Disenchantment and the Great Chain of Being

"It is a commonplace," John McDowell writes, "that modern science has given us a disenchanted conception of the natural world;" a conception which supplants the long-dominant "medieval conception of nature as filled with meaning, like a book containing messages and lessons for us."[1] In what follows I argue that the ostensibly-rejected medieval conception of nature as a *Great Chain of Being* is alive and well in contemporary moral philosophy. The medieval conception persists not only in the anthropocentric, mind-referring hierarchical structure that is common to virtually all ethical theories, but also in the "commonplace" of disenchantment itself. For disenchantment boils down to the thought that either nature is suffused with value, order, and meaning *as those things were previously conceived* – that is, in a mind-referring hierarchy – or else value, order and meaning are not present in nature at all. And this follows only if we arbitrarily restrict our conception of value to the very conception we are trying to do without. The disenchanted conception of nature thus depends for its plausibility and its seeming-inevitability on lingering elements of the very conception of nature that it ostensibly replaced.

I begin here with a brief account of how modern moral philosophy came to see disenchantment as its defining challenge. Then I document the continued presence of the supplanted paradigm in the ethical theories of Christine Korsgaard and Bernard Williams, whom I treat as representatives of neo-Kantian and neo-Humean constructivism, respectively. I conclude with some forward-looking observations. If I am right about where things stand, then contemporary normative ethics is urgently in need of a value theory that does not depend, illicitly, on a pre-scientific theory of nature and humanity's place in it.

I. Paradigm Lost: A Commonplace Reconsidered

The "medieval" conception of the natural world to which McDowell refers is a theory that so-called Western thought derives from Plato and Aristotle, but which was altered and extended in different ways by medieval theologians, and which survived in some form through the modern period roughly until Darwinian evolutionary theory (and other related scientific and cultural developments) supplanted it as the dominant Western conception of nature. It is referred to as the Great Chain of Being, or the *scala naturae*. In the words of intellectual historian A.O. Lovejoy, this picture draws on elements of Aristotle's "metaphysics and cosmology," and "zoological and psychological hierarchies" to arrange "all things in a single order of excellence." The result is a "conception of the universe as a Great Chain of Being;" a world "composed of an immense … number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escaped non-existence, through 'every possible' grade up to the… highest possible kind of creature, between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite."[2]

The "Absolute Being" (whether Aristotle's divine mind or the Christian God) serves as the hierarchy's organizing principle, and also simultaneously as the standard of evaluation for the Great Chain's innumerable constituents. Thus the Great Chain of Being is not only a comprehensive theory of nature. It is also a comprehensive, elegant, explanatorily powerful and deeply reassuring theory of *value*. As Lovejoy puts it,

[1] John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 167-97, 174.
[2] A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 59.

> Everything, except God, has in it some measure of 'privation'. There are, in the first place, in its generic 'nature' or essence, 'potentialities' which, in a given state of its existence, are not realized; and there are superior levels of being, which, by virtue of the specific degree of privation characteristic of it, it is constitutionally incapable of attaining.[3]

In general, the more closely a given kind of thing approximates the manner of existence enjoyed by the Absolute Being, the more robustly it exists, and the finer and more perfect it is. And the more closely a given individual approximates the manner of existence that is possible for its kind, the more perfectly it instantiates its essence or nature. Thus for example a frog is "constitutionally" imperfect insofar as it is a merely perceiving being, and not a reasoning being. A three-legged frog is further imperfect insofar as it is not even realizing its own nature; its own proper form.

Human beings, of course, occupy the highest rung on the *scala naturae*, in virtue of the fact that we alone (among natural beings) have certain godlike mental and/or volitional traits – the capacity for contemplation of eternal truths, for instance, as in Aristotle's picture, or the knowledge of good and evil and the power to choose accordingly as in Aquinas'. Of course, like all beings in nature we too are constitutionally imperfect; our reasoning and volitional capacities fall short of those enjoyed by Absolute Being. Nonetheless, the fact that we do have those capacities constitutionally in some measure provides a satisfying explanation of moral failings as distinctively human forms of privation. Misdeeds, character flaws and even guilty thoughts are different failures to fully realize our volitional and/or mental "potentialities".

This hierarchical, beautifully complete, divinely ordered Chain was "the conception of the plan and structure of the world which, through the Middle Ages and down to the late 18th century many philosophers, most men of science, and indeed most educated men, were to accept without question."[4] It gives us a world replete with value, according to which all that exists is harmoniously integrated, and purposefully so, with no remainders and no mess.

