to happen or not happen – a prescription on future behaviour that would simply not be appropriate outside the
field of human action. (Though this does not, of course, stop us from sometimes accusing the universe of unfairness or cruelty, or from experiencing our disgust as moral outrage.)

The moral response, then, even while it is not experienced as a desire, implies a desire: the existence of a world without this object, or rather – since we respond morally even to the past and the fictional – a world without this kind of object. We cannot, of course, say that we desire this world because it is morally preferable, since that would make the explanation of morality circular. Rather we must look at what interest is implied by the kinds of objects that elicit moral responses. These are, essentially, what the subject perceives as instances of harm – deprivation, pain, the disruption of the “natural order”, death, along with those mental states that symbolically evoke such harms – insofar as they are the results of the actions of human agents. (Though, again, under the pressure of the moment we are prepared to extend the concept of responsibility even to the inanimate; for example, physically punishing recalcitrant equipment.) There is every reason, then, why we should desire a world free from such things for ourselves: this follows from their very nature. However, a moral response is not a direct response to such threats to myself; the appropriate response to the direct threat of any of these things is rather fear and avoidance.

Aversion to these things as they might affect myself does not stand in need of further grounding. Yet, what actually elicits the moral response, is not the direct threat to ourselves of such harms, but rather the very idea of their existence. This in itself is also unproblematic, since every instance of such a harm, even where it does not seem to touch remotely on my self-interest, is, nevertheless, a reminder of the possibility of such harm to myself. Any particular moral response may thus be seen as the occurrent state of this standing fear, brought into existence by an appropriate stimulus: a token of the kind of harm through human agency that we fear. Which is why, contrary to what systematic ethics would seem to imply, the vividness of the instance can be as important as the extent of the harm in determining the strength of our response. It is not then that I do not wish to live in a world in which cruelty, for example, exists because I feel cruelty is morally wrong; rather I feel cruelty is morally wrong because I do not wish to live in a world in which cruelty exists.

However, so long as we were aware that this self-interest was the grounds of our aversion to the idea of harm to others we would not experience that aversion as a moral response. Squeamishness is not sympathy. (If it were, we could simply assert that the aesthetic, in its positive forms, is a matter of
pleasure in what is, and morality a matter of pain in what is.) Despite implying a desire (this should not be), a moral response is not principally experienced as a sense that something is not – as we might expect if that response were principally a perception of the distance between the desired world and the world as it is – but rather as a sense that something is: “This is wrong”. To the subject they appear to represent not so much a wish as the perception of a mind-independent reality. We experience the desire that arises from the difference between the world as we would have it and the world as it is as a property of the world, as a perception of what has value (undesirability or desirability) in itself. This projection is a function of the strength of the desire. For, just insofar as I do not acknowledge to myself that the object represents a de facto denial of the possibility of my desired (harm-free) world, just to that extent I assert the reality of that desired world. The desired world, my response affirms, is not merely a matter of my desire, since what runs counter to it (even if only symbolically), is something that, from the point of the universe itself, should not exist. (Thus I cannot even acknowledge to myself that I possess this image of a desired world.) Moreover, since I respond in this way as much to tokens of the harms I fear (in the form of harms to others even distant, past, or fictional, and in the form of the undermining of human dignity per se) as to potential real harms to myself, the very “disinterested” or impartial appearance of the response serves to support the projection. As, of course, does the fact that I am immersed in a community that similarly projects.

It follows that, in order to sustain this projection, I must experience moral responses to my own behaviour also. If morality were merely a matter of unmediated fear, without this objectifying projection, there would, of course, be no reason why this would be the case. If, then, I am reluctant to be the agent of the harms I fear, it is because, by doing so, I myself weaken the reality of the desired world – the world in which such things do not exist. Moral realism implies that the laws implicit in my responses are somehow equivalent to laws of nature. Insofar as I feel myself capable of breaking such laws, to that extent I weaken my own sense of their status as natural laws, which are laws that, by definition, cannot be broken.

3 Conclusion

What, then, of the proposed overlaps between the aesthetic and the moral that Hepburn examines? If we turn first to the idea of the beautiful soul,
we can see how it might conceivably arise from the way in which an ideal of moral perfection is one of those desirable impossibilities that give rise to positive aesthetic experience per se. At the same time, it is also easy to see what is morally dubious about it, at least where it is one’s own soul that is at issue: it does suggest an attentiveness to the spectacle of the self rather than to the field of human action that constitutes the moral domain, even while laying claim to a concern for the ethical. However, this appears more a matter of a pose (aestheticism) than of a genuine danger of confusing what are, after all, two phenomenologically distinct areas of experience. (Just as one may profess, but not actually live, nihilism.) Hepburn cautions against the temptation to ‘re-think the moral life as fundamentally an aesthetic enterprise’ (42), but it seems doubtful that such a thing is even possible: the distinctively moral response must always break in. However, as I have suggested above, where the ‘beautiful soul’ is a matter of contemplating the appearance of moral perfection in another, that is, where it is a question of the supererogatory, of our response to vivid examples of compassion or self-sacrifice, this may simply be a matter of a positive aesthetic response to what is essentially a moral object. (This is why such responses can so often appear, on reflection, to run counter to any systematic ethical calculus, and why they are so heavily determined by the vividness of the instance.) In such cases, the action, or implied character becomes an aesthetic object, insofar as it symbolizes for us the world as we would have it and know it is not.

It may also be that the idea of the beautiful soul as a moral ideal arises simply through extrapolating from the undeniable ugliness of the wrong both in ourselves and others (under the misplaced assumption that ugliness and beauty are opposites). That is, the very idea of the beautiful soul, rather than reflecting any actual experience of either an aesthetic or a moral character, may be entirely notional: an intellectual construct. This, indeed, seems to be very much the case with two of the other theses concerning the connection between the aesthetic and the moral Hepburn considers: that both domains may be ‘presided over by love as their single and sufficient fundamental principle’ (45), and that aesthetic experience ‘can involve transformations of consciousness which carry us virtually to the moral standpoint’ (58). Both of these seem to rely principally on an overlap between certain abstractions derived from the attempt to characterize both the aesthetic and the moral without providing an actual grounding for either: specifically, that they are both somehow the ‘perception’ of value, both ‘disinterested’, ‘other-oriented’,
and so on. However, despite the positive moral response being essentially an aesthetic response, negative moral responses, that is, the greater part of our moral experience, clearly are quite different in terms of how they are experienced – always remembering, of course, that we are talking here not about particular objects, but rather the subject’s experience of their own response: precisely the same state of affairs may be an object of moral disapprobation to one person and the object of no more than a negative aesthetic response to another. It is not, then, as Hepburn has it, that love can be ‘selfish, manipulatory, predatory’ (46), while morality is selfless (indeed, if ‘love’ can be all these things and still be love, then there is a form of ‘morality’ that is precisely the same) but rather because they feel different to the subject, and do so because they are grounded in quite different ways: both arise from the desire that something should or should not be so, but, in the case of morality, this gives rise to the further desire that something should happen to make a state of affairs not so.

Finally, we must turn to the last potential overlap that Hepburn considers: the idea of one’s life as a work of art. (I take it that ‘work of art’ is being used here to mean ‘object of aesthetic satisfaction’.) Here we may safely say that, while the aesthetic and the moral do not collapse into one another, they are, nevertheless, almost inextricably intertwined. As Hepburn says, the moral choices we make often depend upon a ‘self-image’ that in turn rests on fables, personal myths, and one’s sense of one’s own life as a narrative: an object to which one responds aesthetically. One does not wish, for example, to contemplate oneself as the kind of person who would do this particular action; one could not “face oneself”. Likewise, one might be inspired to self-sacrifice by the very beauty of an example of self-sacrifice. At the same time, there is no sense in which the moral can lose its autonomy in all this: we find the action ugly because we find it immoral. We need not worry, then, as Hepburn does, about the ‘confusion’ of one value with another; nor can we prescribe for what should be the proper balance. I cannot confuse the moral (for me) with the aesthetic (for me) since I experience them differently. It is only from another’s point of view, or from my own point of view in retrospect (which is also another’s point of view), that it may appear that the one has been confused with, or illegitimately outweighed, the other.

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8 Indeed, the aesthetic has ever been posited to be the result of disinterested contemplation, and the moral as the result of sympathy: grounded in their own effects.
At the same time, there is good reason to look askance at the idea of treating one's life as a work of art. In particular there is the way in which it suggests that consciously approaching one's life as a work of art is an attitude that a person could sustain. This is not to say that one might not be almost constantly aware of one's life as an object to be aesthetically perfected (in one's own eyes), but rather that it is impossible for this ideal of aesthetic perfection to endure. One may, indeed, unconsciously strive to make one's life a work of art but it is not always the same work of art. What is false about the idea, then, is the way it suggests that the whole of a life can somehow defer to a single moment – in the manner of an individual encounter with a work of art. Both the aesthetic and the moral happen to us. The aesthete and the moralist (and the Sartrean existentialist), then, simply overestimate the power of the ego: we cannot decide what will move or satisfy us.

Clearly, however, there is not space here to do justice to all of the issues concerning the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral that are raised by Hepburn's richly suggestive essay. I, nevertheless, hope that, even in starting from a very different conception of human nature to Hepburn's own, this essay has at least demonstrated the soundness of his conclusion: that there can be no way to reduce the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral to a simple formula.9

Kansai University

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9 The author wishes to express his gratitude to Kansai University, Osaka, for granting him a sabbatical during the 2015–2016 academic year, thus enabling him to work on much of the material that appears in this essay.
An abiding and often prominent theme in Ronald W. Hepburn's papers is the relationship between aesthetic appreciation of nature and metaphysical-religious conceptions of nature. In this paper, I want to chart his growing sympathy for a particular kind of conception, which he sometimes refers to as ‘nature-mysticism’, and to connect this to the increasing salience of another theme – that of the relationship of selves or subjects to nature. Hepburn never explains quite how his reflections on subjectivity and nature render nature-mysticism attractive, and in a final section I suggest how they might do so.

1 Aesthetic appreciation, metaphysics and religion

The theme of a close relationship between aesthetic appreciation of nature and metaphysical or religious conceptions of nature is there, sometimes as the main theme, in almost all of Hepburn's papers on aesthetics from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. In 1963, for example, he speaks of the manner in which aesthetic experiences encourage a ‘nisus’, an urge, to regard the world as a ‘unity’ and undifferentiated ‘whole’, a view that he labels ‘nature-mysticism’ (AAN, 199, 206). In his well-known 1980 paper on wonder, he indicates how our experience of natural beauty may intimate the presence

of God, or something more ‘elusive’, such as the existence of ideal, Platonic Forms or, once again, the ‘unity’ of everything (W, 12). A decade later he maintains that, in aesthetic experience, there is sometimes present a desire to ‘transcend the Lebenswelt’, and to find in things ‘ciphers’ or ‘symbols’ of what ‘transcends the perceptible world’ – of God, perhaps, or Coleridge’s ‘One Life in Nature’ (TSA, 35). Finally, in one of his last papers on the aesthetics of nature, Hepburn describes how people may find in the landscapes they admire ‘a disclosure of how the world really is’. The beauty they experience seems to ‘speak of a transcendent source for which we lack words and clear concepts’ (LMI, 191).

Several of Hepburn’s responses to this ‘nisus’ or transcendental urge remain constant throughout these papers, covering almost forty years. He remains convinced, for a start, that this urge needs to be taken seriously. It is not a Romantic fantasy, a New Age-ish fad, or a mark of religious sentimental-ity. It is entirely natural for people to want their aesthetic judgements, like their moral judgements, to accord with how things really are, and therefore at least to speculate on whether reality extends beyond the ordinary empirical world (see TSA, 35 and LMI, 192). The metaphysical yearnings, however, that some aesthetic experiences may encourage should not be allowed to exclude other, less heady, dimensions of aesthetic enjoyment. That really would be rampant Romanticism. Aesthetic appreciation is ‘plural’, so that it is perfectly legitimate, for instance, to narrow down our attention to ‘the highly determinate perceptual quality’ of objects of aesthetic enjoyment – the bird’s singing, say, or the twinkling of the stars – without indulging in Coleridgean ruminations on their cosmic significance (AAN, 199).

A third constant in Hepburn’s discussions of the connection between aesthetic appreciation and metaphysical-cum-religious speculations is that this connection is problematic. While, as we have seen, aesthetic experiences may inspire such speculations, they cannot establish the truth of any of them. It is perfectly possible for a religious conviction that informs an aesthetic experience to be false, in which case the experience stands to be discredited. If, for example, integral to my admiration for a certain landscape is the sense that it was created by God, then in the absence of ‘a sound theistic metaphysical argument’, the experience is liable to prove illusory (LMI, 195).

Finally, Hepburn’s attitude towards theistic metaphysics also persists throughout the relevant papers. The attitude is a sceptical one that, if anything, hardens over the years. While the existence of God is not something that can be definitively excluded, nor has anyone constructed a ‘sound theistic
metaphysical argument’. ‘No one’, he wrote in 1999, has ‘succeeded in identifying a possible Ground of the world with the biblical deity’ (RS, 125). This echoes early remarks to the effect that even very intense religious experience is explicable ‘without the God of theism’ (AAN, 207). Indeed, when he adds, in the later paper, that ‘I cannot subscribe to the central doctrines of a world-religion’ (RS, 123), he seems not just to question, but straightforwardly reject the claims of theism.

There are, then, several aspects of Hepburn’s response to the transcendental nisus inspired by aesthetic experiences that hardly change or develop over four decades. There is, however, one important shift – never dramatically announced, but discernible nonetheless – that takes places. This is his increasing sympathy for what, in 1963, he called ‘nature-mysticism’. Several accounts of natural beauty have, he remarked, been ‘historically allied with various sorts of nature-mysticism’ (AAN, 206). What these various sorts share is the idea that there is a reality, transcending the Lebenswelt, that is a unitary whole resistant to description and conceptualisation, and hence a ‘mystery’. Such, for example, is the idea proclaimed by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

In 1963, he treats this idea as a ‘regulative’ one in Kant’s sense. ‘Mystical experience’ does not really provide material for ‘affirmations about a transcendent being or realm’, but rather with a ‘focus imaginarius’. This plays a ‘regulative and practical role in the aesthetic contemplation of nature’ by encouraging the contemplators to relate their experiences to larger contexts – to the forms of nature, to themselves, to natural forces with which they ‘feel in harmony’ (AAN, 207). Just as, for Kant, the idea of totality guides the scientist to seek for ever greater connectivity and coherence among the phenomena he examines, so the idea of unity aroused by aesthetic experiences is, properly construed, an urge to connect these experiences both to one another and to the world and our lives.

