

## Middle Way Philosophy and Objectivity

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### Abstract

This paper is a new attempt to present, for an academic audience, the necessarily inter-related elements of a new philosophical approach to objectivity. The task of philosophy is conceived as the pragmatic one of helping us avoid metaphysical beliefs that interfere with the addressing of conditions in experience, the Middle Way being a navigation between forms of metaphysics to be avoided. This position is justified through epistemological argument beginning with basic scepticism, and further developed through the use of an integrative psychological model. It can be applied to resolve the problem of objectivity in Western philosophy, which is seen as created by unnecessary dichotomies of unfalsifiable claims. The replacement of metaphysical terms with incremental ones amenable to experience allows the replacement of the concept of knowledge with one of justification, both in the scientific and moral spheres of enquiry.

### Introduction

Middle Way Philosophy attempts to offer a new approach to philosophy that is no longer dogged by an irresolvable problem in accounting for objectivity. It does this by rejecting certain basic assumptions widely found in both analytic and continental

traditions of philosophy (ones that are also highly influential beyond these traditions).

These assumptions include:

- The negative implications of scepticism
- The need to accept or reject metaphysical positions
- The identification of objectivity with absolute positions
- The acceptability of pure analysis that does not apply to concrete contexts
- An account of meaning confined to representation or expression
- The fact-value distinction
- The identification of ego with self

The removal of these assumptions clears the way for an account of objectivity that is compatible with practical progress in a whole range of different areas, whether scientific, moral, political or aesthetic, and apparently universal in its applicability.

Middle Way Philosophy is a product of philosophical hybridisation, first developed in a 296,000 word Ph.D. thesis called [A Theory of Moral Objectivity](#), completed at Lancaster University in 2001 (Ellis, 2001). Having studied Buddhism and Buddhist Philosophy first, I approached Western philosophy from a critical perspective orientated by what I took to be the key insight in Buddhist thought – the Middle Way. Finding myself far more comfortable working in the methods and context of Western philosophy, even though my work rejected many of the assumptions of its traditions, I rapidly shed any appeal (or even much reference) to Buddhist traditions or even Buddhist Studies scholarship, which largely adopts scholarly rather than philosophical methods. Eventually I even shed my personal commitment to Buddhist tradition, as Middle Way Philosophy took on an independent life.

The difficulty in presenting Middle Way Philosophy has always been its inter-related rejection of a range of traditional assumptions in Western Philosophy. This meant that short papers, which typically deal with only a small area of discussion, did not offer enough scope to present the inter-related case convincingly, especially given that the burden of proof is always shifted onto those with unconventional views. Reading the lengthy and detailed argument in my Ph.D. thesis, on the other hand, was not likely to be undertaken by anyone not already convinced of the merits of the approach. There are also few contexts in which a philosophical argument outside any of the major traditions can be introduced at all.

However, I have now published a range of materials, including the Ph.D. thesis, developed the Middle Way Society and its website [www.middlewaysociety.org](http://www.middlewaysociety.org), and published several books (Ellis 2001, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) available at <http://www.lulu.net/spotlight/robertupeksa>. This has put me in a position to make another attempt at academic presentation here, with the back-up of these publically available resources to meet all calls for more detailed justification or analysis. Obviously then, this paper has to be compressed in order to include all the main inter-related arguments that support Middle Way Philosophy. It could even be read as a kind of extended abstract of a case made in much more detail elsewhere. It is metaphilosophical in putting forward the possibility of doing philosophy in this different way, rather than engaging in the details of existing discourse in established forms of philosophy.

### **Sceptical arguments**

Middle Way Philosophy takes philosophical scepticism seriously, rather than either attempting to 'solve' the problems scepticism raises, or to ignore them as

irresolvable, as has much other Western philosophy. Basic sceptical argument establishes easily that we do not have grounds for any knowledge assertions (Ellis 2011c, 16-20). I do not *know* in any more than a conventional sense that Paris is the capital of France, or even that I have a hand when I am holding it in front of my eyes, for a variety of reasons. My mere observations through the senses do not give me access to final facts about how things actually are beyond appearances. It is impossible to disprove the arguments that I may be under a global or a partial illusion, given that I have made mistakes before or may be dreaming. A standard of 'reality' may be needed by comparison to talk meaningfully of 'unreality', but sceptical argument (in its Pyrrhonian form) does not make any claims about unreality. It merely casts doubt on claims about reality by showing that they have no absolute basis (Sextus Empiricus/Mates 1996).