So: what brought this mighty edifice crashing to the ground? "Modern science" is indeed the "commonplace" answer, as McDowell observes. But in itself this says very little. Are we meant to think of particular scientific fields? Particular discoveries? Particular epistemic qualities of scientific inquiry? *Physics* is certainly implicated in the idea of disenchantment. Philosophers are often attracted to the idea that psychological, biological, and chemical phenomena can be reduced to physical phenomena, or given purely material explanations and descriptions. And the language of disenchantment in ethics and value theory resonates with reductive physicalism or materialism. Korsgaard, for example, says that the "Modern Scientific World View" is seen as "inimical to ethics" because science tells us that "the world is no longer first and foremost form. It is *matter*… For us reality is something *hard*, something which resists reason and value, something which is recalcitrant to form."[5] In McDowell's words, disenchanted reality is "an ineffable lump, devoid of structure or order."[6]

But in fact it is evolutionary biology, not physics, that is most intimately connected to disenchantment. For it is in Darwin's theory, especially his theory of natural selection, that we find the substantive *alternatives* to the Great Chain's hierarchical, harmonious, and divinely ordered picture of the natural world. In particular, it was Darwin, not Newton, whose theory replaced purposive design with random accident, teaching us that species genesis and species change are

[3] *Ibid*. Phrases in single quotes are Lovejoy's translations from Aristotle's *De Anima*.
[4] *Ibid*.
[5] Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 4.
[6] McDowell, 178.

happenstance, and not due to any sort of plan on the part of any sort of mind. As Darwin says in *The Origin of Species*, "Nothing at first can appear more difficult to believe than that the more complex organs and instincts have been perfected, not by means superior to, though analogous with, human reason, but by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations…"[7] And yet the theory of natural selection is now widely accepted, in lieu of the Great Chain's explanation of the same phenomena. For the same reason it was Darwin, and not Newton, whose theory replaced order with chaos, razing the *scala* and giving us instead an "entangled web" full of broken and dangling threads whose connections to one another are anything but tidy, full of innumerable unsuccessful adaptations that fizzled out.[8] Even ubiquitous developments like the eye seem not to have single common historical origin, instead arising spontaneously at several different times in very different and distantly related organisms.[9] In short, the world as evolutionary theory presents it is not hierarchical, not rational, not harmonious; not orderly at all. And humans and our rational capacities, like everything else, are just a cosmic accident.

To say that evolutionary biology "replaced" the Great Chain is not to say that the former caused the collapse of the latter. The eventual replacement of the Great Chain with an evolutionary picture of the natural world involved more than one major causal factor and did not proceed in a particularly linear fashion, but instead was characterized by the ebb and flow, and rejection and resurgence of various elements of the Great Chain picture over at least a couple of centuries.[10] But the upshot of this process was that the widely accepted, powerful and influential view of the natural world as a complete, harmonious, divinely ordered Chain of Being fell out of favor, ceased to be 'the dominant conception that it had been for many centuries' – in Elizabeth Anscombe's phrase – and came to be replaced by a different dominant conception; one that was strongly associated with and at least partly constituted by evolutionary theory and related scientific and cultural developments.[11] And this shift in the consensus conception of the natural world forces, in turn, a shift in value theory. For to the extent that one embraces the new evolutionary model, one loses the support, previously provided by the Great Chain, for various important structures and presumptions of the traditional Western theory of value, including the superiority of humanity, the hierarchical and harmonious relationships between all beings; and the very basis on which to comparatively assess all beings' respective value and worth. This is the shift that has been understood and described by philosophers in terms of the disenchantment of nature, and which has been thought to place a particular explanatory burden on modern moral philosophers: either to help humanity come to terms with disenchantment, as Williams seeks to do, or else to put value back

[7] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: Collier and Sons, 1909), 499. Accessed online through books.google.com.
[8] Darwin, 433.
[9] "The classical view of eye evolution is one of multiple origin and astonishing convergences onto a few optical types of eye" (Dan-E Nilsson, "Eye Evolution: A question of genetic promiscuity," *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 14 (2004), 407–414, 408). The theory that the eye has multiple independent origins has been called into question by recent discoveries in genetics, but this does not affect the present point, which is that the belief has long been part of the popular conception of evolutionary theory and its picture of the natural world.
[10] For more on the historical process I am relating to disenchantment here, see Lovejoy, Chapters 3 and 4; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Ernst Meyr, "Darwin's Impact on Modern Thought," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 135 (1999): 317-25, and Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity and Disenchantment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 2014, Chapters 1-3 and 6.
[11] G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 23 (1958): 1-34, 5.