Things change, however, in Hepburn’s later writings. In ‘Restoring the Sacred’ (1999), without precisely endorsing it, he quotes admiringly John Dewey’s remark that through ‘mystical’ and ‘intense aesthetic perception […] we are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live our ordinary experiences’ (RS, 126).² A page earlier, he writes that it is not only ‘tempting’ but ‘plausible to argue that the observable universe […] cannot be all there is […] and that the cosmic “background” cannot consist of nothing more than th[e] causal

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dependencies we trace’. This, he continues, maybe the most we can say, in which case ‘there is mystery enough there’ (RS, 125). In a slightly earlier paper, and in a similar vein, Hepburn concludes that ‘there are good reasons for rejecting a dogmatic metaphysical scepticism’, so as to ‘leave open the fascinating alternative possibility […] that the aesthetic experience may keep alive some view of the world that the concepts of systematic metaphysical thought cannot precisely articulate’ (LMI, 200).

Taking these various remarks together, it seems that at the same time as Hepburn’s scepticism towards theism and ‘systematic’ metaphysics increases, so do his sympathy for and his inclination to accept nature-mysticism. Nor, any longer, is he treating nature-mysticism, with its idea of reality as an ineffable unity, as a ‘regulative’ idea. Indeed, we find him suggesting that ‘less mystical versions’ of ‘oneness’, like the regulative interpretation of it, derive their force and value from more explicitly mystical ones (LMI, 198). The ‘deeper reality’, the ‘cosmic background’ and ‘mystery’ referred to in these remarks are no longer a useful focus imaginarius – inciting us to keep looking for connections - but the fundamental truth of the world that aesthetic experiences of nature intimate. The spirit of Hepburn’s remarks is that of Wordsworth’s famous verses composed above Tintern Abbey, recording the poet’s ‘sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused […] [that] rolls through all things’.

In sum, I take it that, in these later papers, Hepburn is proposing the following. First, that it is at least plausible to regard reality as an ineffable, mysterious whole. Second, that this whole is the ‘ground’ of, or necessary ‘background’ of, our everyday experience of a world of objects, of the Lebenswelt. Finally, that aesthetic experiences of nature, while they can never establish or guarantee such ‘theoretical presuppositions’ (LMI, 199), may ‘keep alive’, intimate and cultivate a sense of this cosmic mystery.

2 Subjects and objects, culture and nature

How might we explain the shift in Hepburn’s attitude to nature-mysticism that I have charted? Well, perhaps there is no explanation. Perhaps his own aesthetic experiences of natural environments became not only more intense but more suffused, for reasons he could not articulate, with a sense of the mystery of nature. But I want to propose that the shift is related to, and illuminated by,
another discernible change in his writings. This is the increasing, and increas-
ingly rich, attention that he pays to the relationship between subjects or selves
and objects, and to kindred relationships, such as that between human culture
and natural environments.

Attention to these relationships was never, of course, entirely absent, even
in the earliest papers. For example, in ‘Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature’, he
describes the importance to this appreciation, in many instances, of one’s own
place and presence in a landscape. He gives the example of a glider-pilot,
whose enjoyment of his experience involves a sense of his own buoyancy in
the air (AAN, 196). In a later paper, he emphasises how the subject cannot but
affect his or her aesthetic experience by the distance from an object – a tree,
say – that is adopted and by the perspective from which it is viewed. Unlike
typical art objects, natural objects and scenes are not neatly ‘framed’ for our
inspection (TSAAN, 13).

In his final writings on aesthetics and nature, however, Hepburn is
concerned to identify deeper relations between subject and object than those
just mentioned. A clue to his central point is the first two words in the title of
one of these papers, ‘Nature Humanised: Nature Respected’. Our experience
of nature, he argues, is not affected simply by such rather obvious activities
as choosing a distance or perspective from which to view things. Far more
entrenched, decisive and pervasive factors are at work – so much so that our
experience is necessarily the outcome of a ‘fusion’, ‘meeting’ or ‘cooperation’
between ourselves and nature. For our experience to be what it is, there has to
have taken place a ‘joint fashioning of what neither subjects themselves nor
nature left to itself can bring into being’ (NH, 275). My perception of, say, the
forest is neither a passive recording of how the forest is, ‘left to itself’, but nor
is it a purely human ‘construction’ or an improvised ‘projection’.

What guarantees that experience of nature belongs to a ‘fusion’ of subjec-
tivity and nature is, in the most general terms, ‘the human habits by which we
identify and individuate items’, habits that are part of any ‘human life’ (NH,
274). Experience of the forest cannot but be shaped by a ‘forest-image’ that
is, to a significant degree, the product of ‘culture, tradition, art’ and ‘myth’.
The experiential ‘outcome’ of what the subject ‘brings into active relation’ to
the forest is ‘something new’ – neither a human invention nor the imprint of
nature as such (NH, 275).

Hepburn has several pertinent remarks to make on this ‘joint fashioning’
or ‘cooperation’ between subjects and nature. First, a reflexive awareness of
this cooperation is sometimes ‘internal’ to aesthetic appreciation of nature.
Aesthetic Experience, Metaphysics and Subjectivity

(LMI, 197). For example, integral to the gardener’s enjoyment of her garden may be the sense that what she sees before her is the product neither of human effort nor of natural processes alone, but of their ‘fusion’. The garden, for all its natural aspects, has been ‘humanised’ by her.

Second, the appreciator – the same gardener, perhaps – may be profoundly affected by this reflexive awareness of the relation between self and nature. The person who appreciates nature is not ‘a constant dimensionless, observing eye’, but someone whose very ‘sense of self’ may be ‘transformed’. For one’s sense of oneself, including one’s relationship to the natural world, can be ‘an all-important part of aesthetic appreciation of nature’ (NH, 272f).

Important as these observations are, they do not explain, as they stand, how Hepburn’s later reflections on the relation between self and nature help to bring about his increased respect and sympathy for nature-mysticism. That my aesthetic enjoyment of a landscape may involve a sense of my cooperation with nature does not, on the surface at least, show how this might ‘keep alive’ a sense of the mystery of things.

Hepburn, however, is certainly not unaware of connections between the self-nature fusion and mystery. This is shown by two considerations. First, for Hepburn, our sense of fusion with natural scenes and objects contributes to a wider sense of our oneness or harmony with nature at large, and hence to that idea of an ultimately indescribable cosmic unity given poetic expression by Wordsworth and Coleridge (LMI, 196-7). Second, the relationship between mind and body – or more generally, between consciousness and the physical world – is itself a mystery. ‘I doubt if the word “mystery” exaggerates’, Hepburn remarks (NH, 277). As such, the relationship is a mystery.

Such remarks, however, do not explicitly indicate how the ‘joint fashioning’ of experience by subjects and nature supports the idea of reality as an inef-fable whole. At most, they serve to soften up resistance to acceptance of this idea. At one point, for instance, Hepburn draws an analogy between our ‘lack [of] the concepts to make […] intelligible’ the relation between body and mind and the impossibility, as the nature-mystic sees it, of a conceptual articulation of reality. Just as the former ‘does not compel us to deny our experience of both [body and mind]’, nor does the latter exclude keeping alive a view of reality as a mystery (LMI, 200–1). He is saying, in effect, that since we are anyway stuck with mystery, in the shape of the subject-object or mind-body relation, there is no absurdity in going the whole hog, as it were, and at the very least ‘leav[ing] open the fascinating […] possibility’ that aesthetic experience is a genuine intimation of the mysterious.
We need, then, to look more closely at the notion of a ‘joint fashioning’ of experience – of a ‘fusion’ and ‘cooperation’ between subjects and nature – if we are to understand how this might render nature-mysticism attractive or even compelling. To do so, it is first necessary to change the terms in which Hepburn generally talks about aesthetic experience, and indeed about experience in general.

3 Experience and practice

When Hepburn speaks of aesthetic and other experiences, he nearly always has in mind what might be called ‘occurrent’ experiences. By these, I mean particular perceptions and feelings elicited by the objects, places or whatever that a person encounters. Occurrent experiences are ‘dateable’, with more or less clear-cut beginnings and ends and a generally measurable duration. ‘How long did it last?’ is a sensible question to ask of occurrent experiences. Typically, they are of relatively short duration. Many of them, writes Hepburn are ‘fleeting and unrepeatable’ (LMI, 193). Specifically, the experiences that most interest him – those that seem to point beyond themselves, and to intimate the unity and mystery of things – are ‘visionary moments’ that come and go on ‘individual occasions’ (TSA, 35). This is an important reason why such experiences, regrettably, often have only a ‘fugitive and tenuous hold’ on people (LMI, 194). They can, as it were, be passed off – as just peculiar or even aberrant – once the moment is gone. They are comparable, perhaps, to the ‘religious feeling’ that even a hardened atheist might have when listening to a great piece of liturgical music – one later dismissed, over a drink in the pub, as a momentary ‘turn’.

Rarely encountered in Hepburn’s writings is a different concept of experience. This kind of experience is what Dewey called ‘participation and communication’ in or with one’s environment. This environment might be physical, social or both. It is experience in this sense that we intend when referring, say, to a sailor’s experience of being at sea, a climber’s experience of mountaineering, a soldier’s experience of army life, or a student’s experience of university. When people describe their experience, in this sense, they are not talking of particular, occurrent perceptions and feelings, but of the ways in which they participated in and engaged with their careers, hobbies,
surroundings and relationships with other people. In effect, they are describing practices – the combinations of actions, intentions, emotions, dispositions and norms that constitute ways of life or being in the world.

There are several reasons why Hepburn should, in my judgement, welcome a shift of emphasis away from occurrent experiences to experience as practice. Claims of his that I have already discussed come to look significantly stronger with this change of emphasis. To begin with, it strengthens Hepburn’s important point that aesthetic appreciation of nature may induce a ‘transformation’ in a person, even in his or her very ‘sense of self’ (NH, 273). Now, it may happen, of course, that particular, occurrent experiences have a profound effect on a person, serving as a summons to a reassessment of the self and its relationship to nature. But, it is surely prolonged, aesthetically charged engagement with the natural world – experience in the Deweyan sense, rather than staccato experiences – that has the greater power to transform people’s lives and sense of themselves. Gardeners, for example, attest to how their understanding of the world and their relationship to it has been shaped and changed by years of working with nature. Mountaineers, horse trainers, glider pilots, environmental artists, and many others can attest to something similar.

Second, and relatedly, the shift of focus to experience as practice helps to alleviate Hepburn’s worry that putative experiences of mystery may have only a ‘fugitive and tenuous’ hold on people. As I noted earlier, he is right to imply that what we might call ‘Tintern abbey experiences’ can, after the event, be all too easily passed off, as aberrant or illusory. It is not similarly easy to pass off or dismiss moods, emotions and perspectives that inform or partly constitute prolonged engagement with nature. The sense of nature as an ineffable unity that, say, a mountaineer has each day he climbs a peak is not something that, in the evening, he can set aside and dismiss. Such a sense pervades a person’s life; it is a dimension of the person’s way of being in the world.

The primary reason, however, why Hepburn should welcome the shift of emphasis from occurrent experiences to engaged experience is that it prepares for an attractive line of thought in support of nature-mysticism. Or better, perhaps, it prepares the ground for cultivating a sensibility receptive to the truth of mystery.

4 Culture, nature and mystery

Before elaborating on those last remarks, let’s take stock. I proposed that Hepburn’s increasing sympathy for nature-mysticism is connected to his
growing attention to the relations between selves or subjects and nature. In particular, we find him in his later papers stressing that there is ‘fusion’ and ‘cooperation’ between these, and that our experience of the world is the outcome of a ‘joint fashioning’ by them. Despite one or two hints, however, Hepburn does not show how reflection on the self-nature relationship, as he now perceives it, serves to render nature-mysticism more compelling. At most, he indicates how it might reduce resistance to the idea of nature as an ineffable mystery. I then argued that Hepburn is, to a degree, hamstrung by the limited concept of experience with which he works – that of an experience as an occurrent event. It is hard to see how occasional, staccato intimations of a fusion between self and nature can cultivate a sense of nature’s mystery.

With the turn to a concept of aesthetically charged experience as a form of engagement with nature, however, the prospects improve. It is, to begin with, through reflection on this engagement that we best convince ourselves of the truth and importance of Hepburn’s talk of a joint fashioning of experience, of a fusion between subjectivity and nature. For what reflection shows is that people’s experience of nature is inevitably shaped by their practical engagements with the natural world, while at the same time their practices are shaped by the ways in which nature is perceived. Things only show up for us – we can only ‘identify and individuate’ them, as Hepburn put it – in the light of our purposes and the practices that these inform. Nothing in the garden, say, would figure for someone as this rather than that except in relation to the gardener’s aims. Equally, however, it is possible to have these aims, and to engage in a practice like gardening, only because of perceptions of and responses to the natural world. There is, here, a constant dialectic or mutual inflection – of practice and perception – that goes all the way down and all the way back. We cannot, that is, reach a level or time at which perception of nature is innocent of perspectives and practices, nor one at which these practices are unconstrained by receptivity to the natural world.\footnote{A locus classicus for this idea of mutual inflection is Martin Heidegger’s discussion of a Greek temple in his essay, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’. What he convincingly argues is that the temple – and, more generally, Greek culture, art and craft – gave to nature its ‘look’, enabling natural things, like eagles and rocks, to emerge for experience in the way they did. As Heidegger...}

\footnote{For fuller discussions of the culture/nature ‘fusion’, see David E. Cooper, ‘Gardens, nature and culture’, Journal of Scottish Thought, 9 (2017), 1–12.}

\footnote{Cf. Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), 41ff.}
puts it, cultural practice enabled ‘earth’ to arise for the Greeks in the forms it did. At the same time, however, the ‘emergence of earth’, and the ‘look’ of natural things, partly shaped the Greeks’ ‘outlook on themselves’ – an outlook that constrained and guided their culture, including their dealings with nature.

It is in and through the combination of practice and receptivity to nature, then, that our experience of the world – in the sense of our intellectual, practical and emotional engagement with it – is made possible. And it is by reflecting on this combination that we convince ourselves of the truth in Hepburn’s account of fusion and joint fashioning. It is essential, however, not to think of this conviction solely, or mainly, as intellectual assent to some proposition, as something one might argue for in a philosophy essay and then put aside when the essay is finished. What mindful attention to engagement with nature produces is not a dry thought, but a living sense of a fusion of practice and nature that pervades experience. This is the sense that a reflective gardener enjoys when working in the knowledge that what he or she creates and how the natural environment is shape one another. It is the sense enjoyed, too, by the seasoned forest walker, aware – to recall Hepburn’s example – of how ‘culture, tradition and art’ and myth at once inflect perceptions of the forest and are, in turn, shaped by these. It is the sense, as well, enjoyed by traditional peoples who regularly make music in unison, as it were, with the sounds of the environment. Writing of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, an ethnomusicologist speaks of ‘the transformative play of nature and culture’ that inspires their music.