Sceptical arguments are not defeated by the mere appeal to a conventional standpoint found in objectors such as Moore (1959) and Wittgenstein (1969). It may be that in a socially conventional sense of 'certainty', I can be certain about the existence of my hand. However, philosophical scepticism is not using a socially conventional sense of 'certainty', and the denial of meaning to a philosophical sense which is nevertheless used in our experience is high-handed in the extreme (Ellis 2001, 256). When philosophical certainty is demanded, no further argument can supply it except through the dogmatic assertion of metaphysical absolutes, so philosophical scepticism leaves us with meaningful criticisms of knowledge-claims that cannot be answered. My argument as it will unfold is that this situation is actually of great pragmatic usefulness to us.

It is equally important to stress that scepticism gives no grounds for the denial of any knowledge claim, but only for strong agnosticism (Ellis 2001, 184 ff). We do

not know that we don't know, but are nevertheless not entitled to assert that we know, because we have no adequate justification for doing so. This implies strong agnosticism rather than weak agnosticism, because we are not awaiting further evidence (Ellis 2011c, 41). We can merely judge through analysis that no factual proposition can be justified (whether positive or negative), because this forms part of the conditions of our experience.

### **The implications of scepticism**

Taking scepticism seriously, and avoiding the analytic retreat into merely conventional senses of 'certainty', requires that we abandon claims about 'truth' and 'knowledge', at least in the context of philosophical discussion. Analysis of the conventional uses of these terms may provide semantic information, but it tells us nothing about the justification of our beliefs. If knowledge is taken to be justified true belief<sup>i</sup>, both the irrelevance of the truth criterion, which is beyond experience (see below and Ellis 2011c, 25 ff), and the lack of absolute justification mean that we have no justification for knowledge claims.

However, the acceptance of scepticism is not threatening to all justification of our beliefs, and a pragmatic response to scepticism does not have to consist in ignoring it. On the contrary, scepticism is a helpful tool to pragmatists in undermining all absolute beliefs. The implication of scepticism is simply that all justified beliefs must be provisional (Ellis 2011c, 32-36 & 74). Provisional beliefs do not have to be ultimately justified with reference to absolute beliefs. On the contrary, absolute beliefs help to undermine justification.

Scepticism requires us to reconceive justification in non-absolute terms. That means that non-absolute features such as incrementality and provisionality are a necessary element of justification rather than a detractor from it. Claims about absolute features, on the other hand, disable justification because they render the claim no longer subject to any degrees of evidence in experience (Ellis 2001 37-40). Of course, once we have identified that a claim is subject to degrees of evidence in experience, we also need to assess the strength of that evidence. However, even then our judgement is still affected by the need to avoid dogmatic assumptions in the interpretation of our experience. If I am seeking only to confirm a certain hypothesis when examining experience, then I am likely to only find what I seek. In order to avoid this I need to constantly bear in mind the possibility of my hypothesis being wrong and there being alternative hypotheses (Ellis 2011c, 32-36).

The implications of scepticism, then, prevent a justification of our beliefs based either on metaphysics or solely on analysis. Instead they point to a *psychological* criterion of objectivity. If my judgements are more provisional and less dogmatic (and therefore more justified) this is the product of a psychological state that is more open to the investigation of experience without prejudice. The conditions for such provisionality are complex, and probably depend on heredity, environment, and previous habits of thought as well as reflections specific to the occasion. It is important to consider this point without assuming either freewill and determinism, for reasons that will be explained below, and to link it with an account of psychological integration that will also be offered later.

## The Middle Way and avoidance of metaphysics

'Metaphysics' I take here to be any belief that is not amenable to investigation through experience (Ellis 2011c, 42-5). This will mean that it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. Discussions of verifiability and falsifiability in the philosophy of science have consistently raised the problem of what criteria can be used to justify any judgement that a theory is falsifiable or unfalsifiable. Without introducing metaphysical assumptions, there is no criterion available by which one can certify a criterion for falsifiability. How long should the investigation proceed? What about the inter-relationships between core and dependent theories? What sort of evidence should count as falsification given that there may be other way of accounting for that evidence? Every judgement about falsifiability will have to find its own criteria – and these may be individual ones rather than necessarily ones shared by the scientific community (Ellis 2001,383-9; 2011c, 54-7). Judgements about falsifiability are thus interdependent with psychological criteria for objectivity.

The boundaries as to what is or is not metaphysics will thus be fuzzy, contextual and subject to variable judgements, but this does not prevent some claims being quite readily identifiable as metaphysical. For example, the belief either that God exists or that he does not exist, the belief that freewill exists or that it does not due to determinism, or the belief in, or denial of actual objects rather than consistent objects of experience. Metaphysical beliefs tend to come in opposed dualistic pairs in which a given claim is affirmed or denied (Ellis 2011c, 45-51), and they often gain their metaphysical quality from the fact that a given piece of evidence that is claimed to support an affirmation is equally consistent with a denial (and vice-versa). For example, the claim that God's existence is proven by religious

experience neglects the point that such experiences can equally be accounted for in ways that do not assume God's existence.