"into the world somehow" as Korsgaard proposes.[12]

It may seem that "disenchantment" is just a proper name for a particular historical event of theory change: a scientific community rejected one, hierarchical, reason-referenced and value-laden conception of nature and embraced another, quite different conception of the same phenomena. But in fact things are more complicated. In the terms of Thomas Kuhn's vivid metaphor, we can put it as follows: *in the life sciences*, evolutionary theory supplanted the Great Chain as the dominant explanatory paradigm. Scientists in the relevant fields thereby exchanged one set of rich explanatory epithets, methodologies, and norms for another. [13] But the widespread acceptance of evolution as a scientific theory left *ethics* in a starkly different predicament – one which, incidentally, Kuhn thought was quite impossible in science.[14] That is the predicament of having lost one explanatory paradigm without having another equally good or better one to replace it. Understood as a theory of value, the Great Chain was knocked forcibly out of philosophers' hands by its collapse and replacement in the scientific context. This created an explanatory vacuum in the value-theory context, and gave rise to the understandable impression that value itself had been lost. For philosophy had developed no new way of conceiving of value, and yet was forced to relinquish the old model.

Disenchantment fills this explanatory vacuum. But it does so only by piecing together remnants of the old, mind-structured and hierarchical paradigm, in something like the following way. If value exists as part of the natural order (the thought is), then value must be a *hierarchical* phenomenon that both *originates from*, and is *measured by reference to*, rationality, or mind. But value can no longer be understood as the product of a divine mind's comprehensive and harmonious plan. So value can no longer be understood hierarchically, and value can no longer be understood either as originating from or as measured against a divine mind. So there is no such thing as value in nature.

The fallacy in this whole way of thinking appears in the very first thought: *if value exists, then it must exist as we conceived of it on the Great Chain paradigm*. The minute we truly reject the Great Chain's picture of reality, we no longer have reason to believe that value must be as the Great Chain depicts it. So if it seems to us that we have lost value itself, that is only because we are still so in the grip of the lost explanatory paradigm that we cannot distinguish between 'value itself' and 'value as we conceived of it in the terms of the lost paradigm'. We cannot distinguish between 'value itself' and 'value, construed as an inherently hierarchical and rational phenomenon'. Disenchantment itself depends for its plausibility and its seeming-inevitability on the continued influence of the Great Chain, which constraints our ability to conceive of value in any terms besides its own.

II. Disenchantment and the Great Chain in Korsgaard and Williams

[12] Korsgaard, 5. Williams: "Nietzsche's saying, God is dead, can be taken to mean that we should now treat God as a dead person: we should allocate his legacies and try to write an honest biography of him" (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 33).

[13] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). One need not accept Kuhn's theory as an accurate account of scientific change to accept the present point; the important thing is the *disanalogy* between the scientific and value-theoretic contexts. The claim that theory change took place in the former context in a way that caused chaos in the latter context does not depend on any particular account of theory change in science.

[14] "Once it has achieved the status of paradigm, a scientific theory is declared invalid only if an alternative candidate is available to take its place." Kuhn, 77.

This line of thought will be more credible if we can pinpoint the continued influence of the Great Chain's theory of value on particular contemporary normative ethical theories. I will focus here on the influential views of Christine Korsgaard and Bernard Williams, both of whom, like McDowell, have done more than most philosophers to explicitly acknowledge, characterize, and scrutinize the "commonplace" commitment to disenchantment. (I here set aside neo-Aristotelian views, including McDowell's synthesis of Kant and Aristotle in *Mind and World*, not because they are immune to the continued influence of the Great Chain but rather because their relationship to these issues is interestingly different and requires separate treatment.)