But how does this sense of the joint fashioning of our experience and practices convert or modulate into a sense of the mystery of things, into nature-mysticism? I put the question like that – as one about senses and sensibilities – rather than as a question about how one doctrine, a theory of fusion, might support another, a doctrine of mystery. I do so partly for a reason mentioned above: it is not intellectual assent to doctrines or propositions that concerns us, but a lived and alive awareness. And partly because any argument from fusion to mystery would need defending against many objections and queries, and is anyway never going to convince everyone. Hepburn, I am confident, would endorse the way I have posed the question. As we saw earlier, he is sceptical of arguments that purport to establish a metaphysical-cum-religious doctrine.

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8 For a fuller discussion of fusion and mystery, see David E. Cooper, Senses of Mystery: Engaging with Nature and the Meaning of Life (Abingdon, 2017).
which is precisely why he focuses on the aesthetic appreciation of nature as the way to remain open to, keep alive, and incline us towards nature-mysticism.

Key to the modulation from a sense of fusion or joint fashioning to a sense of mystery is the notion that Hepburn places at the centre of his understanding of nature-mysticism— that of unity or oneness. To enjoy, in and through forms of engagement with the natural world, a sense of our experience as jointly fashioned is apt to foster a sense of intimacy with nature. Nature cannot be what Hegel called ‘out and out other’ if the very idea of objects in nature existing independently of our perspectives and practices is incoherent. Nor can we (subjects or selves) be, so to speak, up and running, independently of nature, if our reception and perception of nature are, as argued earlier, conditions of the practices and purposes we are able to adopt.

A sense that our experience is jointly fashioned easily converts, then, into a sense that we and the natural world are co-dependent: neither could, even notionally, exist in isolation from the other. It is this sense that pervades the Romantic poetry which Hepburn frequently cites, and inspires the poets to speak of the oneness or unity of everything. For they recognise, not only that there is unity or inseparability between subjectivity and nature, but that everything, ultimately, owes its identity to its place within a totality. The tree that shows up in my experience can do so only in virtue of belonging in a world of other objects that also show up for me. That I have a sense of this unity in aesthetic appreciation was precisely Hepburn’s point when referring to the ‘nisus’ or urge to place and relate each item of experience into increasingly comprehensive wholes.

A sense of fusion, then, modulates into one of intimacy with the world, which in turn converts to a sense of the unity of things, ourselves included. But why, finally, talk of mystery here? For most of us, Hepburn very much included, it is hard to live with the thought that the world as we can experience, describe and articulate it is all there is— that it is without a ‘ground’, ‘well-spring’ or ‘origin’. But if this world is the totality of what can be articulated, then its ‘ground’ cannot be. Nothing outside of this totality is describable, and nothing within it— the laws of nature, say, or human imaginings— could explain the emergence of this totality. This is because, as we’ve seen, anything within it is dependent for being what it is on its place in this totality.

In sum, the sense, integral to aesthetic appreciation of nature, of the world as a unitary totality, when combined with the conviction that there is a ground for this totality, inevitably impels us to regard this ground as ineffable, hence a mystery. What we are impelled to is, of course, familiar in several ancient
traditions – Daoism, for example, and Neo-Platonism – as well as in the writings of the Romantics. What I have tried to do over the last few pages is to show how, drawing on Ronald Hepburn’s insights, a sense of this mystery is indeed kept alive and cultivated through reflective attention to aesthetic experience of nature.

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Constructing the Aesthetics of Nature

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Ronald Hepburn’s most noted and influential article, ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’, begins by comparing eighteenth-century works of aesthetic theory with their modern equivalents: ‘Open an eighteenth-century work on aesthetics, and the odds are that it will contain a substantial treatment of the beautiful, the sublime, the picturesque in nature’; but, Hepburn suggests, ‘[i]n our own day […] writings on aesthetics attend almost exclusively to the arts and very rarely indeed to natural beauty […] Aesthetics is even defined by some mid-century writers as the “philosophy of art”, “the philosophy of criticism”, analysis of the language and concepts used in describing and appraising art objects’.\(^1\) Hepburn’s essay has come to be seen as a key turning point in the modern appreciation of the aesthetics of nature: it was reprinted, for instance, as the first chapter in Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant’s *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (2004), and Carlson begins his own *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (2009) by declaring that:

Hepburn’s essay helped to set the agenda for the aesthetics of nature in the late twentieth century […] By focusing attention on natural beauty, Hepburn demonstrated that there can be significant philosophical investigation of the aesthetic experience of the world beyond the art-world. He thereby not only generated renewed interest in the aesthetics of nature, but also laid the foundation of environmental aesthetics in general as well as for the aesthetics of everyday life.\(^2\)

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If Hepburn’s essay failed to shift the ground of philosophical aesthetics – Jay Appleton suggests in *The Experience of Landscape* (1996) that ‘aestheticians still have at most a minimal interest in the subject of landscape’ – it has, nonetheless, had a profound influence on what Carlson calls ‘environmental aesthetics’, or what, to some, is the sub-discipline of ‘eco-aesthetics’, and the ways in which conservationist and preservationist movements respond to what is seen as environmental degradation due to human impact on the natural world. Hepburn’s influence on these broader developments stems at least in part from his radical separation of ‘natural beauty’ from any hint of human intervention: this is not an issue to which he devotes any extended discussion, but in a footnote he declares that ‘By “nature” I shall mean all objects that are not human artefacts’. What, however, are to count as human artefacts? Many animals are the direct product of human intervention in their breeding – are they parts of ‘nature’ or ‘human artefacts’? And what do we do, as aesthetic observers, if, tramping up the banks of the River Bran in Perthshire, we come across a stand of Douglas Firs? Is this ‘nature’ that is ‘not a human artefact’, despite the fact that David Douglas sent its seeds back to Britain from the Pacific North-West? Or is it a specifically human production – the deliberate introduction of an ‘alien’ species into a local environment in order to enhance its aesthetic impact?

It was precisely the global availability of plants that could flourish far from their native habitats that led not only to the development of botanic gardens but to the dominant garden style of the nineteenth century – John Claudius Loudon’s ‘the gardenesque’, in which plants from many different climates and environments were juxtaposed not only for immediate aesthetic effect but also as symbols of the vast productivity of nature. In the ‘gardenesque’ plants were displayed not as they might appear in the crowded and competitive environment of the natural world in which they evolved, but in the perfection of the form to which, at their best, they aspired. The gardenesque linked the household conservatory with the garden which it overlooked (Loudon published *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* in 1838), a relationship repeated on a grand scale in the public parks with their vast glass-houses for which, in cities like Birmingham, Loudon was drawing up designs. But it also linked the gardens of villas and country houses to the natural world around

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3 Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (Chichester, 1996), 238.
them, which was itself being transformed by the world-wide transmission of plants. The garden had, in effect, extended itself into the nature over against which it was once defined. Nonetheless, Loudon continued to believe that landscape design could not just be imposed on an environment: design has to respect the ‘genius of the place’, and as A. A. Tait notes in The Landscape Garden in Scotland 1735–1835, it was precisely their distinctive natural environment which Loudon emphasised in his account of Scottish country houses:

in writing his account of Scottish gardening for the Encyclopaedia of Gardening in 1822, […] [Loudon] still found the excellence of the landscape unmatched by the taste of the day: ‘The country residences of Scotland’, he wrote, ‘in general excel these of England in the prominence of their natural features, being generally backed by hills or mountains, encompassed by a river or a stream; or situated on a lake, or the seashore’.6

The ‘natural’ provides a more dramatic context for Scottish country estates than those in England, and Loudon insisted – against those who followed Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown – that landscape architecture had to take account of the spirit of its landscape and not simply be ‘an importation’ of an alien style. The natural – mountains, rivers, sea – must provide the context in which a designed landscape takes its appropriate place.

Such an interaction would be for Hepburn – at least in terms of the argument of ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’ – a violation of the natural because the fundamental difference between the aesthetics of nature and the aesthetics of art objects is that the former is without a ‘frame’:

[...] though by no means all art-objects have frames or pedestals, they share a common character in being set apart from their environment, and set apart in a distinctive way. We might use the word ‘frame’ and ‘framed’ in an extended sense, to cover not only the physical boundaries of pictures but all the various devices employed in different arts to prevent the art-object being mistaken for a natural object or for an artefact without aesthetic interest […] Such devices are best thought of as aids to the recognition of the formal completeness of the art-objects

7 Ibid., 132.
themselves, their ability to sustain aesthetic interest [...] In contrast natural objects are ‘frameless’.8

The frameless-ness of our experience of nature is not a limitation in comparison with our experience of art objects but fundamental to the aesthetic experience of nature because it is characterised by our being in the world to which we are responding rather than being over against it, as we are with a work of art. Even works of art in which we may feel that we ‘lose’ ourselves – like a novel by Dickens or a symphony by Beethoven – do not provide us with the opportunity to walk in different directions and thereby to encounter the unexpected: the aesthetic experience of nature has a contingent openness that is quite different from the experience of a work of art created only for the purpose of eliciting an aesthetic response:

A good specimen is the degree to which the spectator can be involved in the natural aesthetic situation itself. On occasion he may confront natural objects as a static, disengaged observer; but far more typically the objects envelop him on all sides. In a forest, trees surround him; he is ringed by hills, or he stands in the midst of a plain. If there is movement in the scene, the spectator may himself be in motion, and his motion may be an important element in his aesthetic experience.9

Nature, ‘where there is no frame’,10 provides us with a context in which we are offered ‘unpredictable perceptual surprises’ which give rise to ‘a sense of adventurous openness’.11 The aesthetics of nature and of the natural are thus radically different from the aesthetics of the art-object and that difference, Hepburn would argue, has been the basis of the exclusion of nature from modern accounts of aesthetic experience. Art is the framed; nature is frameless; art offers itself as an aesthetic experience whereas we have to go in search of the aesthetics of the natural world, tramping up hills, for instance, to achieve a view of the territory below, or following a river into the forests from which it flows. Bodily effort is part of our aesthetic experience.

9 Ibid., 12.
10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid., 15.
‘Frameless nature’ was not, however, the main focus of the eighteenth-century accounts of the beauties of the natural world: take, for instance, Alexander Nasmyth’s painting of the castle at Dreghorn:

It is a painting clearly informed by the picturesque, with its trees left and right in the immediate foreground, woods surrounding the castle in the middle distance and, beyond those, the ‘natural’ world of hills and clouds and sky. Within the frame of the painting, nature – wild nature – is presented as providing another ‘frame’ for the domestic and the cultivated world of a family habitation. The painting is a series of ‘frames’ for the house and the garden at its centre. This painting was not, however, an ‘imitation’ of reality: like many of Nasmyth’s paintings it was a proposal to the landowner for how both the house itself and the landscape around it could be redesigned to provide the best aesthetic setting for the property. It was, in effect, an invitation to appoint Nasmyth as the landscape architect – a term invented by John Claudius Loudon – to reshape both the aesthetic context within which the house would be perceived and the ‘nature’ into which it would be integrated. The painting juxtaposes the elements of the landscape which can be redesigned – the parkland and trees – and the elements which are not as amenable to such human intervention – the treeless hills beyond. Paintings of this kind were part of Nasmyth’s stock-in-trade for getting business as a landscape designer: the aim was to reveal the integration rather than the opposition between the domestic and the natural, between garden-art and the natural. Nasmyth’s painting, as with Loudon’s development of the gardenesque, is an aesthetic that aims at integrating rather
than separating the space of social life and the space of the natural world, the
space of human art and its ‘natural’ environment.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the vast transfers of plants across the world
made possible by sea exploration after the sixteenth century, what of ‘nature’
remains untouched by human intervention? The conservationist and pres-
ervationist movements in North America seek to maintain some ‘natural’
environments by defining the ‘natural’ world as it was before the arrival of
Europeans, but that natural environment can only be preserved in many
cases by the deliberate exclusion of the native American peoples who once
inhabited and helped shape those territories. For Hepburn, ‘nature’ must be
radically separated from the human world if it is to justify our aesthetic expe-
rience of it, because aesthetic experience is a case of imaginatively ‘realising’
the particularity of an ‘object’; bringing into focus, as it were, the uniqueness
which distinguishes it from all other ‘objects’ that we might elsewhere encoun-
ter, and which ‘tethers aesthetic experience to the perception of the particular
object and its perceived individuality.” That individuality, however, is compro-
mised if it comes under human use: Hepburn invites us to suppose:

that I am realizing the utter loneliness of the moor, when suddenly
I discover that behind sundry bits of cover are a great many soldiers
taking part in a field-exercise. Could I, without illogic, maintain that I
had been realizing what was not in fact the case? Hardly. ‘Realize’ con-
tains a built-in reference to truth.

The experience of ‘nature’ is incompatible with the presence and the activi-
ties of other human beings: ‘nature’ is what we experience in isolation from
the human community and separated from other human beings’ use of nature.
The scene he describes is one in which an aesthetic experience is disrupted
by the discovery of the presence of human beings: there is no change in the
visual experience – it is a moor, plain and simple – but a change in the infor-
mation informing that experience – there are soldiers hidden in it – reduces its
value to the aesthetic observer. The presence of other human beings who are
using the moor for a human purpose turns the aesthetic into the non-aesthetic.
Of course, one could imagine a painting or a drama in which the presence of

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14 Ibid., 28.
soldiers on a moor could be aesthetically effective – the scene in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* when Birnam Wood appears to march to Dunsinane, for instance – but these would not then be cases of the aesthetic experience of ‘nature’. For Hepburn, it is fundamental to such aesthetic experience that it have no human involvement: the human is precisely what has to be excluded from ‘nature’ if it is to be experienced aesthetically:

This is the same environment from which we wrest our food, from which we have to protect ourselves in order to live, which refuses to sustain our individual lives beyond a limited term, and to which we are finally ‘united’ in a manner far different from those envisaged in the aesthetic ideals of ‘unity’: ‘Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course [\] With rocks and stones and trees.’ To attain, and sustain, the relevant detachment from such an environment in order to savour it aesthetically is in itself a fair achievement...

The aesthetic experience of nature is only possible because of our defiance of the uses to which nature must be put if we are to survive within it, which is why a fundamental element in aesthetic experience – ‘wonder’ – is defined as being ‘non-exploitative, non-utilitarian’. Nature as an aesthetic object is nature without mankind – except, of course, in the person of the all-too-human observer of nature who has left the rest of mankind behind.