The recognition of what is unhelpful about metaphysics is not dependent on any absolute philosophical rule enabling its identification. It is the psychological function of metaphysics that interferes with the psychological state of provisionality and hence with the justification of our judgements (Ellis 2001, 333-5). However we identify it philosophically, a metaphysical belief is psychologically unassailable. Whatever the evidence, we can remain committed to it, and it therefore continues to support our prejudices. Metaphysics is the seed of dogma, and it is dogma that prevents us from addressing conditions. It can be understood as a maladaptation, because (although it may have a group-binding function) metaphysics consistently interferes with our ability to learn from our environment (Ellis 2015, 67ff.) . It also intervenes in reflection and creates psychological conflict (Ellis 2015, 115ff), as will be explained further below.

The Middle Way<sup>ii</sup>, then, is the avoidance of metaphysics, so called because the avoidance of metaphysics involves a balancing act between positive and negative metaphysical claims. The avoidance of metaphysics simultaneously creates the positive conditions for objectivity of understanding – whether this is understanding of facts or values (a point to be discussed later). The Middle Way is a principle of judgement that supports a progressively integrated psychological state in which we are increasingly equipped to make more justified judgements (Ellis 2011c, 63-6). If we are to see objectivity as non-absolute, the Middle Way becomes the condition of objectivity. If we are to avoid the metaphysical assumptions of freewill and determinism, it is a matter of judgement as well as a matter of prior conditions (Ellis 2011c, 88-95).



## Meaning from physical contexts

To avoid metaphysics in this way, and indeed to accept the arguments for doing so, it is also necessary to avoid strong conclusions based on pure analysis of a kind that are common in analytic philosophy, but do not actually relate to experience. One example of this would be the utilitarian argument that, even if we are not ourselves aware of utilitarian motives, our actions can still be justified under utilitarianism (Ellis 2001, 176-180; Williams 1973, 134). Another would be reliabilism in epistemology, which claims that we can be justified in our judgements when they are made using a reliable method, even when we are not aware that the method is reliable (Goldman 1967). These kinds of arguments assume a God's-eye view or a totally abstracted perspective in which some kind of claim can be 'true' or 'justified', but in a way that is of no relevance to experience and of no practical help to us in making judgements. This move towards abstraction may appear to make our claims unassailable, but in a way which is only based on a dogmatic identification with an absolute perspective that we cannot inhabit and can only describe abstractly. It contributes towards the irrelevance of philosophy in contemporary life, when philosophy actually offers many resources of potential practical value.

This abstracted turn could easily be used to undermine my argument for Middle Way Philosophy so far. For example, mathematical propositions can be put forward as having a strong claim to absolute truth based only on a priori analysis, and thus being non-dogmatic metaphysics. However, mathematics is not encountered in concrete experience in its abstracted a priori form. I encounter numbers either instantiated in objects, or in the form of mathematical calculations where the content I am focusing on is abstracted, but the calculation still has a concrete context. Without that concrete context, mathematics would be irrelevant to us. A

mathematical proof is worked out by a person with a body, in a particular place, for a particular purpose, and motivated by particular drives. The 'truth' of mathematical, logical, or any other purely analytic propositions is one dependent on context and use just as much as any theory of biology or sociology. The fact that the justification offered is a priori rather than empirical tells us about the main relevant difference: that mathematics describes a set of consistent assumptions used in interpreting our experience, rather than a representation of truth beyond that experience. Analysis does not have to be given a metaphysical status (Ellis 2011c, 27-32).

To further support this standpoint and its rejection of an ingrained analytic tradition, however, it is necessary to examine the theory of meaning. The correspondence theory of meaning still widely used in analytic philosophy assumes that the only meaningful units are propositions, and that these gain their meaning from their truth-conditions. Even the revisions to the analytic tradition made by Wittgenstein do not depart very far from this understanding of meaning. Instead of correspondence with truth-conditions, Wittgenstein substitutes correspondence with the conventions of a language game (Ellis 2001, 254-8). Like other analytic philosophers, Wittgenstein asserts that any propositions not fitting this restrictive explanation of meaning are meaningless<sup>iii</sup>. This is another example of the abstracted turn at work, for this analysis bears very little relationship to meaning as we experience it.

An alternative pragmatic theory of meaning has been developed by George Lakoff which gives credit to the starting point of meaning in physical experience. The idea of a container, for example, is understood according to Lakoff through our experience of our own bodies, and the internal-external schema by which we symbolise experience of things being inside or outside our bodies. Physical

experience provides the basis of meaning on this account, whilst metaphorical extension enables increasingly complex or abstract concepts to be related to this physical experience (Lakoff 1987).

