The Philosophy of Julia Wedgwood

Imperfect Antithesis

Alison Stone

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Author Biography

Alison Stone is Professor of Philosophy at Lancaster University. Her most recent books are on nineteenth-century women philosophers. They are *Frances Power Cobbe: Essential Writings of a Nineteenth-Century Feminist Philosopher* (Oxford University Press, 2022), *Frances Power Cobbe* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), *Women Philosophers in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2023), and *Women on Philosophy of Art: Britain 1770-1900* (Oxford University Press, 2024). With Charlotte Alderwick, she co-edited *Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers in Britain and America* (Routledge, 2024), and with Lydia Moland, she co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of American and British Women Philosophers in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

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1. Introducing the Philosophy of Julia Wedgwood

1.1 What This Book Is About

Julia Wedgwood (1833–1913) was a conspicuous intellectual force of the Victorian period. She wrote two major books, *The Moral Ideal* (1888) and *The Message of Israel* (1894), two biographies, and around a hundred and fifty journal articles, a handful of them collected in her book *Nineteenth-Century Teachers* (1909). Her interests were incredibly wide. She wrote on the history of civilisations and religion, ethical theory, the origin of language, the implications of evolutionary theory, art and literature, the problem of free will, feminism, and debates in theology, engaging with an array of figures from ancient and modern philosophy.

What unifies this unusually wide-ranging and extensive body of published work? In this book I propose that a significant part of Wedgwood's corpus is organised by the idea of *imperfect antithesis*. 'No law of thought', she says, 'seems to us to have a wider range than what we would call the law of imperfect antithesis'.[1] As I will explain, she believes that experience and reality exhibit pervasive antitheses – such as truth and falsity, praise and blame, the good and the bad. The opposites are not symmetrical but generally take a 'slightly varying form', not perfectly mirroring one another.[2] For example, a person might deserve praise for behaving a certain way, but it does not follow that if they behave the opposite way they deserve blame.

1 Julia Wedgwood, '"The Unseen Universe"', *Spectator*, 13 November 1875, 1425.
2 Ibid.

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This idea of imperfect antithesis orchestrates Wedgwood's views on a spectrum of issues: pain and pleasure; selfishness and self-sacrifice; the self and relationships with others; free will and determinism; the natural and the supernatural. In all cases, she argues that these are genuine oppositions, manifest in lived experience and reality, and showing an asymmetrical structure. Notably, within this overarching approach, she defends the reality of the supernatural as well as the natural. Wedgwood is thus an anti-naturalist in metaphysics and ethics. The distinctive form of her anti-naturalism is bound up with her idea of imperfect antithesis.

She also gives imperfect antithesis a historical dimension. In this aspect, it is the 'law of recoil' or the 'law of inversion',[3] in which we naturally recoil from one form of social life towards an antithetical one – for example, from prehistoric matriarchy to classical Greek patriarchy, on her account. But the swing is not even: the recoil may be exaggerated, entangled with what people are recoiling against, or both. Thus, people may bounce wildly from one extreme to another, or preserve strands from an earlier mode of life, or try the harder to escape those strands because they are still attached to them. Either way, the antithesis between later and earlier forms of social life is never perfect or symmetrical. She traces this historical law of recoil across several time-periods: the rise and fall of patriarchy, the recoil of the classical Romans against the Greeks, of early Christianity against Rome, and modern scientific naturalism against Christianity.

Imperfect antithesis stands to Wedgwood's thought, I will suggest, much as dialectic does to Hegel's thought. Dialectic, for Hegel, is not a method, not a formula, as its infamous reduction to 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' misleadingly suggests.[4] Rather, for Hegel, the dialectical movement of self-contradiction and resolution is immanent in any subject-matter we think about, and in our thinking as well. Wedgwood was influenced by Hegel, and one might wonder whether her law of imperfect antithesis is basically Hegel made British. I will

3 Wedgwood, *Nineteenth-Century Teachers* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 203; Wedgwood, '"Grievances of Women"', *Spectator*, 8 May 1880, 588.

4 Hegel says that Fichte's 'thesis–antithesis–synthesis' formula is 'spiritless', merely a formula mechanically applied to indifferent material; see Gustav E. Mueller, 'The Hegel Legend of "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis"', in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 302.

instead suggest that Wedgwood goes in a different direction to Hegel, a difference that helps to bring out the originality of her thought. She holds that the 'logical intellect' tries to strip real-life asymmetrical antitheses down to perfect and symmetrical logical form, and then to line up these schematised antitheses into a system, like arranging a neat row of dominoes.[5] At his worst Hegel succumbs to this temptation, she claims.[6] He looks *through* the phenomena to a logical structure; she endeavours to keep a steady focus *on* the phenomena themselves, and their heterogeneous and messy real-life oppositions.