> Let us begin with Korsgaard. As she puts it in *The Sources of Normativity*:
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> it is often thought, though obscurely, that the normativity of ethics poses a special problem for *modern* moral philosophers. The Modern Scientific World View is supposed to be somehow inimical to ethics [because it tells us that] the world is no longer first and foremost form. It is *matter*. … For us, reality is something *hard*, something which resists reason and value, something which is recalcitrant to form."[15]

Korsgaard responds to the challenge of disenchantment in a broadly Kantian way: that is, by grounding value, meaning, and the requirements of ethics in the rational human will. She says,

> The death of God did not put us back into Plato and Aristotle's world. … The real is no longer the good. … [and if] the real and the good are no longer one, value must find its way into the world somehow. Form must be imposed on the world of matter. This is the work of art, the work of obligation…[16]

where 'obligation' has to do with the rational will binding itself to act in ways that are consistent with rationality. "The ethics of autonomy," she concludes, "is the only one consistent with the metaphysics of the modern world."[17]

To bring out the Great Chain's lingering influence on Korsgaard's normative ethics, we can begin by noting that her view is avowedly anthropocentric. She gives to human beings – specifically, to human *reason* – the role in the natural world order that was previously held by the divine mind. In her form of constructivism the Great Chain has been decapitated, as it were, and in the same movement it has been naturalized; stripped of its supernatural portion. Humanity is now the measure of all things, but the Chain has been left otherwise intact, and this in a double respect. First, *humans* remain at the top of a hierarchical natural order; we create value as God used to do, and other constituents of the world are valuable either in relation to us, or by comparison to us. Second, *rationality* is still the source and measure of all value.[18] Thus Korsgaard offers to meet the threat of disenchantment by restoring or preserving the Great Chain's structure, albeit in a modified form.

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[15] Korsgaard, 4.

[16] *Ibid*., 5.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] I discuss *Sources* here because of its status as an influential 20th century expression of Kantian normative ethics. But Korsgaard's views on this point have not been static. In her 2004 Tanner Lectures, she is still explicitly committed to the idea that rationality is the source and measure of value. There she argues that our obligations towards nonhuman animals depend upon and must be derived from the value of the rational human will. "The only possible source of law and obligation is a rational will, and, *in this sense*, a non-rational animal cannot be the source of obligation. But it does not follow that the other animals cannot be … the sources of legitimate normative claims" in another way. ("Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals" in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 24 (2004), 77-110, 95-6.) She *may* give up this commitment with her conception of "tethered value" in *Fellow Creatures*, but I do not take up that question here (*Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to Other Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)).

Of course, there is nothing inherently illegitimate simply in seeking to recreate or preserve the Great Chain's rational hierarchy. The problem is rather that, in motivating her view as a response to disenchantment, Korsgaard relies on remnants of the Great Chain framework which are supposedly off-limits to her once she embraces the 'metaphysics of the modern world'. She says, "if the real and the good are no longer one … Form must be imposed on the world of matter … and that is the work" of human artifice. But as we have seen, it doesn't follow merely from the dissolution of the Great Chain itself – from the fact, as she puts it, that 'the real and the good are no longer one' – that value has to be imposed on the world. It doesn't follow from the loss of one form that the world is actually recalcitrant to form altogether. What follows is only that reality is recalcitrant to *one particular* (hierarchical, reason-referencing) form. In accepting the challenge that is framed by disenchantment, Korsgaard assumes that the only possible way for the world to be ordered is as a Great Chain: that is, hierarchically, with some absolute being (or a near, natural approximation), to give the whole thing its order and intelligibility. And in this respect the Great Chain of Being continues to influence her sense of the viable options for contemporary ethics even as she attempts to develop a theory that can cope with its absence.

The Great Chain is also present in Korsgaard's commitment to what we might call human exceptionalism, and this in two ways: first, in the view that *humans make meaning*, and second, in the view that *we matter more*. We saw above how the shift to an evolutionary worldview undermined the particular reasons the Great Chain gave us for seeing ourselves as higher or better. But if, post-Great Chain, humans emerge as the true origin and benchmark of value and order and meaning, as they do for Korsgaard, that certainly *would* be good grounds for saying that we still matter in a special way. The question is: why think that a human solution to the perceived problem of disenchantment is a) appropriate b) the only possible solution and c) even possible? Here, surely it seems that humans must step in to fill the explanatory and generative vacuum left by the dissolution of the Great Chain because we have certain properties – chiefly, our rationality – which uniquely equip us to create value, or to bring form and structure and intelligibility to the world. But our reason for thinking that human rational and agential capacities specially equip us to *create* value – *that* reason is nothing more than our long-standing tendency to think of man as made in the image of God (or vice versa, as Xenophanes would have it). The human exceptionalism of the Great Chain of Being was always essentially contingent upon its more fundamental theocentric structure. Therefore one cannot simply decapitate the chain and expect the next link to assume the topmost role. For the instant the top link is removed, the other links lose their status as *links* altogether, and the whole value-laden hierarchical set of relationships is dissolved, along with the special connection between rationality and value. Without the Great Chain of Being, human exceptionalism is utterly groundless.