Lakoff's account of meaning has the huge advantage of being adequate to the concrete context. It does not limit meaningfulness to propositions, yet it can also account for the meaningfulness of the most abstract propositions. Most importantly, Lakoff's approach gives us the opportunity to unite cognitive or representational forms of meaning with emotional meaningfulness, seeing both forms of meaning interacting in experience (Ellis 2001, 42-6 & 323-330). Even a mathematician completing a proof has an emotional experience that the proof represents for him, whilst something as non-propositional as a baby's or animal's cry not only conveys emotion, but can also be interpreted as conveying a propositional content.

The abstracted turn in philosophy has been built on a restrictive account of meaning which then rules the ensuing debate and polices its boundaries. However, if we want to make philosophy more directly relevant and helpful to human concerns, we need to begin with a wider recognition of human experience, and produce an epistemology and ethics that are consistent with this wider account of meaning.

### **The fact-value distinction**

Closely associated with the abstracted turn of modern philosophy is the fact-value distinction. This distinction has been a disaster for ethics, condemning us to a false dichotomy between absolutism and relativism. To be able to give an alternative account of objectivity in ethics it is necessary to demolish the fact-value distinction.

The fact-value distinction, as formulated initially by Hume (Hume 1978, 469-70), claims that no moral proposition can ever be logically derived from a factual proposition. This distinction has meant that moral claims cannot be supported by facts, but merely express social conventions or individual desires. Hume's successors thus have a difficult time avoiding moral relativism (Ellis 2001, 184-6). Metaphysical advocates of absolute ethics, on the other hand, also implicitly accept the terms of the fact-value distinction because they attempt to support values by appeal to facts. Whilst this defies Hume in the sense of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is', it also accepts absolute distinction between the two types of proposition assumed by Hume.

The basic mistake made in Hume's analysis is not a logical one in the treatment of propositions, but a set of restrictive assumptions made about the meaning of both factual and moral propositions in human experience. As we actually encounter factual claims, rather than as we abstract them, they are not purely factual, but rather loaded with value assumptions. Similarly, as we actually experience value claims, they also imply factual assumptions. This point is identical to the one made above about the overlaps between cognitive and emotional types of meaning in context. 'The dog is hungry' is usually perceived as a factual claim, and 'I ought to feed the dog' as a value claim, but in practical context, each may imply the other (Ellis 2001, 222-4).

Hume's logical commentary based on the abstracted meanings of these two types of propositions is correct in its own terms. The problems arise when the limitations of the abstracted context in which it remains justified is forgotten, and reasoning is made from this abstracted fact-value distinction to an absolutist or relativist claim about the justification of moral beliefs. Here it contributes directly to

the undermining of confidence in moral beliefs as we encounter and justify them in experience.

The justification of factual and value claims is only incrementally, not absolutely, different, as the sceptical arguments above suggest. Factual claims depend on experience and have no absolute justification, because we do not have a God's-eye-view of the full facts, and exactly the same points apply to moral claims. There is thus no basic disjunction between the justifiability of factual and moral beliefs as we encounter them in experience. Each can be provisionally justified to some extent through reference to a fallible experience. If there is wider agreement on some factual claims than there is about many moral claims, then this is a distinction between factual and moral claims that is a matter of degree and contingent on the precise factual or moral claims being made, not an absolute difference in kind.

Objectivity in ethics or aesthetics, then, is not fundamentally different from objectivity in science, and vice-versa. In both cases, I want to argue, objectivity depends on provisionality, which is a psychological state cultivated by the practice of the Middle Way and avoiding metaphysical assumptions that will interfere with our ability to address conditions through experience (Ellis 2011c, 70-74). To clarify this further I now need to enter more into the psychological aspects of Middle Way philosophy.

### **Ego and integration**

Amongst the metaphysical beliefs that need to be avoided by Middle Way philosophy is the acceptance or rejection of belief in the self. Both Hume and the

Buddha have pointed out in this connection that we do not actually find a self when we examine our experience, but only a variety of experiences that we assume to be ours. The Cartesian self that provides the necessary conditions for conscious thought may be one that we experience, but we do not thereby prove that this same self is continuous through time, or that its consistent existence is not our own construction. Even if 'self' refers rather to a seat of experience or a consistent centre of reasoning, we do not thereby show that this seat or centre is identical to the self we believe in and identify with. The self of apperception is not necessarily identical to the self of identity. Again, however, this involves merely an agnostic application of sceptical doubt, not a negative claim of the contrary non-existence of the self (Ellis 2001, 23-6).

If we do not assume that the self is unified, what do we find in experience? A variety of desires, inconsistent over time, and an identification with what we believe to be ourselves at a given moment. One of the biggest mistakes in the tradition of Western philosophy, I want to argue, is the assumption that the wishful thinking of this temporary act of identification is an identity (Ellis 2000). This assumption involves the metaphysical abstraction of an experience that can be better described psychologically: the treatment of the ego as the self. Ego is a constant process of identification, not an established identity. This identification is not even necessarily tied to the individual body with which it is most closely associated: people identify with friends and relatives, groups and nations, material possessions and places, as well as "their own" minds and bodies, whilst at times some people also cease to identify with their minds and bodies, but can become alienated from their own desires or even disown a limb.