What we might describe as the ‘without mankind’ paradox of the aesthetics of nature is enacted in Hepburn’s frequent quotations from the poet whose ‘vision’ he regards ‘as the great peak’ and the ‘extraordinary summit’ of that aesthetic – William Wordsworth. In his chapter on ‘Values and Cosmic Imagination’ in *The Reach of the Imagination*, for instance, he quotes Wordsworth’s account of the ascent of Snowdon from Book XIII of ‘The Prelude’:

*With forehead bent*

*Earthward, as if in opposition set*

*Against an enemy, I panted up*

*With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts.*

*Thus we might wear perhaps an hour away,*

*Ascending at loose distance each from each,*

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15 Ibid., 21.
And I, as chanced, the foremost of the Band;  
When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,  
And with a step or two seemed brighter still;  
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,  
For instantly a Light upon the turn  
Fell like a flash; I looked, and lo!  
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height  
Immense above my head, and on the shore  
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,  
Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet. (ll. 29–44)

The experience is presented as solitary – ‘I found myself’ – despite the fact that Wordsworth and his companion have been guided to the summit of Snowdon by a shepherd and his dog. To the shepherd, presumably, the mountain has a use-value because it is where he keeps his sheep, whereas, for Wordsworth, it has a purely aesthetic value, one which is fulfilled by his mountain-top vision to which his guide is irrelevant and which reveals a world where there is no sign of humanity:

A hundred hills, their dusky backs upheaved  
All over this still Ocean, and beyond,  
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves,  
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,  
Into the Sea, the real Sea, that seemed  
To dwindle and give up its majesty,  
Usurped upon as far as sight could reach. (ll. 45–51)

The aesthetic experience is achieved precisely by rising above and beyond the human community into a world apparently structured only by natural forces – a place where ‘nature transforms nature’ – even though it can only be experienced, as Hepburn acknowledges, by the active imagination of the observer. Nonetheless, the observer is presented as now entirely isolated from his companions and from the human community, having, quite literally, risen above and beyond the utilitarian demands that humanity imposes on the natural world. In a move which recapitulates the

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19 Ibid.
eighteenth-century beginnings of the discipline of aesthetics, utility and aesthetic experience are set in fundamental opposition; as Archibald Alison put it, the state of mind which is conducive to the experiences of ‘taste’ is ‘the vacant and unemployed’.20

That the opposition between utility and the aesthetic is fundamental to Hepburn’s account is underlined by a passage in his essay ‘Restoring the Sacred’, from *The Reach of the Aesthetic*:

> ‘This must not be despoiled’ – reminds us that, although it is seldom that our manipulation of the environment results in an enhancement of the qualities that elicit a sense of the sacred, the opposite is all too easy to bring about – the destruction of such qualities, perhaps by imposing an array of identical wind turbines on a once distinctive and treasured upland skyline, or driving a motorway through the landscape of the Downs.21

‘[L]et us not’, Hepburn declares, ‘set our utilitarian mark on everything we have the power to exploit, for in so doing we also tame, master, annul our freedom to explore contemplatively and respectfully nature’s own individual forms.’22 But if we return to the earlier example of the moorland in which the observer was ‘realizing the utter loneliness of the moor’ but which turns out to be full of soldiers, it is quite probable that that moorland was not just one of ‘nature’s own individual forms’ but the product of deforestation carried out by human beings many hundreds, perhaps thousands of years ago. What is ‘natural’ to the modern observer may in fact be the result of some distant human intervention, the very product of actions that have ‘set our utilitarian mark on everything we have the power to exploit’. No matter how removed from our existing human communities, the apparently ‘natural’ may in fact be the product of human interventions – as, for instance, in the apparently ‘wild’ landscapes of the highlands of Scotland, the product of deer and sheep farming and the breeding of grouse for sport, or the untrodden landscape of the Yosemite Valley, which was once the hunting ground of Native American peoples. In the case of landscapes,

22 Ibid.
it is not as easy to distinguish the ‘natural’ from the ‘artificial’ as the linguistic antitheses suggest: there are hills on the islands of Scotland which were assumed to be natural geographic features but which turned out to be the rubbish dumps where early settlers deposited the shells of the molluscs on which they fed. Equally, there are environmental features which are entirely human creations – the Five Sisters ‘bings’ (the waste from shale mining) in West Lothian, for instance – which have now become the focus for aesthetic experiences of the broader landscape. The aesthetics of the ‘natural’ as Hepburn envisages it, is almost always the aesthetics of withdrawal from the human community into that which is supposed to be – or, at least, to have been – immune from human intervention. This is no doubt how Wordsworth envisaged it, but can we rely on Wordsworth as the ultimate authority on what is to count as ‘nature’? Wordsworth arrives at the peak of Snowden not as an innocent observer but as someone with highly trained artistic capacities: it is the inheritance of the human world that makes possible his vision of the natural. This is an issue that Hepburn touches upon in his essay ‘Nature in the Light of Art’, but though he acknowledges the ‘interconnections between experience of natural objects and of works of art’, in the end he is more concerned with the ways in which art can mar rather than enhance our aesthetic experience of nature: ‘Seeing nature in the light of art may condition a person into having eyes only for frame-worthy “scenes”, forming bounded unities. If however we mentally place a frame round a natural scene, as often as not we turn good natural beauty into mediocre quasi-art’. However interconnected nature might be with our experience of art, the aesthetics of nature has to be rigorously separated from the aesthetics of art if it is to be truly the aesthetics of nature.

The degradation of nature to ‘mediocre quasi-art’ produced by ‘putting a frame round a natural scene’ underlines the absolute opposition between the aesthetic experience of nature and art-induced aesthetic experiences. There is, however, as already implied in Loudon’s the ‘gardenesque’, a significant absence from Hepburn’s discussions of aesthetics as compared with his eighteenth-century precursors; in fact, the opening sentence of ‘Contemporary

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23 Five Sisters Bing, https://westcaldor.org/directory/listingpage/five-sisters-bing/, accessed 7 October 2018, notes that the ‘bings’ ‘provide a refuge for localised rare plant and animal species and are deemed important to both conservation and for their diversity. For “bing baggers” there is a steep path/track to the top of the Five Sister Bings – and the views impressive.’

Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’ might be recast with a quite different focus: ‘Open an eighteenth-century work on aesthetics, and the odds are that it will contain a substantial treatment of the garden’. The absence of the garden from Hepburn’s account of the aesthetics of nature, as compared with his eighteenth-century predecessors, is quite as striking as the absence of ‘nature’ from the aesthetic theories of the period after the Second World War, for the garden was in many ways the paradigm of the eighteenth-century aesthetic experience of nature. In the garden, a fallen world was redeemed; a simulacrum of the unfallen Garden of Eden recuperated; the garden was aesthetically interesting precisely because it was not nature. As Archibald Alison put it in his Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste:

The Art of Gardening seems to have been governed, and long governed, by the same Principle. When men first began to consider a Garden as a subject capable of Beauty, or of bestowing any distinction upon its possessor, it was natural that they should endeavour to render its Form as different as possible from that of the country around it; and to mark to the Spectator as strongly as they could, both the design and the labour which they had bestowed upon it. Irregular Forms, however convenient or agreeable, might still be the production of Nature; but Forms perfectly regular, and Divisions completely uniform, immediately excited the belief of Design, and, with this belief, all the admiration which follows the employment of Skill, or even of Expense.25

The gardener’s art was to create order where nature produced only disorder or to make nature conform to aesthetic principles which could only happen occasionally and accidentally in nature itself, but which could become reproducible in the garden, making aesthetic experience the dependable outcome of the gardener’s labour. And if, for Hepburn, an important aspect of the aesthetics of nature is that the observer ‘may himself be in motion’, it is no less so in a garden, no matter how small. And, of course, the garden is itself in continuous motion as the seasons make possible different configurations of plants, but though that motion may depend on the workings of ‘nature’, the garden itself is precisely ‘framed’ and advertises itself as a ‘human artefact’, and therefore cannot be accommodated in Hepburn’s ‘aesthetics of nature’.

For Archibald Alison, the development of landscape gardening was prompted not just by the gradual erasure of all the artifice which had characterised earlier gardening but by the influence of James Thomson’s *The Seasons*:

The power of simple Nature was felt and acknowledged; and the removal of the articles of acquired expression, led men only more strongly to attend to the natural Expression of Scenery, and to study the means by which it might be maintained or improved. The publication, also, at this time, of the Seasons of Thomson, in the opinion of a very competent judge [Dr Warton], contributed, in no small degree, both to influence and to direct the Taste of men in this Art. The peculiar merit of the work itself, the singular felicity of its descriptions, and, above all, the fine Enthusiasm which it displays, and which it is so fitted to excite, with regard to the works of Nature, were most singularly adapted to promote the growth of an infant Art, which had for its object the production of Natural Beauty; and by diffusing everywhere both the admiration of Nature, and the knowledge of its Expression, prepared, in a peculiar degree, the minds of men in general, both to feel the effects, and to judge of the fidelity of those scenes in which it was imitated.26

Hepburn’s appeal to the aesthetics of nature having no ‘frame’ repeats a central idea in Thomson’s account of the natural world: in ‘Winter’ Thomson recalls the friends of his youth:

Thus in some deep retirement would I pass  
The winter-glooms, with friends of pliant soul,  
Or blithe, or solemn, as the theme inspired:  
With them would search, if nature’s boundless frame  
Was called, late-rising from the void of night,  
Or sprung eternal from the Eternal Mind;  
Its life, its laws, its progress, and its end.  
Hence larger prospects of the beauteous whole  
Would, gradual, open on our opening minds;  
And each diffusive harmony unite  
In full perfection, to the astonished eye.27

26 Ibid., II, 102–3.  
Their theme is ‘nature’s boundless frame’, a paradoxical combination of the boundless and the framed – ‘the beauteous whole’ – which echoes an earlier account of God in ‘Spring’:

What is this mighty breath, ye curious say,
That, in a powerful language, felt not heard,
Instructs the fowls of heaven; and through their breast
These arts of love diffuses? What, but God?
Inspiring God! who, boundless spirit all,
And unremitting energy, pervades,
Adjusts, sustains, and agitates the whole.
He, ceaseless, works alone, and yet alone
Seems not to work; with such perfection framed
Is this complex, stupendous scheme of things.
But, though concealed, to every purer eye
The informing Author in his works appears.

God is ‘boundless spirit’ and ‘unremitting energy’ but also ‘perfection framed’: from a human perspective God in nature is boundless but for God the artistic creator the universe is framed and whole. The echoes of Thomson’s celebration of the boundless can be heard all the way down to the celebration of wilderness by early environmentalists such as John Muir:

But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fibre thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God’s first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself. The same may be said stone temples. Yonder, to the eastward out of our camp grove, stands one of Nature’s cathedrals, hewn from living rock, almost conventional in form, about two thousand feet high, nobly adorned with spires and pinnacles, thrilling under floods of sunshine as if alive like a grove-temple, and well named ‘Cathedral Peak’.

29 John Muir, ‘My First Summer in the Sierra’ in idem, The Wilderness Journeys (1911; Edinburgh, 1996), 84.
Nature is at once boundless and complete; testimony to the power and beneficence of the God who framed it.

Hepburn is profoundly sceptical of such extrapolations from the aesthetic to the theological – among his earliest books, after all, was a study of *Christianity and Paradox*, which sought to challenge the use of ‘paradox’ as it had been developed by recent theologians30 – and he asserts his resistance to reading theological meanings out of aesthetic experiences:

> For the theist, of course, the ultimate background is the pervasive divine (holy) being upon whom the entire world depends. But can we validly argue from an empirical world to such a being? In my own present view, the philosophical critics of cosmological argumentation to God have not succeeded in refuting it in all its forms, but neither have its defenders succeeded in identifying such a possible Ground of the world with the biblical Deity.31

Nonetheless, Hepburn wants to retain, in some senses and in some of his essays, a consanguinity between religious intuitions and aesthetic experiences: ‘some works of art do bring about, for some appreciators, release of vitality comparable only to that in religious conversion or falling in love; so indeed can some scenes in nature’,32 but also to insist that the experience of ‘transcendence’ offered to us by art – and by critics such as George Steiner33 – cannot simply be transferred into a religious context: ‘their use in the aesthetic contexts provides material for enticing analogies and patterns of extrapolation to religious attitudes and beliefs, but not the warrant to extrapolate to theistic belief.’34 No matter how intense our aesthetic experience of nature or of art, there is no guarantee, as there was for Thomson and for Wordsworth, that it is a gateway to theism and to the certainty of religious belief. In this sense, Hepburn’s account of the aesthetics of nature can be seen as the decay of that eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century belief that the experience of the sublime was the guarantor of a

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31 Hepburn, ‘Restoring the Sacred’, 125.
34 Ibid., 103.
higher order of meaning in which God was revealed in and through the workings of nature. As Hepburn puts it in his essay on ‘Wonder’, ‘the presence of wonder marks a distinctive and high-ranking mode of aesthetic, or aesthetic-religious, experience characterizable by that duality of dread and delight. So conceived, sublimity is essentially concerned with transformation of the merely threatening and daunting into what is aesthetically manageable, even contemplated with joy: and this achieved through the agency of wonder.’

Invocation of the ‘sublime’ here as a specific expression of ‘wonder’ might suggest that the aesthetics of nature reach towards the sublime and that the aesthetics of the garden are the ‘merely’ beautiful, if not the simply quotidian or utilitarian. And certainly the lack of any consideration of the garden in Hepburn’s essays suggests that gardens are an aesthetic blank as compared with the possibilities of a natural world apparently untouched by humanity. But our understanding of the history of the garden, John Dixon Hunt has argued, has been profoundly annexed to the notion of the garden as a ‘representation’ of nature, particularly through the influence of the parklands created by eighteenth-century landscape architects and by the popularity of the jardin anglais as a version of English nature: where earlier gardens had sought to create meaning through their transformation of nature, the jardin anglais sought to turn itself into a piece of English nature, as though it were indistinguishable from the natural world in which it was situated. Hunt points to Horace Walpole’s History of the Modern Taste in Gardening as the consummation of this version of the garden, in which:

‘informal’ is pitted against ‘formal’, and other nations, against the English. We are entertained to a wonderfully agile, often amusing, and horribly persuasive argument for the supremacy of one mode of gardening, one that is above all ‘natural’, modern, English and worthy to be acclaimed among the pre-eminent fine arts. Walpole’s achievement has to be saluted all the more when it is realized that single-handedly he determined (or distorted) the writing of landscape architecture history to this day.

The ‘natural landscape’ of the jardin anglais makes the garden disappear into nature and nature into the garden as though they are indistinguishable:

it is neither ‘nature’ in Hepburn’s sense, quite separate from the world of human artefacts, nor art-object in the sense adopted by those whom Hepburn attacked for ignoring the natural world. The garden, as it were, falls out of the category of the aesthetic: neither ‘nature’ nor art. This, I would suggest – paraphrasing Hepburn – is ‘a very bad thing’:

Bad, because aesthetics is thereby steered off from examining an important and richly complex set of relevant data; and bad because when a set of human experiences is ignored by a theory relevant to them, they tend to be rendered less readily available as experiences.  