It might seem that neo-Kantian constructivism like Korsgaard's is especially vulnerable to such criticisms because she attempts to rehabilitate the Great Chain and reestablish it in a humanist guise. Someone like Bernard Williams, in contrast, may seem comparatively immune because he copes with disenchantment by embracing it, rather than trying to overcome it. Like Korsgaard, Williams sees modern science as responsible for both the collapse of the Great Chain of Being, and the inevitability of disenchantment. But unlike Korsgaard, Williams does not seek to put value back into the world. Instead he argues for a value-free conception of the natural world and for a correspondingly greatly diminished and limited conception of ethics, as compared to earlier, robustly objective and realist conceptions of ethics.

The problem of disenchantment and the question of the objectivity of value are themes running through Williams' whole life work, and I will not discuss all of the relevant texts and

passages here. For present purposes I take the argument of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* to represent Williams' mature views on disenchantment and the nature of value. And I treat him as a representative neo-Humean thinker, although his views are more complex than this label implies, because he tends towards materialism, and towards an arguably-Humean or neo-Humean conception of ethics as a subjective, intersubjective, and social phenomenon.[19]

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* Williams begins by raising a question about how to justify the claims and requirements of ethics; how to prove that ethics is objective. To do so, he says, we would need to find a "position outside all our [ethical] knowledge and beliefs from which we could validate" ethics.[20] But Williams does not think that any such justification for ethics can be found. "We must admit," he says, "that the Aristotelian [and Kantian] assumptions which fitted together the [ethical] perspective and the outside view have collapsed."[21] Their collapse was precipitated, he thinks, by the development of a more mature, rationally more sophisticated "outside" modern scientific perspective: "reflection characteristically disturbs, unseats, or replaces those traditional concepts… in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge.*"[22] Reflection "unseats" ethics by revealing a "genuine and profound" difference between science and ethics when it comes to objectivity: "in a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer [that] represents how things are; [whereas] in the area of the ethical ... there is no such coherent hope."[23] In science, there could be conversion on an accurate representation of reality because science alone stands to yield "a conception [of reality] consisting of *non-perspectival* materials available to any adequate investigator, of whatever constitution."[24] ("Perspectival materials" for Williams include not only values but also colors, smells, and all other life-form-relative ways of getting to know the world, such as whether something is hot or cold.[25])

The notion of *perspective* is key to the sense in which, for Williams, the findings of ideal science are at least potentially absolutely true, or fully objective, and ethical 'findings' are not. What science tells us is stable, or "absolute;" it is precisely *not* vulnerable to being disturbed or unseated by reflection.[26] Why? Because the content of scientific findings does not depend on the contingent, local perspective or the perceptual or experiential capacities of the observer, but transparently reflects "how things (anyway) are."[27] For this reason we could, in principle, agree with Martians or with distant, very different future human beings about the world as science presents it, even if the medium in which these things are rendered intelligible to each group differs dramatically. Thus for Williams, freedom from perspectival contingency is just what it is for something to be objective, for our grasp of things to reflect how things really are.

In contrast with science, Williams thinks that ethics is intrinsically perspectival. Thus he thinks the intelligibility of ethical "truths" like *Misogyny is wrong* does not survive even across different contemporary human cultural contexts, let alone across history or across different imaginary forms of life. Reflection leads us to appreciate the fragile parochialism of our own substantive ethical convictions. And the more aware we become of their parochialism, the less able (Williams thinks) we become to really hold them as convictions. For "if you are *conscious* of non-

[19] Thank you to Barbara Herman for raising this point.
[20] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* 28.
[21] *Ibid*. 53.
[22] *Ibid.* 148.
[23] *Ibid.* 135-6.
[24] *Ibid*. 140. Emphasis in the original.
[25] See Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry,* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978).
[26] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* 138-139.
[27] *Ibid*.

objectivity, should that not properly affect the way in which you see the application or extent of your ethical outlook?"[28] To think that we could simply continue to hold on to our local, ethical perspectives in the face of their acknowledged non-objectivity "can lead to nothing but disaster, rather as someone who finds that having children has disrupted her life cannot regain her earlier state by killing them."[29]