Ego is a mere freezing of a particular set of identifications at a given moment, not only without any necessary regard for our interests as individuals, but even to the consistency of those identifications over time. A slimmer, for example, may identify with a desire to be 20 pounds lighter one moment, and an intense desire to eat cake the next. At each point the desire appears to rule, and to take over the motives and judgement of the individual concerned. Yet reflection also gives us access to the bigger picture, and the slimmer may also become aware of this inconsistency. So we are not merely egos – again, the ego should not be identified with the self, because it is not essentially or eternally us. We experience the ego constantly, but the self (or its denial) is a metaphysical dogma.

If we take a broader view of the desires associated with a particular individual over a period of time, we can label it (taking a term from psychoanalysis) the psyche. The psyche is a necessarily vague construction with necessarily vague boundaries, for it consists in desires we have had in the past or might potentially have, in addition to the ones we actually have at present. Since we haven't experienced some of these desires yet, our understanding of exactly what they consist in is often unavoidably speculative, but only a little reflection is required to establish that at other times we have desires beyond our current ones. Although the idea of the psyche is adopted from psychoanalysis, it is not necessary to adopt other assumptions from specific theories of psychoanalysis in order to make use of the concept. For example, we do not necessarily need to think of the psyche as unconscious (though personally I think that the unconscious is a useful theory which generally accords with experience). All we need to do to acknowledge the psyche is to note the discrepancies in our identifications over time, and thus distinguish the current experience of identification from the potentiality.

The potentiality of the psyche is bigger than that of the ego, for it includes the ego as just one identification amongst many. The expansion of identifications, however, comes as a result of expanding awareness, as we realise that our identifications at a given moment are not the final or only identifications possible. This might mean the developing of greater consistency in our desires and goals. However, given that our identifications are not only about ourselves as individuals, it could also mean the development of altruism where this had previously been lacking, or the overcoming of a previous alienation from one's own interests as an individual (Ellis 2001 317-323). This unification of identifications at different times that had previously been separated I call *integration*, again adopting a term from psychoanalysis.

My discussion of the fact-value distinction here lays the groundwork for rejecting the assumption often made in psychological theory that mere facts about the psyche can be described, without implications for value. Any account I may give of the ego and the psyche is not just an attempt at factual description following a particular theoretical model, but also implicitly a prescription putting forward the value of adopting such a model.

Although the theory of integration to some extent involves the provisional adoption of theoretical apparatus, making it a psychological theory, it also seems to me that the most important work involved in establishing it is philosophical. The process of taking scepticism seriously means that we need to be ready to reject metaphysical beliefs about the self, and to follow through the implications of doing so. Yet at the same time we need some other provisional theoretical apparatus for discussing issues of identity and identification. The concepts of ego and psyche do this without adopting any other metaphysical assumptions, being merely



phenomenological labels. Though our experience does not offer undeniable facts (*pace* Descartes), it does offer values that are undeniable in the sense of always contributing to our concrete experience, even though the object of these values is inconsistent. These values become justified to the extent that we succeed in integrating them and unifying their objects. This claim about value normativity will be discussed further below.

The moral value of this model is that it can make clear the nature of objectivity (of both factual and moral types) and thus release us from the unnecessary dichotomy of absolutism and relativism. Integration, I want to argue, is objectivity described psychologically. Integration enables us to move beyond the identifications of a particular moment and address the further conditions recognised by other desires at other moments. In order to make this clearer I will need further discussion of the relationship between desires and beliefs.

### **Desires and beliefs**

The inter-relationship of desires and beliefs is already implied by the case I have made against the abstracted turn in Western philosophy and the interdependence of the meanings of cognitive representations and emotive expressions. Whenever I desire something, in the concrete context I also by implication must believe in the objects of desire and in the surrounding context which justifies my desire. It would not make much sense to desire cake if I didn't believe in the actual or potential existence of cake. Nor would any scientist put forward a theory about particle physics if she didn't believe that the recognition and understanding of

that theory was desirable – whether out of a disinterested love of truth or a rather more interested advancement of career, or more likely a mixture of the two.

The integration of desires thus also implies the integration of beliefs. Let's take the previous example of the slimmer who wanted to be 20 pounds lighter, and then a little later wanted to eat cake. These two desires are likely to be understood as inconsistent ones (although the idea that they are inconsistent does depend on various background assumptions, say on what the slimmer eats the rest of the time, how fast he wants to lose weight, or how much cake he might eat). Given these background assumptions, they are inconsistent because the teleological beliefs that actuate each are inconsistent: the belief that satisfaction will be gained by losing weight, as opposed to the belief that satisfaction will be gained by eating cake. To reconcile these two desires within this framework of assumptions where they are inconsistent requires not just an emotional change but also a change of belief. The change in belief might just involve the more consistent adoption of the belief that addresses more conditions – that is, probably, in this case, the belief in the need to lose weight, and that this needs to take priority – or it might alternatively involve changing the background beliefs, so that eating cake now doesn't matter in the long run, and can be made consistent with a longer term weight loss.