Despite his scepticism about the possibility of constructing an argument from the fact of aesthetic experience of the sublime or the transcendent to a theistic belief system, many of the aesthetic questions that Hepburn poses revolve around the remnants of ‘metaphysical’ meanings – the ‘sublime’, the ‘sacred’, the implication of a ‘beyond’ – in our encounters with nature; but gardens pose a very different set of questions about the relationship between the social world of human civilizations and the natural world in which those civilizations have to find their place; about the relationship between the utilitarian use of nature – grazing animals in parkland, vegetable plots for the dinner table – and the aesthetic experiences it inspires. This is not merely a matter of the ‘beautiful’ versus the ‘sublime’; it is, rather, about the aesthetics of the domestic and the domesticated versus the aesthetics of the ‘untouched’, of the kind of ‘wilderness’ proposed and promoted by John Muir.

If, for Hepburn, an essential characteristic of our appreciation of nature is that it has no ‘frame’, an equally essential characteristic of that which is not nature is its evasion of the forces that animate the natural world: writing about the work of metaphor as the ‘imaginative annexing of the outer world’ Hepburn writes:

No doubt some of this can be done by images drawn from domestic or urban life; but there is more than a little suggestion of anxious self-protectiveness in such restriction to the man-made environment. The gain would be that we screen ourselves off from the natural immensities

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that daunt us; the loss that we cut ourselves off from that ‘renewal of our inner being’ which the Romantics saw are derived from meditating on the great permanencies of nature.\footnote{Ibid., 9–10.}

The turning back to the Romantic conception of Nature as full of great ‘permanencies’ implies the triviality of whatever may be the permanencies of the recent human world, from Einsteinian physics to the pictures of deep space made possible by the Hubble telescope, from Artificial Intelligence to the effort to understand black holes in the cosmos. If nature has ‘permanencies’ they are only made possible for us by becoming incorporated into the human world, a world which does not necessarily attempt to ‘screen ourselves off from the natural immensities that daunt us’ but reveals precisely how little of those immensities we, including the Romantics, previously understood. As Hepburn partly acknowledged in his essay on ‘Nature in the Light of Art’, when we have an aesthetic experience of nature we bring with us a lot of accumulated art through which we ‘see’ or ‘read’ the natural world. We provide a frame even to that which is apparently without a frame:

\begin{quote}
Correlative to any general view of nature – as innocent, benign, hostile or whatever – is a view of the viewer himself. He confronts nature’s hostility with defiance or resignation; he luxuriates in its benignity. To have one’s view of nature part-determined by art is simultaneously to have one’s sense of self, one’s posture \textit{via-à-vis} nature determined as well.\footnote{Hepburn, ‘Nature in the Light of Art, 42.}
\end{quote}

We might go further than Hepburn does and say that there is no innocent encounter between the human world and the natural world, which is why the search for wilderness as essentially ‘other’ to the human world is self-defeating; no matter how much we aim to conserve or preserve of the natural world, conservation and preservation are human impositions resulting from human decisions. The garden, however, is precisely the opposite of this, since it has always been the place – at least since the Fall – where nature and the human are both in necessary conflict, though it is humanity’s striving after a temporary resolution that makes its aesthetic appreciation possible.

Ironically, given his lack of attention to the garden, Hepburn’s early essays were being written in the University of Edinburgh, during the same
period when, only 26 miles to the south, Ian Hamilton Finlay was beginning to construct the garden that came to be known as ‘Little Sparta’, and which celebrated the intersections of art and nature by having plaques and plinths with literary quotations scattered across gardens that were themselves celebrations and recuperations of previous gardening styles. Finlay’s garden has been proclaimed one of the greatest works of art of the twentieth century in Scotland – perhaps, indeed, in Europe – but its style is a defiant resistance to any notion that there is an aesthetics of nature which is not seen from the human world and from the history of our previous aesthetic experience – a garden, Finlay aphoristically asserted, is not a retreat but an attack. And in Finlay’s gardens there are frames within frames that emphasize we are in nature but also against nature, forcibly extracting the beautiful from what is implicitly and perhaps implacably hostile to our purposes. An old sheep farm on an apparently desolate stretch of the Pentland Hills can only become a celebration of nature’s fertility and the gardener’s art with enormous amounts of labour and a belief in the power of human beings to transform nature – an old Scottish farmhouse (hardly a farmhouse, more of a cottage) is transformed into a Greek temple in celebration of Apollo; as John Dixon Hunt puts it, Finlay wants his garden to ‘achieve sublimity and some sense of the sacred’.

While John Muir and the environmentalist movement search wilderness environments for sublimity and the sacred, Finlay seeks to create them in a constructed (and, indeed, in a constricted) space: the sublime and the sacred are products not of nature but of art – of art in the service of making ‘nature over again’. Against the ‘high peak’ of our aesthetic understanding of nature that Hepburn attributes to Wordsworth, Finlay invokes a neo-classicism that goes back beyond Romanticism to a different relationship – or, at least, an alternative relationship – with the natural world.

Finlay’s garden challenged the separation of art and nature by constructing an environment in which individual works of art were an integral part of a garden that was itself designed as a work of art, deliberately referring to and mimicking previous styles of garden design. What the visitor to the garden will encounter is art in nature and nature as art, combined as mutual revelations of humanity’s place in the world. Throughout the garden there are sundials:

These sundials point back to one of the most important indicators of Scotland’s early gardening traditions, the sculpted sundials charted by Thomas Ross (1839–1930) in 1883. Ross argued that these freestanding sundials were ‘among the most important class of monumental object bequeathed to this century by the seventeenth century and it is only when we come to realise how numerous they are and that many of them are fine works of artistic and scientific skill that we perceive how widespread must have been the appreciation of the sculptor’s art as combined with that of the landscape gardener’.  

The sundial is the image of art and nature combined, charting in its stillness the motion of the sun and providing an artistic still centre to the constantly changing nature of the garden by which it is surrounded. Here, art and nature, human understanding and the movements of the universe combine to create an art of time through the timelessness of art.

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Finlay’s garden defies the separation of art and nature, human world and wilderness which Hepburn sees as fundamental to the crisis of aesthetics in the twentieth century: here is an aesthetic which seeks to integrate the natural with the artificial.
The garden at Little Sparta climbs the hill towards the open countryside beyond – hardly wilderness since it has been used for many hundreds of years for sheep grazing – but the boundary between the garden and the farmed land beyond is marked by the fragmentary ruins of language inscribed in stone:

The text reads –

THE PRESENT ORDER

IS THE DISORDER

OF THE FUTURE

SAINT- JUST

The order of the garden abuts on the disorder of nature, the order of nature disrupts the order of the garden, the garden is a continual struggle between two different orders and, at the same time, a resolution, however temporary, of that conflict. Finlay’s work is a challenge to the conservationist desire to maintain wilderness in order not to lose the aesthetics of nature and, at the same time, a challenge to the notion of the art object as separate from and unaffected by the environment in which it exists. Finlay’s gardens are full of objects framed as art, but framed as art by nature. It is a pity that Hepburn did not try to incorporate the aesthetics of the garden into his aesthetics of natural beauty, or to build a theoretical bridge that would allow, as with his eighteenth-century precursors, that our aesthetic experience can – and perhaps must – include both.

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In this paper I consider Ronald W. Hepburn’s writings on education. Though Hepburn did not try to articulate a general philosophy or theory of education, he – like his contemporary Scottish philosophers: John Macmurray and Alasdair MacIntyre – did provide an account of how engagement with the arts can educate emotions. According to Hepburn, emotions are at least partly cognitive states and so educable. The arts (and especially literature) can educate the emotions in various ways: by enlarging experience beyond the trite emotion clichés of everyday life; by enhancing self-knowledge and emotional freedom, by revivifying and revitalising emotional experience, and by improving our understanding and relations with other people. In the paper I also consider Gordon Reddiford’s objection that Hepburn erred in suggesting that aesthetic criteria could settle scientific questions. I argue this objection does not convince as Hepburn only defended the thesis that it is vital that educators teach students that the sciences do not represent the only path to knowledge of reality. Hepburn believed that the arts and journey’s in nature (both lived and literary) can also disclose reality in educationally valuable ways. To help illustrate the educative power of journeying, I refer to the journey that the character Kenn undertakes in Neil Gunn’s novel *Highland River*. Contrary to Reddiford, I conclude that for Hepburn not all education is education of subjectivity. Instead, I draw upon Hepburn’s reflections on wonder to show that it is more likely that he thought it important to educate for both objectivity and subjectivity.

1 In different ways both John Macmurray and Alasdair MacIntyre stress how engagement with the arts can educate emotions. In a public lecture of 1958, for example, Macmurray suggests that the arts can educate emotions by helping students overcome the human tendency to self-deceit and egocentricity, cf. John Macmurray, ‘Learning to be Human’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 38 (2012), 661–74. While MacIntyre suggests that human beings are story telling animals that need to tell each other stories in order to work out what it really means to live well and badly, cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana, 1984). As we shall see, Hepburn also thinks that engagement with the arts, and especially literature, can help foster a more truthful and real understanding of the human condition.
Hepburn was a pivotal figure in the revival of interest in environmental aesthetics in the latter half of the twentieth century. His work on education by contrast has been much less influential. This is perhaps unsurprising. Only two papers he wrote had education as the focus. As far as I am aware only two further papers, one by Konstantin Koopman and another by Gordon Reddiford, engage in any depth with Hepburn’s writing on education. Koopman’s engagement is brief, extending to little more than two paragraphs of summary of Hepburn’s first paper on education. Reddiford’s engagement is more substantial but only focuses on Hepburn’s second paper on education. A third article, by Chung-Ping Yang does not discuss Hepburn’s work on education but does consider the implications of his aesthetic theory for aesthetic education. Finally, Steven Fesmire quotes from Hepburn’s famous essay on the neglect of natural beauty of 1966 in discussion of the ecological imagination and moral education. However, Fesmire’s chapter again proceeds without reference to Hepburn’s views on education. What none of these papers do, then, is consider Hepburn’s published works on education together with discussion of his views on aesthetics. My paper therefore examines both of Hepburn’s neglected works on education and it relates them to some of his work in environmental aesthetics.

1 The arts and the education of feeling and emotion

Hepburn’s first work on education was a paper ‘The Arts and the Education of Feeling and Emotion’ which was published in 1972 within a philosophy of education anthology called Education and the Development of Reason but also later republished in a collection of Hepburn’s own works, ‘Wonder’ and Other Essays.  


5 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘The Arts and the Education of Feeling and Emotion’ in Robert
What does Hepburn say about the emotions and emotion education in this essay? At the start of the essay Hepburn makes clear he is not trying to articulate a general theory or philosophy of education. Instead, he intends to look at a very specific aspect of education – the education of emotions through appreciation of the arts. Hepburn takes issue with the ‘traditional’ view of emotion which construed them as wholly inner, private experiences of pure sensation. He points out that if this account of the emotions was right, it is hard to see how they could be educable. He says:

[w]e might speak of checking, controlling and suppressing private, inner feelings. But what about transforming and civilising emotions, or rendering them more discriminating, appropriate, reasonable, sensitive? If these questions are intractable, it is because that traditional view of emotions as inner feelings is inadequate.\(^6\)

In contrast to the traditional view, Hepburn defended a cognitive account of emotions. On this view emotions are not just inner experiences. They are also directed at external objects. Hepburn maintained that to experience an emotion is not just to perceive an inner feeling – it is also to evaluate facts about the world. He concluded that emotions can be educated as they involve not just a passive feeling but also an evaluative component.

He maintained that the evaluative and cognitive elements of emotion can be pulled together by the notion of ‘seeing as.’ What Hepburn seems to be getting at is that emotions can be justified or without grounds. A justified emotion, an emotion that is, that a person has solid grounds for having, is one where that person has come to see reality as it really is. They have pulled their inner sensation together with an apt cognitive judgement about the object or objects that the sensation is directed. Having clarified what sort of phenomena Hepburn thinks emotions are, he turns to the issue of educating emotions. Hepburn suggested that emotion education can and should perform a variety of functions. It can firstly oust vague, crude emotion clichés and replace them with ones more discriminating and true to the facts of individual human experience.\(^8\) Hepburn thought engagement with works of literature, such as

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7 Ibid., 485.
8 Ibid., 485–6.
Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, can enable such emotion education. According to Hepburn, Tolstoy can educate as he can *enlarge emotional experience*. He can do this by taking his readers out of everyday life, where emotions are generally liable to be cliched and hackneyed, and into an imagined world that has precise, authentic accounts of individual human feeling. Hepburn cites a passage from Tolstoy’s novel that describes a character’s (Levin’s) emotional response to seeing his new child for the first time. The response contains the expected joy but also entirely new and unanticipated aspects. What Levin felt was not simple joy, but a tortuous awareness of liability to new pain, that only slowly evolved into joy and pride. Such passages in literature educate by affirming the complexity of emotional life and ‘by eliciting a new way of seeing’.

The educational possibilities of art do not end here. According to Hepburn, engagement with works of literature can help readers to better understand and relate with others. This is so as the precise accounts of individual human emotion that good novels contain, can support readers to empathize, to imaginatively put themselves in the place of others and feel what they feel.

Moreover, literature can also help readers to have more fine grained and true to life knowledge of their own emotions. Tolstoy’s reader, he says, is ‘much less likely to disavow the complexity of his own emotions […] and is far better equipped to acknowledge, and find words to articulate, fugitive and unmapped forms of feeling’. Successful art can help people to be honest and sincere about the knotty, entangled, sometimes difficult, nature of their own emotions. For Hepburn such aesthetic education is generative of personal and moral freedom – what he calls ‘emotional freedom’. He comments that:

> the emotion cliche, the stereotype, can be seen as a trap; for it says […] that this is the only option for feeling in this sort of situation. In contrast an aesthetic education is an introduction to countless alternative possibilities for feeling: the options are shown to be immeasurably more diversified than the clichés allow.

Hepburn maintains that *emotional freedom* is the antithesis of *freedom from emotion*. The latter involves a certain deadness of feeling, or at least a partial withdrawal from the realm of feeling. The former in contrast entails a stance of

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9 Ibid., 486.
10 Ibid., 490–1.
11 Ibid., 487.
12 Ibid., 488.
fundamental openness to the reality of emotional life and to the infinite variety of feelings that are humanly possible. For Hepburn emotional life can be revivified and recharged by art experiences that foster emotional freedom. Hepburn thus maintained the arts (and especially literature) can educate emotions in various ways: by enlarging experience beyond the trite emotion clichés of everyday life; by enhancing self-knowledge and emotional freedom, by revivifying and revitalizing emotional experience, and by improving our understanding and relations with other people.