I have already argued that it is question-begging to infer disenchantment simply from the loss of the Great Chain paradigm. Does Williams make this leap in the view just sketched? Sometimes he seems to do so. He consistently presents human progress towards the absolute, scientific conception as an inevitable *response* or reaction to the loss of prior paradigms – using words like *destabilize*, *destroy*, *collapse* – while simultaneously relying, consistently and repeatedly, on the claim that "we" experienced this collapse at a certain cultural and historical juncture because "we" gained the capacity to adopt a certain kind of enlightened perspective on these earlier, cruder or less fully developed worldviews. To this extent, he does seem to infer disenchantment directly from the loss of the Great Chain paradigm. But there is more to his view than this. Williams thinks that scientific reflection undermines the objectivity of *all* value-laden perspectives, not just the particular ancestral conception of nature afforded by the Great Chain. Reflection, in his view, carries human thinkers gradually from *whatever* their particular, local point of view might be, towards an absolutely objective, universally available perspective on things—a perspective which, as it happens, turns out to reveal an objective world that contains only primary qualities (no values, no colors, etc.). If so then scientific reflection gives us positive reasons to accept disenchantment; reasons that are independent of the reasons it gives us to disavow the Great Chain.

The trouble is that Williams' conception of objectivity itself, and his conception of the relationship between objectivity and scientific reflection, are tainted with vestiges of the Great Chain worldview. First, Williams simply assumes his conception of objectivity and its relationship to science without argument. This suggests that, in a more subtle way, he does infer disenchantment simply from the loss of the Great Chain. Second, and more interestingly for our purposes, lingering elements of the Great Chain show up in the substance of Williams' conception of objectivity itself, which is anthropocentric and hierarchical in a way that is unjustified in the absence of the Great Chain's explanatory framework.

Regarding the first point: rather than providing an independent argument for his conception of objectivity, Williams baldly asserts, in the first place, that reflection has revealed the falsity of religious value-laden perspectives: "we know that it could not be true – *could* not be true, since if we understand anything about the world at all, we understand that it is not run like that."[30] And then he baldly asserts, in the second place, that when reflection further undermines our confidence in the objectivity of a particular ethical perspective, there is no possibility of a new "convergence" on ethical truth:

> The idea that our beliefs can track the truth at this level must at least imply that a range of investigators could rationally, reasonably, and unconstrainedly come to converge on a determinate set of ethical conclusions. What are the hopes for such a process? … If it is construed as convergence on a body of ethical truths which is brought about and explained by the fact that they are truths – this would be a strict analogy to scientific objectivity – then *I see no hope for it*.… Discussions at the

[28] *Ibid*. 159.
[29] *Ibid.* 168.
[30] *Ibid*. 32.

> reflective level, if they have the ambition of considering all ethical experience and arriving at the truth about the ethical, will necessarily use the most general and abstract ethical concepts such as "right," and *those concepts do not display world guidedness*. … We must reject the objectivist view of ethical life as in that way a pursuit of ethical truth.[31]

In simply assuming the conception of objectivity that he does, Williams is making a slightly more subtle version of the leap that I briefly acquitted him of making, above. He is assuming without support that a disenchanted conception of nature follows inevitably from the demise of the Great Chain. And this inference is, again, unjustified. It seems warranted only to the extent that our sense of the available options for conceiving of nature remains constrained by the Great Chain model.

But again, presumably Williams feels entitled to his disenchanted conception of nature because he takes that to be the conception suggested by science, and science tells us "how things (anyway) are."[32] Let us therefore grant this view for the sake of argument and see where it leads. Suppose that science does gives us an objective picture of things, where 'objective' means specifically that there are certain *in-principle universally available* features of reality that are discernable only from a scientific perspective, while many other features of reality (color, value, etc.) are not discernable from that perspective. Even so, it doesn't follow merely from their universal accessibility that the former bits of reality are more real, or accounts of them more true (so to speak), than the bits that are only locally accessible. For that to follow, we must also assume the *epistemic superiority* of the scientific way of looking at things. Without this assumption firmly in place, we have no reason to privilege Williams' "absolute conception of the world"[33] over more perspectivally-embedded conceptions of reality – even when the latter are not fully communicable in non-perspectival terms. We might just as well consider the non-perspectival point of view to be impoverished; woefully incomplete. We might long for the enrichment and insight that would come from occupying perspectival positions that are not available to us: oh, to be able to eco-locate or communicate telepathically! We might feel sorry for anyone or anything who could only occupy the entirely non-perspectival "position": how much they miss!