Perhaps, in the short term, we could make limited progress in integrating our desires without integrating our beliefs, or vice-versa, but this flexibility seems limited given the amount of interdependency that appears to exist between desires and beliefs. So, whilst the correlation may not be absolute, nor is it entirely contingent (Ellis 2001, 317-337). I cannot discover any examples of changes of desire which do not simultaneously require some changes of belief and vice-versa, which seems to

establish the point on a provisional inductive basis, but the amount of change of each may be quite varied in different cases.

An integrated belief is not only a more consistent belief, but also one that takes into account the possibility of change given further evidence at different times. In this respect the concept of integration of belief needs to be seen as a psychological equivalent of the concept of justification, and consisting not just of an appeal to the consistency of a particular set of assumptions taken in isolation, but in a more general adequacy to conditions over time.

This should put us in a position now to give a psychological account of the reasons for the interference in justification by metaphysical belief. Metaphysical belief is adopted by the ego, and the ego may construct a whole set of other beliefs that are consistent with that metaphysical belief, whether this is a whole theology or just a set of rationalisations. However, what distinguishes the metaphysical belief in terms of its psychological function is that it does not take into account the possibility of its own error. In the event of further experiences that seem to be inconsistent with it, those who hold such a belief will either develop an increasingly desperate series of ad hoc rationalisations to defend their position, or suddenly give way (at which point there is a great danger of identification with its opposite instead) (Ellis 2001, 31-4).

Metaphysical beliefs are not capable of integration with other beliefs that oppose them, because there is no possible third ground of appeal between a metaphysical belief and its contrary. Information from experience cannot be accepted as impacting upon it due to the very nature of the belief. Instead of taking contrary views into account, then, they must either dominate them or give way. In contrast, a non-metaphysical belief (such as the belief that there are elephants in

London Zoo), is capable of being re-asserted, modified, or abandoned in the light of evidence that there are or are not elephants in London Zoo (or even that there are sometimes parts of elephants in London Zoo), and can be admitted to be wrong without a threat to a whole set of other beliefs that have been built on it. My ego may identify with the claim to some extent, but a wider set of reflections has leverage on this egoistic identification that may prevent it from becoming entrenched. However, any ordinary claim can also be turned into a metaphysical claim when it really is entrenched: I just have to turn the elephants into supernatural elephants, or shift the sense of my initial claim in some other way, in order to avoid any challenge to my belief – hence the metaphysical impulse towards ad hoc shifting of ground.

Metaphysical beliefs held by different people, or the same person at different times, clearly lead to conflict of a kind that is intractable. Because it resists integration, metaphysics is not amenable to compromise, but instead needs to be decisively rejected through a process of hard agnosticism, without turning to belief in the opposite. Conflict and integration can thus be found not only at an individual level, but also by extension at a social and political level, where greater or lesser degrees of integration can occur at different points given the relationship of relative harmony or conflict between beliefs and desires held by different individuals or groups within that social or political context (Ellis 2001, 389-399).

### **Integration and moral concepts**

It is the resistance of metaphysics to integration that gives it its moral character. Metaphysics leads to unjustifiable conflict because different metaphysical views inflexibly collide. The results of this can be seen for example in holy wars, in the

rancorous debates between theists and atheists, and in the intractable conflicts between differing political ideologies where these go beyond examination through experience. Many conflicts widely regarded as evil can, when analysed, be attributed to metaphysical claims (Ellis 2001, 49-312).

The claim that metaphysics is evil and integration is good involves both a prescriptive and a descriptive element. Descriptively, we can analyse a wide range of desires and correlative beliefs that have been widely regarded as good or evil and note the ways in which the evil reflects metaphysics and the good reflects integration. Here we can, for example, simply juxtapose atheistic criticisms of the morality of theism through its association with holy wars, inquisitions and terrorism, with theistic criticisms of atheism through its association with Communist totalitarianism and with consumerist excess, in order to pronounce a plague on both their houses. More positively, we can associate the pursuit of integration and the avoidance of metaphysics with activities that are already widely recognised as good, from consensual democratic politics to conflict resolution at a social level, and counselling to critical thinking at an individual level.