2 Hepburn confronting some objections

Middle way through his essay, Hepburn confesses that he has been up to that point deliberately presenting a blandly one-sided and optimistic account of the ways in which the arts can educate emotion. He therefore spends the rest of the essay confronting possible objections to, and possibly negative features of his account. He firstly notes that his understanding of emotion could be questioned. Here he concedes that not all emotions are necessarily directed at objects. However, he maintains that even where emotions do not have objects, such emotions can be experienced more or less discriminatingly. The implication being that engagement with art-works can help students to experience objectless emotions, more discerningly. Another more fundamental objection he notes runs as follows – that in creating a new possibility of feeling, art-works might supplant one popular emotion-cliché with another. Here he comments on how characters in novels that initially eschew cultural norms of feeling, can over time, like the existential rebel, come to embody a new cultural stereotype. The danger being that the more art-works are valued for emotion education, the more likely it is that people may become distant from and mistrustful of their own lived emotions. Instead, they may come to need the ‘reassuring authority’ of art to tell them what it is they feel or ought to. Hepburn thinks educators can devise strategies to minimise this risk.

They should firstly expose students to as wide a range of artworks as possible, from many different time periods, and not just rely on one or two contemporary writers. This is needed, as such authors may be especially susceptible to inducing new emotion clichés. Educators can also keep asking questions that encourage students to argue over whether emotions represented

13 Ibid., 494.
in the works of art are the only ones possible or if they are only creative fabrications, one possible set of emotional responses to a situation amongst others. If students learn to continually ask such questions of the art-works they engage with, Hepburn thinks it more likely they will be left emotionally revitalised and free by the art experience and less likely to go on to replace new emotion clichés with old. Hepburn also confronts the possible objection that while engagement with arts can enhance emotional freedom, it is far from clear that they must. He acknowledges that a weakness of artistic representations of feelings or philosophical ideas is that they generally do not come with grounds that evidence why that feeling or idea is being represented and not another. He states that ‘plays, poems and novels rarely contain philosophy as such. Philosophy is essentially argument, the presenting and defending of grounds for claims made and views presented. In a work of art, however, a view is presented characteristically, without its grounds, without a systematic sifting of evidence and alternatives’.14

In response to this concern, Hepburn reiterates the importance of understanding emotions in partly cognitive terms. If it is accepted that emotions are educable cognitive states, then educators can and should encourage students to see emotions as always involving active appraisals and interpretations of situations, appraisals that can be true to reality or not. Hepburn maintained that educators should teach students to question whether a given emotion is truly grounded in reality or not or if other emotional responses are possible or have more warrant. Indeed, Hepburn implies it is because artworks generally present emotions without grounds that aesthetic education as opposed to indoctrination is vital. He argued that processes of indoctrination, instil non-rational beliefs in students, beliefs without grounds. In contrast, ‘to be educated is to be put in a position to choose, knowing the alternatives, the pros and cons, the strengths of the case’.15 An objection that Hepburn did not consider, but should have, concerns the extent to which literature can help students to better understand and relate with others. Just because literature might help readers understand fictional characters better does not mean that readers will automatically be better able to understand and relate with others in real life. Fiction is fiction and life is life. The two can meet and enrich each other, but they need not.

Hepburn seemed aware of the limitations of his essay as he concluded it by remarking, perhaps too modestly, that he has done nothing more than provide

14 Ibid., 495.
15 Ibid., 498.
two rhetorics on emotion education. One that defends the need to educate the emotions and human subjectivity, another that discredits this idea. The essay which preceded Hepburn's in the philosophy of education anthology was by Richard Peters.\(^{16}\) Peters also took the topic of emotion education as his focus. While Hepburn did not refer to Peters' work on emotion education in his own paper, he did suggest it to readers of 'Wonder and Other Essays' as a source of further reading on emotions and emotion education.\(^{17}\) Hepburn shared with Peters the view that emotions are cognitive states that can be educated. He also agreed with Peters on another matter - that one of the main tasks of emotion education is to help those being educated to become attuned with reality. However, while Peters felt emotion education could connect students to reality by fostering their capacity for objectivity,\(^{18}\) as we shall see, Hepburn felt emotion education could and should attune students to reality by enhancing their subjectivity.\(^{19}\)

### 3 Art, truth and the education of subjectivity

The thought-model with which we very often represent to ourselves the road towards truth or fuller knowledge of reality is one that involves a stripping away of anthropomorphic accretions and deposits, a process of reducing [...] whereas for the productions of art the influential thought-models are of projecting, humanising, interposing a lens, or a temperament. Although art no doubt works for a maximising of interpretative and emotive enrichments, the implications of these thought-models must be that we are thereby distanced from truth and knowledge of reality. Such thought-models need critical scrutiny; their importance can hardly be exaggerated for someone educating in the field of the arts.\(^{20}\)

Hepburn only mentions the education of subjectivity once in passing at the end of his first essay on education. In his second published work on education,

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17 Hepburn, 'Wonder', 184–5.
18 Peters, 'The education of the emotions', 476–7
20 Ibid., 185.
Art, Truth and the Education of Subjectivity, the issue takes centre stage. Hepburn introduces two divergent thought models for pursuing truth and knowledge in order to explain the idea, and importance of, educating for subjectivity. One thought-model is the objectifying way, the other is the subjectivising way. The objectifying way is the way of the sciences. It involves forming claims about the world that can be tested in controlled experiments, claims that can be verified or falsified. The subjectivising way by contrast is the way of the humanities and arts. It involves sensitively attending to the particulars of lived human experience. It does not involve making claims about the world that can be generalised or falsified. While the former way seeks to reduce and strip away individual human experiences from the pursuit of knowledge and truth, the latter way seeks to amplify it. Hepburn remarks that though it would be decidedly odd to question whether the sciences can generate knowledge of reality, it is bordering on paradoxical to hold that the arts can. However, this is the claim Hepburn defends. He argues that such dualistic thought-models require careful interrogation as the arts and the sciences can both usher in valuable truths grounded in reality. Just truths of a different sort. A key task Hepburn sets himself in the paper is to get clear about the sorts of truth the arts can generate. He regards this task as an especially important one for arts educators.

Hepburn maintains that while the objectifying way can provide truths ‘about’ reality the subjectivising way can be true ‘to’ reality.\(^{21}\) Works of art can disclose aspects of reality by presenting concrete, often ‘highly evocative’ images of reality – images that invite spectators to see likenesses they may not have before. Hepburn stresses that though art can be true-to reality this is not a process of merely mirroring reality. Instead, the ‘art-work has itself been ingredient in giving shape and determinateness to the real’.\(^{22}\) Hepburn concludes that art is of significant educational importance as it has the power to alter human grasp of reality and make it discernible. That art can be subject to interpretation should not invariably be regarded as problematic from an epistemic or educational point of view. Indeed, art, that is open to interpretation can foster a stance of openness and questioning in those who engage with that art – a stance that can open up new possibilities of feeling and doing, new possibilities that is, for learning. Hepburn states that the ‘implications for education are, again, manifest. Art can be presented as inculcating that open, exploratory attitude to new possibilities of experience, and as overcoming

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 186.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 188.
views of human possibility that are limited by [...] a restrictive and crude set of popular concepts'.

It seems clear then that Hepburn, across both his papers on education, held that art can enlarge experience beyond the emotion clichés of everyday life and popular culture. Hepburn suggested that the foundation underpinning scepticism about the truth revealing capacities of art, lies in a general ‘disparagement of subjectivity as such’. Those who would so disparage art are likely those who accept that the objectifying way is the only reliable way to what is ‘really real’. For those who place total faith in the objectifying thought-model, the subjectivising way cannot be regarded as a reliable vehicle to truth as it is so heavily dependent on selective and fallible individual perceptions. When it comes to finding out the truth, trust should be placed in science not human subjectivity. In the face of such logic, Hepburn again insists it is vital that arts educators critically question thought-models that disparage the subjective ‘since any educator who accepts that overall view of the arts [...] cannot fail to communicate, wittingly or unwittingly, an evaluation of their role that pushes them towards the margin of serious cognitive relevance.’

Hepburn however moves to assure arts educators, affirming that there is no good reason to exclude lived experience from the domain of the real. Indeed, he argues that human subjectivity undergirds all truth-seeking practices, even in science. He reasons that when seeking truth, human beings choose their methods of inquiry. These choices can only ever be made by subjective human agents in the experiential life-world. He states that ‘our choosing – to explore reality through science and the concepts of objectivity [...] is itself a choice in the life-world’. Hepburn concludes that every truth-seeking thought-model that disparages the very thing, human subjectivity, that makes truth-seeking possible, must be thoroughly distorting and questionable. As these thought-models rest on unjustified dualisms, he insists that educators must resist the temptation to oppose the humanities and social sciences. Hepburn concludes that educators need to think about how to teach their students that ‘in art, as outside it, the subjectivising way can be a cognitive path’.28

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23 Ibid., 188–9.
24 Ibid., 191.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 192.
28 Ibid., 196.
4 Reddiford’s objections to Hepburn’s account of subjectivity

Reddiford takes issue with Hepburn’s account of subjectivity in two ways. He firstly argues that the subjectivising way might not just be capable of being true to reality, it might also help individuals form truths about reality. To explain his gripe, he discusses Macbeth. He claims that some of the imaginative realisations in the play are so authoritative about the reality of lived human experience that they can be read as truths about human experience – truths that are objectively compelling. Reddiford thus argues that Hepburn needs to modify his account of subjectivity and admit certain aspects of objectivity into it. The aspects of objectivity he has in mind are any instances when art is able to represent human experience so precisely that it ‘true about us’, true that is about human experience.29 Does this objection and subsequent argument that the category of subjectivity needs modification to include some objectivity have merit? I am not sure that it does. Reddiford seems to have forgotten or disregarded the distinctions Hepburn drew between subjectivity and objectivity. They are both ways to truth, but they are different ways to truth. In Hepburn’s framework an art-work such as Macbeth cannot create objective truths as it is not composed via the objectifying way, by scientific inquiry. When Hepburn concluded that an art-work can be true to human experience but not true about human experience he was not playing with words but making an important point about methods – they are very different in art and science. Hepburn was also affirming that the truths that art can generate can be of great human value, both in education and outside of it. When art is true to life it does not need to smuggle in aspects of objectivity for that truth to have value. Reddiford seems to have lost sight of this. However, there may be more substance to Reddiford’s second objection.

He argues that Hepburn’s suggestion that aesthetic criteria like elegance and beauty are at the ‘heart’ of the objectifying way is suspect. Hepburn supports this claim with reference to Heisenberg, who in conversation with Einstein said that if ‘nature leads us to mathematical forms of great simplicity and beauty […] that no one has previously encountered, we cannot help thinking that they are “true”, that they reveal a genuine feature of nature.’30 Reddiford maintains that only a very charitable interpretation of this passage would lead to the conclusion that Heisenberg is advancing the view that aesthetic criteria are at the core of scientific truth-seeking. Reddiford is especially troubled by

an implication he thinks arises from this. That while the subjectivising way can provide ‘aesthetic criteria that can settle scientific questions’, the objectifying way can play no such judicial role in the arts. It should be granted that Hepburn’s assertion in question is uncertain and open to interpretation. Hepburn’s wider argument would have been stronger without this ambiguous claim. However, it is also important to ask if Hepburn really makes the argument that Reddiford attributes to him.

So far as I can tell Hepburn nowhere claims that aesthetic criteria can settle scientific questions. In the passage Reddiford takes issue with, Hepburn only claims that the two thought models ‘do not altogether lose sight of one another’. I think it is much more likely that Hepburn was merely trying to support a claim he does make – that scientists can only ever choose their methods in the world of lived emotion and human subjectivity. A world that can at times be wonderful. Hepburn elsewhere clearly expresses the view that scientific methods must govern scientific practices. He states that ‘what we can know of the objective world is necessarily approached from our experience (disciplined by the methods of science)’. Overall, Reddiford’s objections to Hepburn’s account of subjectivity do not convince. Though I do not think Reddiford is right, even if Hepburn did believe aesthetic criteria could settle scientific inquiries, this would not alter the main thesis Hepburn sought to defend in his paper on the education of subjectivity. The main thesis is this: it is vital that educators teach students that the sciences do not represent the only path to knowledge of reality, and that the arts and journey’s in nature (both lived and literary) can also disclose reality in educationally valuable ways.

5 Getting real via journeying in ‘Highland River’

To bring out the folly of thinking that objectifying is the only way to reality, Hepburn asks his reader to imagine what it would be like to journey through a landscape where all perception of self, time, place and space, had been stripped away for the duration of the journey. He then asks his reader to restore the powers of subjectivity to the agent on the journey. The restoration will, he insists, not move the journeying agent away from but towards a fuller grasp of reality. They will be able to feel the ground under their feet, and eye ‘the

31 Reddiford, ‘Subjectivity and the Arts’, 111.
33 Ibid., 192.
hills, water, marshes34 in a way the agent devoid of subjectivity could not. They would be able to synthesise the totality of the journey in a way the agent devoid of perception could not. They could feel the depletion in energy levels over the course of their journey. They could witness the shifting patterns of light and cloud at different points in the day. By the end of the journey they will have accumulated a resource bank of perceptual memories. The imagined agent, without subjectivity, will have no such perceptual memories. As a result, arriving will mean much more to the agent who has really lived the journey. Hepburn suggests there are more obvious ways (other than walking in nature) by which educators can help students to get to reality via journeying. He argues that literary journeys, like Odysseus’s home to Ithaca, can reveal the life-world of difference between a mere change of location and really living through a journey to its end.

Is Hepburn right though? Can journeys, both lived and literary, help people to get to reality? Can journeying educate? A literary journey that can facilitate exploration of these questions can be found in Neil Gunn’s novel, Highland River from 1937. The first chapter in the story recounts an epic struggle between a Highland boy, Kenn, and a salmon dwelling in a river pool, by a well, near his home. Against all odds the young Kenn is able to wrestle the salmon the same size as him out of water with his bare hands. Gunn says ‘it was a saga of a fight, for all that befell Kenn afterwards, of war and horror and scientific triumphs, nothing ever quite had the splendour and glory of that struggle’.35 As the novel unfolds it becomes clear just how central the Dunbeath water (the Highland River of the title) is to Kenn’s life. It was the site of his most powerful childhood experiences. It was a place for learning, for wonder in nature, as well as heroism. His schooling, by contrast, was a deadening affair, all learning of lifeless facts. Kenn had a ‘feeling of detachment from everything that went on the school […] the freedom and thrill of life were outside […] Nor had any of the things the master taught any joy in them’.36 As he grew older, Kenn would walk further and further up the river with his brother. Together they took delight in trying to describe their natural surroundings as precisely as they could. While Kenn struggled to remember the dull facts about industrial towns learned at school, they knew by name most of the birds of the area and some wildflowers too.