Are there reasons to assume the superiority of the scientific perspective over all other perspectives – reasons for aligning *it alone* with objectivity, truth-tracking, world-guidedness, and so forth? Here we find the crux of Williams' commitment to anthropocentric and hierarchical survivals of the Great Chain. In his view, the scientific perspective tracks truth because it discloses the world in a way that is in-principle universally accessible. But that is really to say: the more beings are *like us* with respect to their reflective, theoretical rational capacities, the more they will be able to take up a perspective on reality which shows it for what it "really" is, stripping away all contingent seemings and appearances, and getting to the real behind the apparent. Williams substitutes Martians and hypothetical, ideally rational future descendants of human beings for angels and God, but in its essence the epistemic ideal remains the same: the concept of divine, perfect rationality that is inherited from the Great Chain of Being. In this way, Williams'

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[31] *Ibid,* 151-152, my emphasis.

[32] *Ibid.* Williams' stipulative tendency on this point led Hilary Putnam to conclude that "what we have in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is, in fact, not a serious argument for ethical 'non-objectivism', but rather the expression of a mood" (Hilary Putnam, "Bernard Williams and the Absolute Conception of the World," in *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 80-107, 107). Williams decried this criticism as *ad hominem* (Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline," *Philosophy* 75 (2000), 477-96, 484). There is truth in both positions. Williams *is* expressing a mood, but he is expressing a mood that few others articulate, and most others share.

[33] *Ibid*. 139.

conception of objectivity itself turns out to be fundamentally shaped by the reason-referenced hierarchy of the Great Chain.

It might be suggested that Williams is not necessarily *privileging* the objective over the perspectival, simply in distinguishing the two. If so then his view is not hierarchical in the manner of the Great Chain. But Williams' view is that the concepts of physical science are "potentially universal in their uptake and usefulness" *because* they track facts; because they reflect "how things (anyway) are" in a way that ethical concepts do not. And given this commitment, it is not enough for Williams to shake off the influence of the Great Chain to say (as he does) that it is valuable and appropriate, or even necessary and inevitable that human beings maintain some embedded, non-absolute, non-objective ethical perspective(s) on the world.[34] A perspective can be important, useful, or inevitable without thereby disclosing the world in a way that true, or "potentially universal" in its "uptake" and "usefulness". Williams can *say* that it is not in any way preferable for a theory to get some grip on reality as opposed to not. But he should not be surprised if others do not agree.

In the end, however, even granting Williams the ineliminable *and equal* importance of value-laden perspectives would not be enough to free his view of problematic vestiges of the Great Chain. The distinction itself – between science and ethics with respect to their objectivity –is a distinction whose motivation and seeming-justification come from implicit remnants of the Great Chain picture. Unless we assume a hierarchical, reason-referencing conception of value, we have no reason even to posit Williams's sort of difference between fact and value because we have no reason to connection human, Martian, and future-human modes of experiences with a unique capacity to track truth. This is the case even if the distinction between fact and value in this respect were (contrary to fact) generally celebrated as opposed to rued.

III. Conclusion

In "Modern Moral Philosophy," Elizabeth Anscombe suggests that certain familiar moral concepts "are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it".[35] That "earlier conception of ethics" was a divine law ethics, which, as a "consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries… became deeply embedded in our language and thought."[36] Anscombe argued that "it is not possible to have [a law conception] of ethics unless you believe in God as a lawgiver. ... But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the [associated] concepts … should remain though they had lost their root." If so, they have survived "outside the framework of thought that made [them] really intelligible."[37]

The argument of the present paper has been parallel in structure to Anscombe's argument in "Modern Moral Philosophy." What I have been trying to show is that *the framework itself* has survived its own demise, and remains, unacknowledged but as "deeply embedded in our language and thought" as ever. Once this possibility dawns on us we can see that the very etymology of 'disenchantment' displays its intellectual heritage: *dis*enchantment is a backward-looking notion

[34] It was suggested to me that Williams might be a friend and not a foe to the present argument first by Barbara Herman at the UCLA history workshop, and subsequently by Douglas MacLean at the Rice Workshop in Humanistic Ethics, and I am grateful to both for pressing this objection.
[35] Anscombe, 1.
[36] *Ibid.* 5.
[37] *Ibid*. 6.

that depends for its own plausibility and its seeming-inevitability on the continued plausibility and seeming-inevitability of the Great Chain. But in fact, the loss of the Great Chain paradigm raises a question that might be answered in more than one way. That question is: *what, if any, kind of order, value, meaning, or significance do we see in the natural world, if we strive to understand it in the absence of the particular, hierarchical and mind-centered presumptions that have organized philosophical thought about value for so long?*