However, this by itself is only a process of conventional analysis and does not establish any more than that those surveyed regard these features as good or evil – not their justification for doing so. A prescriptive element, then, is also needed. This prescription in Middle Way Philosophy comes not from dogma but from pragmatic potential. If we were to adopt this model of good and evil it would not only enable us to resolve the entrenched problems which stand in the way of a widespread consistent understanding of ethics, but also enable us to practice it. This requires little less than a philosophical revolution in which good is seen, not as an unattainable metaphysical absolute or a mere individual preference, but as a way of

talking about a point of balance that best enables us to address conditions. It dares to offer a solution to the long-standing problem of explaining the philosophical status of what ethics tells us.

The Middle Way and the avoidance of metaphysics would be a pragmatically useful sense of 'good' to adopt because it appears to be universal – obviating clashes between religious and cultural views of the good – and also because it provides a basis for justified consensus that is an advance on utilitarianism (which has been fulfilling that function somewhat crudely so far). Whilst utilitarianism can involve arrogant calculations of the general good from an assumed absolute standpoint (due to its reliance on the abstracted turn in philosophy mentioned above), the Middle Way attempts to address conditions from the starting point of our whole experience (Ellis 2001, 168-182).

The normativity of this 'good' cannot depend purely on conventional analysis whilst having prescriptive force, but nor can it make claims that reach completely beyond such analysis without being alienated from our experience and existing concepts. Instead, an integrative concept of normativity will take conventional analyses of normative goods as partial views of it associated with limited identifications and limited associated beliefs. 'Good' is not an absolute, but a direction that we become more justified in pursuing as we integrate all possible kinds of moral normativity into an increasingly universal vision. Though this may sound Hegelian, the dialectic involved in this process is epistemological and psychological, not based on dogmas about the destination of history.

The three main existing accounts of moral normativity (utilitarian, Kantian and virtue) can be seen as implying the value of the Middle Way when integrated. Utilitarianism (along with egoism, or any other type of consequentialism) assumes

the value of desires being fulfilled. In some versions these desires are restricted to preferences or those creating pleasure, but in any of its versions consequentialism raises the question of why the desires we currently identify with (either in our current situation or through the abstract mediation of a theory) should take precedence over those we may experience at other times. If we attempt to integrate desires at different times this obliges us to acknowledge the value of virtues (which support the long-term development of sustainable desires that address conditions better) and the judgements of rational consistency used by Kantian ethics (Ellis 2001, 402-4). On the other hand, Kantian assumptions about the normativity of rationally consistent judgements will address conditions still further if they take into account the temporal limitations of coherentist judgement. If we want a genuinely universalising moral normativity it will be vital to take into account experience of moral intuitions that we become aware of at different times, some of which may address conditions differently because they are concerned with consequences or virtues (Ellis 2001,401). Finally, the limitations of virtue normativity are not that it fails to consider desires and judgements at other times, but that a given account of virtue is both unavoidably conventional and also fails to provide a model for moral judgement at one time. Again, to address conditions more universally it needs to be able to offer grounds for moral judgement outside a particular virtue tradition (Ellis 2001, 404-5).

This raises the question of how moral judgements can actually be justified using Middle Way Philosophy.

## Moral judgements

The key difficulty in theories of moral judgement in the Western philosophical tradition has been that of combining a universality of justification with a specificity of advice for a moral situation. Any prescription specific enough to be useful is not universal enough to be justified, and vice-versa. However, it is not necessary to conclude from this difficulty that there is no action with a universal justification in a given moral situation: the alternative is to affirm that there is a moral good for every specific person making a moral judgement in a specific concrete situation, but that our inability to prescribe this in advance is a positive indication of universality rather than a proof that it does not exist. If we thought we had a metaphysical formula that applied equally to the ethics of all situations, sceptical argument could rapidly show this to be mistaken. However, if the good is non-metaphysical and integrative, our inability to create convincing universal prescriptions can be seen as a sign of a healthy recognition of our own ignorance.

Instead, the justification of moral judgements is a matter of degree, and depends on the extent to which we are addressing conditions by combining theoretical coherence with a recognition of ignorance. The existing accepted ways of making moral judgements, then, can be seen as offering a toolbox of moral approaches to be employed when they help us to gain objectivity. Both utilitarianism and Kantianism provide methods of thinking beyond current desires, concerns and assumptions and attempting a universal view, but each also contains limiting assumptions that can be stretched through consideration of the other (Ellis 2011b, 17-36).

For example, if we consider a moral issue such as abortion in which entrenched consequentialist and deontological views based on different metaphysical



assumptions clash incompatibly, one aspect of the solution is for consequentialists to also employ deontology as a tool for objectivity, and vice-versa. For a fuller solution to the conflict, however, auxiliary metaphysical beliefs will also have to be considered sceptically and turned into incremental observations. The foetus cannot be assumed to be either a person or not a person, but experience suggests a range of gradually developing qualities that we associate with personhood. Whilst our consideration of principles, consequences and virtues involved in a judgement about a specific possible abortion will not be confined to the foetus, a removal of metaphysical assumptions about personhood (to be replaced with systematic, hard agnosticism) provides an important condition for recognising the limitations both of Kantian principles and utilitarian calculation applied to abortion. In the concrete circumstances of a particular case, a woman still may have to make a decision about an abortion that cannot be prescribed in advance, yet if she makes this decision untrammelled by dogmas that restrict the range of conditions she addresses, her decision is more likely to be of a higher level of objectivity (Ellis 2011b, 215-221) .