34 Ibid., 194.
36 Ibid., 20–1.
[However, of] the river itself, they had no time to learn the name of things. What they lost here was compensated in some degree [...] by a knowledge so physical and real [...] in which there was an element of pure apprehension [...] freed from ‘explanation’, a reaction to the mystery of its reality purified of the personal emotion of vanity [...] This reaction may be no more than momentary [...] but is all the more vivid for that...37

The novel is brought together when Kenn, now nearing middle age, returns to his Highland River. He goes on a pilgrimage to the loch that is the river’s source. En route, when walking past his childhood home, now occupied by strangers, he realises it is the river and the natural word around it, that is his real home. Given Hepburn’s insistence that art-works generally represent emotions without grounds, and need to be open to interpretation, I only tentatively speculate he might have shared some of the feelings and ideas expressed by Gunn. Gunn and Hepburn both suggested education is horribly impoverished if it is all scientific facts divorced from lived human experience. They both suggested that walks in nature can help human beings to perceive reality in a way that can revivify emotions. They both also grappled with whether or not scientific knowledge must come to dominate artistic, or if the two cannot co-exist.

Gunn returns to this theme more than once. He firstly has Kenn speculate that it would be quite wrong to oppose the pure apprehension of nature ‘freed from explanation’38 with scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge of rivers and salmon need not kill the joy of pure apprehension of them. On the contrary, his ‘boyhood approaches’ of the river were, though ephemeral, also indestructible and fundamental. Kenn’s early experiences of the river were carried over ‘to every other environment of life’.39 Later when Kenn is much older and talking about his Highland past with a scientist friend, he remarks that we never really believed in the church or the clan landlord – ‘that’s the sort of thing that becomes clear to me when thinking of the river’. The raw, wondrous power of the river was such that it could unsettle man-made norms. When asked by his friend what he really thought of the arts, Kenn responded that ‘there is the purely objective and the purely subjective [...] The

37 Ibid., 181–2.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 182.
purely objective is photographic. The purely subjective is incommunicable'.

Kenn lamented that the modern age had produced no great poetry. In this age ‘wonder and curiosity and the thrill of new forms and new beauty are today to be found in science’. Hepburn may not have assented to the thought that modern poetry is incapable of inspiring new appreciation of beauty. I think he would though have appreciated Kenn’s utterance that science is born out of, and capable of, wonder.

6 Wonder and education

Hepburn thought wonder entails delight and surprise at an object in the world. This may be ephemeral or more lasting. Like Kenn, Hepburn believed that aesthetic wonder in nature is felt without human vanity. It is a ‘glad and serene inner celebrating of the actuality of these items, these processes of nature’. Wonder has various guises for Hepburn – it can be worth indulging for various reasons. Scientific inquiries are often initiated and sustained by wonder. Importantly such wonder cannot settle scientific questions but it can motivate the pursuit of scientific questions. Furthermore, such wonder can, but need not, terminate when the object inspiring the wonder is more fully comprehended. There ‘is room for wonder that is compatible with understanding’. A more personally contemplative wonder, that makes no claim to extend understanding, is also commendable. Here early experiences of wonder can, like they did for Kenn, have lasting reverberation and meaning. Hepburn says that ‘vivid sensory and emotional impressions from early life can continue to vivify much later and otherwise less keen experience […] the […] wide temporal gap […] is essential to the wonder-arousing synthesis’. Possibilities for wonder are wide for Hepburn – it can be aesthetic, religious or existential. Wonder also has ethical potential as it has affinities with gentleness, compassion and is essentially

40 Ibid., 214.
41 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 278.
46 Ibid., 135.
'other acknowledging'. Hepburn suggested wonder can help agents perceive the otherness of others. In so doing wonder can enable moral action for others.

He ends his essay on ‘Wonder’ by suggesting it is the educators task to inspire wonder in what is worthy of it, ‘in place of cynicism, indifference and other rivals’. Though inspiring wonder could perhaps then be regarded as an overall aim for educators in Hepburn’s framework, I do not think educating subjectivity could. Reddiford however maintains that for Hepburn, all education is education of subjectivity. I disagree. Much of Hepburn’s writing on education does to be sure stress that education of subjectivity is desirable and needed because it can help students see the real and wondrous and not some lazy anthropomorphism or emotion cliché. Admitting this though does not mean admitting Hepburn held all education is education of subjectivity. He claimed there are two distinct, if sometimes overlapping, ways to truth and knowledge about reality. Both ways can inspire wonder and help students get to reality so both are worthy of education. In his writing on education Hepburn emphasises the power the arts can have to educate subjectivity much more than nature.

This is surprising, given Hepburn elsewhere suggested that the neglect of the aesthetic import of natural beauty will only be fully overcome when aesthetic education teaches how nature can be beautiful in ways distinct from art. However, Hepburn did, as we have seen, discuss the rich educational possibilities that can arise from walking in nature in his second paper on education. If his wider writings on ‘Wonder’, and the need to respect nature, and humanise it without illusion, are also considered, I ultimately think it is very clear that Hepburn felt human subjectivity could be enlarged via aesthetic appreciation of nature as well as art. Indeed, experiences in nature may even have certain educational advantages over art experiences. He says that when looking upon a landscape painting

the light of its sun does not shine on me or warm me; its wind does not ruffle my hair. But in nature they do: I am immersed in the nature I appreciate as I cannot be with paintings. Nature is continuous with my bodily presence...

47 Ibid., 144.
48 Ibid., 152.
49 Ibid., 16–17.
50 Ibid.
In sum, and contrary to Reddanford, I think it is likely that Hepburn thought it important to educate for both objectivity (through the sciences) and subjectivity (through the humanities and aesthetic appreciation of art and nature).

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1 Preliminaries

In the celebrated essay ‘Wonder’ Ronald W. Hepburn makes a passing reference to John Stuart Mill who writes: ‘It is not understanding that destroys wonder, it is familiarity.’1 Mill, specifically discussing William Hamilton’s ideas, is arguing against the views that science expels wonder – that the more we know, the less there is to wonder. Mill argues that ignorance is not a necessary condition of wonder, strangeness is. Even when we know and understand nature, nature can still raise wonder. Mill continues: ‘To a person whose feelings have depth enough to withstand that, no insight which can ever be attained into natural phenomena will make Nature less wonderful.’2 Hepburn does not discuss Mill’s idea any further, although he certainly seems to accept it. An interesting detail is that there is, in the essay collection, even an indexed item for the expression ‘wonder destroyed by familiarity’.3

In this essay, I want to discuss these two notions: wonder and the everyday. When our everyday routines are in their places, there is nothing to wonder about them. I will take Mill’s statement as my starting point: familiarity destroys – or at least diminishes – possibilities for wonder, strangeness increases them. If familiarity is one of the characteristics of our everyday – as I think it is –, is there any role for wonder in our everyday? Is it impossible to experience wonder in our everyday existence, or are we somehow removed from the everyday when facing matters that raise wonder? Can we wonder at everyday items – the chair I am sitting on, the technically very complex machine I am using while writing this, the fly that I can see on my window? And what about

2 Ibid., 544.
3 Ibid., 192.
aesthetic phenomena and wonder, are there any connections? If strangeness and wonder are connected, it is likely that there are.

Contrary to some contemporary writers, I will argue for a robust notion of the everyday: the everyday as such is permeated with familiarity. This does not entail, however, that there could not be extraordinary moments in human existence. There clearly are, produced by, for example, nature and art. The extraordinary moments can be seen as cracks or as highlights in the weave of the everyday. Sometimes they are negative, for example, encountering a deep loss; sometimes positive, like having a wonderful experience of nature. When we keep the notions clearly separate, we can appreciate the aesthetic, as well as other experiential, potential of them both. They both constitute human existence, although, as I will argue, familiarity has a privileged position: it is only in contrast to the everyday that wondrous moments can occur.

2 Wonder

The word itself, ‘wonder’, can refer to objects that raise wonder, as well as to our reaction to objects. Something that is out of the ordinary, say, a miracle, is an object of wonder. “Miraculous wonders” might actually be examples of wonders that can be expelled by science – science explains away miracles. So, there is a point in Hamilton’s claim, although it clearly does not cover all cases of wonder. I am more concerned, in a way similar to Hepburn, about the other side of the coin: not so much about wondrous objects, but human reactions and attitudes.

In a later essay ‘Values and Cosmic Imagination’, Hepburn makes, again very passingly, an intuitively plausible distinction between the ‘questioning’ and ‘appreciative’ modes of wonder.4 This is a very commonsensical distinction, and is implicit in the ‘Wonder’ essay as well, but he does not use the terms in the original essay. Instead, he talks of ‘interrogative element’5 and ‘meditative wonderment.’6

The questioning mode is, presumably, the more mundane of the two: I may wonder what you mean when you say this or that; or I may wonder what is this strange-looking plant. My wondering is easily satisfied by asking you,
or by consulting an encyclopaedia of plants. The appreciative mode is more interesting and relevant from the philosophical point of view, and I shall come back to it very shortly. But before that, I want to point out other distinctions that Hepburn makes in reference to Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger which are very close to the one I picked up above, but have, if nothing else, a different emphasis.

The Kantian distinction is between ‘astonishment [Verwunderung]’ and ‘wonderment that is steady and unthreatened [Bewunderung]’. The former ‘wears off’ when the novelty effect disappears. The latter, to which Hepburn also refers by the term ‘admiration’, is the much celebrated case of ‘the starry heavens above and the moral law within.’ This seems to be a distinction between two kinds of reactions, a more immediate one and a more contemplative one. The latter often requires a special attitude, which might also be called ‘wonder’.

Hepburn continues by referring to a passage in Heidegger’s Being and Time in which Heidegger considers the phenomenon of ‘Neugier’, curiosity. In Heidegger, this is in connection with other characteristics determining human everyday existence; the very mundane way of being of das Man. Curiosity has a close link to ‘idle talk’ or ‘chatter [Gerede]’ and ‘ambiguity [Zweideutigkeit]’. Furthermore, they constitute what Heidegger calls the ‘falling [das Verfallen]’ of Dasein. I will quote a somewhat longer paragraph than Hepburn in order to get more of the Heideggerian specifications into play:

The basic state of sight shows itself in a peculiar tendency-of-Being which belongs to everydayness – the tendency towards ‘seeing’. We designate this tendency by the term ‘curiosity’ [Neugier], which characteristically is not confined to seeing, but expresses the tendency towards a peculiar way of letting the world to be encountered by us in perception. […] When curiosity has become free, however, it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen […] but just in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty, […] Therefore curiosity is characterized by a specific way of not tarrying alongside what is closest. Consequently it does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters.

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7 Ibid., 133.
8 Ibid., 134.
9 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson
Hepburn compares this to the touristic attitude; ‘a tick on the tourist’s place-list’.\textsuperscript{10} Using terminology introduced by John Urry, we could speak of the ‘tourist’s gaze’ which seeks the extraordinary: ‘potential objects of the tourist gaze must be different in some way or other. They must be out of the ordinary’.	extsuperscript{11} This is a particular kind of attention, seeking for novelty. Curiosity is the driving force behind all this; in Heidegger’s concepts, it is a way in which we are connected to the world; it is a mode of ‘care [Sorge]’.

Hepburn contrasts curiosity with wonder: ‘wonder does not see its objects possessively: they remain “other” and un-mastered. Wonder does dwell in its objects with rapt attentiveness.’\textsuperscript{12} Hepburn reads Heidegger so that ‘thaumazein’ would correspond wonder. Heidegger makes this point very quickly: ‘Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marvelling at them – Θαυμάζειν. To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest.’\textsuperscript{13}

I admit that that it is heuristically useful to distinguish the two, but phenomenologically they go often hand in hand: curiosity is the starting point for wonder, and moments of wonder may end up in curiosity. This is acknowledged also by Hepburn when he writes: ‘There seems, too, a variable relation between the element of curiosity or interrogation in wonder and a contemplative-appreciative aspect (“dwelling”), in which it is furthest from mere curiosity.’\textsuperscript{14}

Before entering the issues of the everyday in more detail, I want to correct a common misunderstanding to which Hepburn also subscribes. He writes that ‘mere curiosity is given an inferior place is Heidegger’s scheme.’\textsuperscript{15} Admittedly, Heidegger does sometimes get a bit carried away by language, and gives the impression that phenomena such as curiosity and chatter are somehow inferior compared to their authentic counterparts. However, Heidegger is in great pains to emphasize that the expressions such as ‘curiosity’, ‘falling’ and ‘inauthenticity’ do not carry any negative evaluations; they are meant to be purely descriptive:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 134.
\item \textsuperscript{11} John Urry and Jonas Larsen, \textit{The Tourist Gaze 3.0} (London 2011), 15.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Hepburn, ‘Wonder’, 134.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 216.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Hepburn, ‘Wonder’, 134-5.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 134.
\end{itemize}
This term [i.e., falling, Verfallen] does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that Dasein is proximally and for the most part alongside the ‘world’ of its concern. [...] We would also misunderstand the ontologico-existential structure of falling if we were to ascribe to it the sense of a bad and deplorable ontical property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves.16

In sum, wonder can be an object or a human state. Wonder can be attitude, and it can be a reaction. When an attitude, it should be distinguished from curiosity (Heidegger); when a reaction, it should be distinguished from astonishment (Kant). So, when talking about human states, we have four closely related phenomena: curiosity or questioning mode, ‘contemplative-appreciative aspect’,17 astonishment or being surprised, and finally, wonder in the sense of admiration and awe.

3 Everyday

Now it is time to go into questions of the everyday. Heidegger was one of the first philosophers who attended problems of the everyday. He introduces the concept at the very beginning of Sein und Zeit with the, by now, celebrated expression zunächst und zumeist,18 ‘proximally and for the most part’,19 or ‘firstly and mostly’20: humans exist zunächst und zumeist in their durchschnittlichen Alltäglichkeit,21 in their ‘average everydayness’.22 The average everydayness consists of certain structures which, then, define humans. Heidegger is after the ontological structures of human existence. In this context, there is no need to go into details of the Heideggerian analysis, which is, by now, well-known, anyway.23 For my purposes, besides Heidegger’s observation of the zunächst und zumeist, his remark concerning the overlooking of the ontological

16 Heidegger, Being and Time, 220.
18 Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (Tübingen, 1979), 16.
19 Heidegger, Being and Time, 37.
21 Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, 16.
22 Heidegger, Being and Time, 38.
importance the everyday and the ‘averageness [Durchschnittlichkeit]’ is relevant.²⁴
The ordinary, average everyday is closest to us, but for this very reason ‘the
farthest and not known at all’.²⁵ We are embedded in the structures of the
everyday; they constitute our very existence. I think that this is true also of the
aesthetic aspects of the everyday: most often they go unnoticed because they
are so close to us.