Disenchantment is one possible answer to this question. But it is not the only one. It is the answer we are likely to get as long as we continue to work only with the explanatory resources afforded by the Great Chain paradigm. But if we take a wider view we will see that we are not without other resources. Here I will mention only a few possibilities just to give a sense of where we might begin. We might, for example, explore the possibility that value and form are immanent in nature – are themselves irreducible natural phenomena – in some way other than in the hierarchical and anthropocentric way suggested by the Great Chain. The writings of Darwin are replete with non-hierarchical, but hardly disenchanted descriptions of life and related natural phenomena; perhaps one could start there. But it would take careful work to cultivate the value-theoretic resources of the evolutionary model in a way that neither presupposes disenchantment, nor contains other illicit remnants of the Great Chain's value theory. Perhaps here we might look to environmental philosophy, and consider whether the world is ordered, not hierarchically, but *ecologically*, with distinguishable kinds of entities related to one another as nodes in a net, in the image of environmental philosopher Arne Naess.[38]

Another fruitful way to proceed would be to look cross-culturally. For example, the ethics and cosmologies of some indigenous peoples of the Americas have been a rich source of inspiration and understanding to those interested in environmental philosophy.[39] Here we find robust alternatives to hierarchical conceptions of value in nature, including various cyclical and ecological models. Why not consider the potential bearing of these insights on value theory more generally? Of course these views will come with their own cultural inheritance of enchantment, but we know now that Western philosophical value theory is in no position to throw stones on that point. Finally, we should keep in mind that it has proved possible to think in different terms even within the narrow intellectual confines of Anglo-American philosophical culture. Benthamite utilitarianism, for example, departs significantly from the hierarchical and anthropocentric presuppositions of the Great Chain picture. (This may explain why it is so often reviled as a *vulgar* theory – conspicuously, by Bernard Williams.[40]) Bentham's is not the dissolution of hierarchical models of value that I myself would choose to defend. But it is an example of an alternative model that has been cogently and successfully promoted over the last hundred-odd years.

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[38] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement," *Inquiry* 16 (1973), 95-100. Perhaps Korsgaard's notion of "tethered values" in *Fellow Creatures* can be seen as an ecological conception of value. For a tongue-in-cheek but effective exposé of the tendency since Darwin to superimpose Great-Chain hierarchy on evolutionary models, see Sean Nee, "The Great Chain of Being," *Nature* 435 (2005), 429. Nor was Darwin himself entirely immune to the influence of the Great Chain paradigm, however much his views were in conflict with it.

[39] See e.g. Winona LaDuke, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Futures," *Colonial Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy* 127 (1994), 127-48. See also Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Current Ecological Crisis," *Science* 10 (1967), 1203-1207; and William T. Hagan, "Justifying Dispossession of the American Indian: The Land Utilization Argument," in *American Indian Environments*, edited by Christopher Vecsey and Robert W. Venables (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980).

[40] Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism for and Against*, by Bernard Williams and J.C.C. Smart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77-150.

No matter what range of hypotheses we might entertain in response to the question, *what on earth is value?* the bottom line is that the assumption that the world is disenchanted is, in the full absence of the Great Chain paradigm, just that: an assumption, without a sound basis in fact or argument. It is an assumption based primarily on the sheer impressiveness of the loss of the previously dominant paradigm, and in making it we are hanging on to "survivals, or derivatives from survivals" of the Great Chain, precisely when we meant to be staunchly doing without them.[41]

If modern science does not force us to accept a disenchanted conception of nature, then modern moral philosophy is in a far more difficult, but also far more interesting, position than it takes itself to be. Rather than trying to cope with disenchantment, we ought to be developing a legitimate, empirically responsible conception of value that does not rely illicitly on artifacts salvaged from the rubble of our prior worldview. The purpose of the present discussion has been to show that this important project has been obscured by philosophers' commitment to disenchantment, and thus neglected. Having looked closely at disenchantment in the views of Korsgaard and Williams, we face this task with a better sense of how held-over hierarchical and reason-glorifying elements of the previous, "enchanted" natural world order still shape contemporary ethics. This is an important first step towards having, not just a clearer sense of a really pressing problem for ethical theory, but also eventually some serious candidate solutions to that problem.[42]

[41] Anscombe, 6.

[42] Acknowledgements removed for blind review.

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