### Scientific objectivity

However, Middle Way Philosophy offers an account of objectivity that is not limited to moral objectivity. Its challenge to the fact-value distinction instead implies that integration of desires and beliefs at different times provides the basis for both factual (i.e. scientific) and moral objectivity (as well as aesthetic objectivity, which I do not have space to discuss here – see instead Ellis 2011b, 285-291).

To assert the commonality of all objectivity runs against the grain not only of the fact-value distinction, but the way in which science is usually conceived as gaining

objectivity by excluding “subjective” value-judgements. However, judgements about the relationship between theory and observation in concrete contexts proceed on exactly the same basis of incremental objectivity as moral judgements – that is, the more we succeed in taking more conditions into account by avoiding dogmatic assumptions, the more objective the judgement. The key points at which scientific judgement becomes important have been particularly examined by Kuhn (1996) and Lakatos (1974), and include for example when basic paradigms become decreasingly fruitful in offering new ways of being tested, where observations may be interpreted as contradicting a theory, and where observations may or may not be accepted as informative (Ellis 2001, 31-4).

At these crucial points the idea of science as a description of the universe as it really is becomes entirely useless. In practice scientists will never know whether they have identified ‘reality’, but nevertheless their judgements can be more or less effective in addressing conditions. Both Kuhn and Lakatos try to avoid a psychological explanation of scientific objectivity, but both end up by describing effective scientific judgement as striking a balance between over-attachment to theories and the too-easy abandonment of a line of enquiry that might still be fruitful. Their resistance to psychological forms explanation seems to be a cultural feature of the Western philosophy of science, but it seems to me the obvious solution. A scientist with more integrated desires and beliefs is more likely to make objective judgements in these circumstances (Ellis 2001, 34-7; Ellis 2011c, 152-9).

However, it is also important not to underestimate the importance of social integration in the tradition of scientific training. As mentioned above, integration is not a concept that is confined to individual psyches in its application. The extent to which scientists working together as a team or even as a wider community maintain

provisionality and avoid interfering metaphysical assumptions is at least as important as the state of an individual scientist (Ellis 2001, 394-7). Principles of scientific investigation may help to maintain that social objectivity, but only as long as they are not taken to be absolute principles and can be challenged to allow alternative approaches that address conditions in differing circumstances.

## Conclusion

This has been of necessity an extremely compressed survey, but I hope that it provides enough of a sketch of Middle Way Philosophy to show the inter-dependence of its different challenges to assumptions traditionally made in Western philosophy, and the inter-dependence of the alternatives. Putting scepticism, integrative psychology, epistemological dialectic, Lakoffian meaning and the rejection of the fact-value distinction together in this way seems to offer the possibility of a coherent and plausible alternative approach to long-standing philosophical and practical problems, of a kind that does not follow merely from the adoption of only one or two of these conjoined approaches.

Many supporting arguments and clarificatory analyses must be sought elsewhere in the self-references. However, a vast field of potential has been sketched out here, much of which has not yet been developed in any detail, and for which I need the assistance of others. Fuller justification can developed along with this detail of application, provided that the inter-relationships of the overall approach have first been appreciated.

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<sup>i</sup> I assume this definition rather than discussing it because it would be of no relevance to get sidetracked into definitional issues with knowledge. Gettier counter-examples etc. Are only concerned with analysis of the conventional sense of knowledge and are of no relevance to issues of justification.

<sup>ii</sup> The term 'Middle Way' is obviously adopted from Buddhism. Whilst I am not interested in scholarly argument about the legitimacy of using the term (in philosophy one has the liberty of stipulation), the following are references that can be used to relate my arguments here to elements of the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon:

- The introduction of the Middle Way as a conception of the spiritual path alongside the Noble Eightfold Path, in the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (Samyutta Nikaya 56.2)
- The 'Silence of the Buddha' (avyakata), where the Buddha refuses to give answers to metaphysical questions, e.g. *Culamalunkya Sutta* (Majjhima Nikaya 63)
- The parable of the raft from the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, supporting the provisionality of justifiable beliefs (Majjhima Nikaya 22.13-14)
- The affirmation of the incrementality of the dharma in the Simile of the Ocean (Udana 5.5)
- The Middle Way epistemology found in the *Kalama Sutta* (Anguttara Nikaya 65)

<sup>iii</sup> As in Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument (Wittgenstein 1967 section 258), criticised in Ellis 2001, 258-262