Rather than saying that we are in the everyday, we should say that we are the
everyday. We construe ourselves by living our lives, by creating liaisons to
our fellow-humans and to other entities with which we are dealing. Firstly and
mostly, we are – happily – the average somebody, das Man, but the average
somebody exists on the ontic level, in numerous manifestations. You as an
average everyday person are different from me as an average everyday person.
There is nothing wrong, avoidable or even deplorable in existing as the aver-
geomebody. In the Heideggerian scheme this is a simple fact: ‘The “they” [das
Man] is an existeniale; and as a primordial phenomenon, it belongs to Dasein’s positive
constitution.’²⁶

Is there any aesthetic potential in the average everyday existence? In our
very everydayness, things tend to disappear in the sense that they do not stand out in any particular way. Heidegger’s well-known analysis of tools or pieces
of equipment applies to a large extent to anything we encounter while leading our lives. A pair of shoes is a good pair when they do not announce themselves; we do not have to pay any attention to them; they simply serve in their function of covering our feet and making effortless moving possible. In a similar way, our everyday surroundings do not require special attention; ontically speaking, we get used to it, there is nothing new to be seen, nothing that would raise our curiosity, much less wonder. When there are changes in the environment we inhabit – a building is being constructed – then we pay attention. Our curiosity is aroused.

Meanwhile, what is aesthetically noteworthy is that which seems to stand out from the ordinary averageness. Yuriko Saito claims that ‘the enemies of the aesthetic are inattentiveness and mindlessness.’²⁷ When considering traditional objects of aesthetic interest, works of art and scenic natural sights, this is true. The whole institution of art aims at this: works of art have to stand

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²⁴ Heidegger, Being and Time, 69; Inwood, A Heidegger Dictionary, 212.
²⁵ Heidegger, Being and Time, 69.
²⁶ Ibid. 167, emphasis in the original.
out, attract our curiosity and attention, be noteworthy. The question concerning the aesthetic potential of the everyday remains unanswered: perhaps we should extend the range of the aesthetic to cover the basics of human existence – the firstly and mostly.

On earlier occasions, I have pointed out that the very mundane everyday has its own aesthetic characteristics: it is the flow and rhythm of things that matter. This is the ordinary, everyday, average existence; taking care of daily matters and routines. Taking a familiar route to work, to school, to the grocery store, or wherever one standardly commutes. This does not have to happen daily, but it must be a routine-like activity, which one takes without any particular planning or effort. For some, this has been rather counter intuitive, but I think that the steadiness of the everyday should be taken seriously in philosophical aesthetics: this is the bedrock of our existence, and it provides us many quiet pleasures which often go unnoticed.

I do not deny that boredom is the other side of the coin – if one’s everyday is very monotonous, the state of being bored is understandable. This is a standard strategy in punishment: one’s options of diversifying one’s everyday are limited. A kind of an extreme is solitary refinement: there is very little to do, very little to see. And clearly, people do get bored even when living in freedom. But pointing out the aesthetic potential of the everyday does not entail that there should be only the everyday. We need breaks from the everyday – that is why we go to foreign places, to the nature (if we are mostly city dwellers), to concerts and other art events.

In recent philosophical aesthetics, there has been a fair amount of discussion on the concept of the everyday. Thomas Leddy defines the everyday in contrast to the arts and to nature:

> the objects of everyday aesthetics are not works of art. Although some works of art, both high and popular, are experienced every day by someone […], everyday aesthetics is not defined by what is experienced literally every day but what is not art or nature. Moreover, there is a commonly accepted domain of everyday objects and experiences. People generally recognize what is meant by ‘everyday life’: that it refers

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less, for example, to the part a concert pianist’s life that involves performing as an artist than to what happens when she goes to the grocery store.  

I find this counter-intuitive: if I live in a natural environment, in a cottage in deep wilderness, the natural setting around me is my everyday. And if I pass a monument – a public work of art or a building – every day on my way to work, this particular object is an everyday object for me. Furthermore, if Leddy’s pianist is not in the habit of doing her groceries herself – her husband does that –, the occasion of her actually going to the supermarket for groceries, is not her everyday. From the Heideggerian point of view, the everyday is a relational phenomenon, depending on the person and on her relationships with the environment. It is not only objects that constitute human everyday, we are also together with other humans: das Mitsein is one of the existentials structuring our existence. On the ontic level, your ‘being-with’ other people differs from mine, because you know different people, because we are not from the same family, etc. But ontologically, we are always with other humans, even complete solitude is defined by the absence of other people.

More recently, Ben Highmore has emphasized the relational nature of everyday: it is not a fixed set of objects, but rather a set of relations. Even though Highmore himself does not refer to Wittgenstein, it is not too farfetched, I think, to talk about a ‘form of life’. I find it slightly misleading to characterize the relationality of the everyday in terms of ‘attitude’ or ‘attention’. In a recent article, Ossi Naukkarinen and Raine Vasquez write as follows:

We have already highlighted the fact that the everyday is a relational concept, that is has to do with our relations towards objects, events, or others – specifically, the mood in which we engage, encounter, or experience them. This fact encourages the view that the everyday is a form of attention; thus, we can experience things which are not normally a part of our daily-lives with the feeling of the everyday.

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30 Ibid., 20.
32 Ossi Naukkarinen and Raine Vasquez, ‘Creating and Experiencing the Everyday through Daily-life’ in Carsten Friberg and Raine Vasquez (eds), *Experiencing the Everyday* (Copenhagen, 2017), 179.
As an example, they give ‘parties, changes at work, or planned holidays that fail to break the grip of the everyday’. In their view, they ‘illustrate the possibility of experiencing even extra-ordinary events through the lens of everydayness’.33

Living in the everyday does not require, or even involve, any particular ‘form of attention’; rather the opposite: a special attention is required if we want to distance ourselves from our daily routines. Everydayness is not a lens which can be changed to something else instantaneously at will. Everydayness is a form of life defining us as human beings. We can sometimes take some distance from our everyday, its objects and events, but even if we do so, there is no way to get rid of the fact that they constitute our everyday and have accordingly an aura of familiarity in them. The examples Naukkarinen and Vasquez give illustrate something else than what they suppose. Naukkarinen comments on his experiences of ‘remarkable’ events in the everyday as follows:

Rather, I tend to think that even many rather remarkable things, in good or bad, are part of the everyday. For example, over the years some close people around me have died. Those were very sad moments that moved me deeply. Yet, they didn't prevent me from leading the life that I have. I continued with those routines related to my job, home, and hobbies – not happily and lightly, but still.34

The everyday has, indeed, the potential of “carrying” us through many of the losses all of us have to go through in our lives. There are ruptures in the weaves of the everyday, both positive and negative. But this is exactly what they are – ruptures, cracks, highlights which many of us, although not all in every situation, can deal with. If deaths and funerals would indeed become an everyday routine for someone not in the business of an undertaker, his everyday would be a very peculiar one, and if the losses would always be from the ring of family and friends, it would be devastating for anyone’s existence. As far as I can see, in the second quote, Naukkarinen is using the term ‘everyday’ in a meaning referring to the life history of a particular person, not in the sense of a form of attention, to say nothing of the sense that I have outlined.

Another terminological comment is worth making: is there a distinction between the everyday and the daily? In the kind of philosophical discussion I am leading here, as is also the case with Naukkarinen and Vasquez in their essay, we are not relying entirely on a common sense understanding of a

33 Ibid., 179–80.
34 Ibid., 177–8.
language, or “intuitions” – whatever they might be and where ever they might come from – but also make stipulations. For Naukkarinen and Vasquez, the ‘daily-life’ seems to be some kind of quantitative notion: if I encounter something almost on a daily basis, it is part of my daily life. But in this context, they characterize the everyday as a ‘feeling’ which might even be ‘paradoxically, removed from daily life’. From this they conclude: ‘the everyday is merely one (special) mode of being’.

I am puzzled: for Naukkarinen and Vasquez, the everyday has become something special. I do understand it that in the hustle and bustle of our everyday activities, we do not pay attention to – we do not reflect on – the everyday. I certainly agree with the idea that there is a danger that the everyday looses its everydayness once one starts to pay attention to it. However, I cannot see the benefit or advantage for naming the attention to daily activities the “everyday.” The everyday is, indeed, a relation, rather than a ‘form of attention’ or a ‘(special) mode of being’.

I would rather bring in the distinctions Hepburn refers to – curiosity and wonder. We can take a step back from our routines, and take a curious look around. This might not be an easy exercise, because we are in the everyday. It is much more natural to occupy a curious gaze in unfamiliar locations. We might even adopt a wondrous attitude to the whole phenomenon of our individual everyday: that I exist as I exist. This would be a modified and shortened version of the traditional philosophical wondering which Heidegger formulated as follows: ‘Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?’ “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” This kind of wondering cannot be an attitude for everyday existence: we need to act and do things in the everyday, and with existential wondering this all would cease.

4 Wonder – everyday

But let me now turn back to wonder. What is the role of wonder in our everyday? Clearly, there are many matters in our Lebenswelt that we can wonder about. Small children wonder about matters that we adults take for granted: “Why is it so-and-so?” In principle, one can take a ‘wondrous attitude’ to just about anything. We might even be able to practice wondering so that even the most trivial of matters would raise wonder. The world would be full of

35 Ibid. 181.
36 Martin Heidegger, Einführung in die Metaphysik (Tübingen, 1953), 1.
wonders. But this kind of “wonderization” would make the whole phenomenon trivial. This is very analogous to aestheticizing our everyday in the traditional sense of the “aesthetic”; there is noteworthy ‘ordinarily neglected, but gem-like, aesthetic potentials hidden behind the trivial, mundane, and commonplace façade’, Saito’s expression,[37] in everything, but if everything is aestheticized, the notion of the “aesthetic” becomes futile. This applies to wonder too: matters of wonder have to be worth of the special attention we give them – there must be something extraordinary in them.

Wonder and aesthetic attitude seem to be closely related – they both require attentiveness on part of the perceiver, and more often than not, there is a strong element of wonder in aesthetic experience. We may be caught by a natural scene or a work of art, and be simply “amazed” by it. As Hepburn rightly points out, not only aesthetic, but also religious phenomena raise the feeling of wonder.

The everyday is not our whole existence, rather we are in the everyday ‘zunächst und zumeist’, firstly and mostly. Firstly in the sense that the everyday forms the foundation of our existence, mostly in the sense that for most of the time of our conscious existence, our way of being is being in the everyday. These existential facts do not exclude moments of wonder, whether aesthetic, religious, or of any other kind. It might go too far to say that the everyday requires breaks in it, but it clearly is a deeply human characteristic to look for breaks in the continuum of existence. For a concert pianist the break might be a visit to the grocery store, for somebody else a concert performance. Whether such breaks amount to wonder in the sense of a reaction, depends on the person in question, and on the language game in which he is involved. I myself have had “truly amazing experiences” – this is the expression I would use – both in nature and in art. Both in nature and in art some of the experiences are of a quiet and subtle sort, some of them much more grand and deep. But, even though I would be willing to describe many of these experiences as “wonderful”, I would be hesitant to use the word ‘wonder’ in this context.

When talking about ‘appreciative wonder’, I would again admit that this kind of attitude can be in place in many contexts, and creates opportunities for both subtle and grand experiences. However, to avoid trivialization, one should be rather careful in adopting such an attitude; it cannot be an everyday

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37 Saito, Everyday Aesthetics, 50. I should add that Saito is well aware of the dangers of beautification and aestheticizing: ‘the inquiry into everyday aesthetics should also challenge an attitude of indiscriminate aestheticizing’ (203).
attitude. ‘Meditative wonderment’ is an exception requiring some effort. Moreover, as Hepburn forcefully puts it: ‘The attitude of wonder is notably and essentially other-acknowledging,’ which, in turn, implies ‘gentleness – concern not to blunder into a damaging manipulation of another.’ In the later essay, when discussing ‘sacred’ and ‘holy’, Hepburn gives very similar characterizations, and refers to Heidegger’s notion of ‘es gibt’, ‘it gives’, which he connects with ‘gift’, and continues:

Obscure and arcane though much of this Heideggerian material appears, it can certainly be taken as a poetical-rhetorical expression of a way of seeing and evaluating one’s world: wonderingly, and under the category of ‘gift’. As such, it might well be a viable, though limited, deployment of the language of ‘sacred’ and ‘holy’. Nature or being is to be respected and revered: we should assume a thankful and responsible posture, not an exploitative or rapacious one.

So, I would endorse the role of wonder as well as of curiosity in our existence. And especially with regards to wonder, I agree with Hepburn’s considerations: there is an element of other-acknowledging and respect in wonder. But perhaps more than Hepburn, I would emphasize that moments of wonder are special ones, and should be kept as such, so that they can offer a break from the everyday.

To avoid misunderstandings, I want to stress again that when I speak about the aesthetics of the everyday, I am not referring to special moments in our daily lives, to the ‘extraordinary in the ordinary’. But neither am I denying the relevance and importance of different kinds of extraordinary moments in our existence. What I want to highlight is the imbedded aesthetic character of the everyday which goes most of the time unnoticed, or noticed as something going smoothly, and as it should be. This is the comforting stability of the everyday; this is the favourite couch which invites and welcomes us without any effort. Ben Highmore puts this very nicely:

39 Ibid., 144.
40 Ibid., 146.
41 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics’ in idem, The Reach of the Aesthetic, 113–29, 117.
Beds, chairs and clothes accommodate us: most of the time they receive our 'daily inattention'. We don’t notice them, but we do interact with them. What are the circumstances of a favourite armchair when we seem to be so unconcerned by it, while it perfectly preforms its role of comfortably supporting us precisely so that we don’t have to 'give a notice'? Is noticing or not noticing significant for the intimacy of our relationship with some of our most familiar things? Does the old adage 'familiarity breeds contempt' really apply when we consider the preciousness of a family photograph that we can see each day but rarely pay any heed to?

In this sense, the aesthetic is something which goes along with daily activities. It is like the Sartrean consciousness which exists only when directed to something else. The fluency and the rhythms of the everyday are constituted when the everyday is in place. This is the aesthetics of the familiarity, of the 
\[nächst und zumeist.\]

5 Closure

Let me conclude with yet another quote which is very relevant when discussing aesthetics and the everyday. Hepburn wanted to expand the field of aesthetics by considering notions such as ‘wonder’. He saw it very clearly that aesthetic phenomena are connected with, for example, ethical and religious ones. The boundaries, if there are any, are blurry. Hepburn did not himself discuss the notion of the everyday, but in his spirit, it is possible, perhaps even fair, to take yet another step: the aesthetic is not only about the “wondrous” but also about the mundane. This is exactly what is so wonderful in the aesthetic: there is no essence, but a variety of phenomena waiting to be explored. Hepburn writes:

There have been aesthetic theories that put their whole explanatory burden upon a single key concept. […] I should be unhappy with that kind of theory […]. [I]n common with many other writers, I cannot see any single-concept theory as adequately accounting for the whole, highly diversified range of aesthetic data. In order to understand

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aesthetic activity and aesthetic value, [...] we require a plurality of key concepts...43

One of the key concepts might well be wonder and its assimilates. However, the foundation of wonder is the ordinary – only against the ordinary can something be regarded as wondrous. That is why I think it is important to give the everyday in everyday aesthetics a chance, not to change it to something else.44

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