Does Wedgwood, then, oppose systematicity? She certainly warns about the dangers of system-building,[7] and her idea of imperfect antithesis is not the first principle of a deductive system. It is more like a lens for illuminating the varieties of experience and reality, where that variety in turn suggests imperfect antithesis as an appropriate lens. Looked at through this lens, the many topics she considers fit together and her views on them support one another. There is organic unity amongst her views, without a formal or deductive system.

Hegelian dialectic and Wedgwood's imperfect antithesis diverge, yet the parallels between them clarify how, like Hegel, Wedgwood could write extensively on historical material while remaining a philosopher. The philosophical dimension came from the unifying lens of imperfect antithesis. Moreover, Wedgwood was overt herself that she was doing philosophy. For example, she wrote to a friend about the dialogue *Proteus and Amadeus*: 'As for the philosophy it is not worth a pinch of snuff. But *I* can write philosophy'.[8] This is a refreshingly frank female claim to do philosophy in an era when women often philosophised somewhat indirectly, in non-obvious forms like autobiographies, travel writings, or novels.[9]

Wedgwood adopts imperfect antithesis as a lens on contemporary

5 Wedgwood, 'The Moral Ideal–I', *Spectator*, 20 December 1879, 1605.
6 Wedgwood, 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', *The Reader*, 17 June 1865, 675.
7 Ibid.
8 J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 29 August 1876, WM 401, referring to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and Charles Meynell, *Proteus and Amadeus* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), originally published in 1876. All references to WM refer to correspondence held in the Wedgwood Mosley Collection in the V&A Wedgwood Collection, Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent.
9 On this pattern, see Alison Stone, *Women Philosophers in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), ch. 1.

and historical experience; reciprocally, this book adopts imperfect antithesis as a lens on Wedgwood, a way to bring out the coherence and originality of her thought on ethics, metaphysics, and history. I hope this will motivate others to take a renewed interest in Wedgwood and recover her as a significant female philosopher of the Victorian period.

1.2 Wedgwood and Victorian Print Culture

Since Wedgwood may well be unfamiliar to readers, let me begin by placing her in her context, particularly Victorian print culture and publishing.

She had an impressive, indeed almost overpowering, family pedigree.[10] Her uncle was Charles Darwin, and her father was a renowned philologist, Hensleigh Wedgwood. Her mother Frances (Fanny) Wedgwood, née Mackintosh, was a salon hostess and a great friend of the polymath Harriet Martineau, who became an older friend and mentor to the young (Julia) Wedgwood. Fanny was a daughter of James Mackintosh, a Regency-era moral and political philosopher who defended the French Revolution against Edmund Burke. To this background Wedgwood added friendships with many prominent figures, including George Eliot, the poet Robert Browning (who was her romantic friend in the 1860s), and late in life the novelist E. M. Forster, who assisted with the research for the second edition of her book *The Moral Ideal*.

Wedgwood was educated mostly at home, with a stint at a boarding school run by Harriet Martineau's sister Rachel, followed by undergraduate-level study at Bedford College in London. Recently opened, it was one of Britain's first higher education institutions for women. From 1849 to 1852, Wedgwood took classes in moral philosophy, political economy, Latin, mathematics, geometry, geography, astronomy, and logic. As well as Latin, Wedgwood mastered French, German, Italian, and Greek, and later, Hebrew. Her language skills equipped her to expound the ancient Greeks and Romans authoritatively and tutor

10 For biographies, see Barbara Wedgwood, *A Critical Study of the Life and Works of Julia Wedgwood* (PhD dissn., University College London, 1983) and Sue Brown, *Julia Wedgwood, the Unexpected Victorian: The Life and Writing of a Remarkable Female Intellectual* (London: Anthem Press, 2022).

the first generation of women undergraduates at Girton College after its foundation in 1869.

After studying at Bedford College, Wedgwood turned to fiction and published two novels in 1858.[11] However, she swiftly changed course and moved across into philosophy,[12] beginning in 1860–61 with the two-part dialogue 'The Boundaries of Science', arguing that evolutionary theory was compatible with Christian theism when the two were rightly understood.[13] This dialogue launched her prolific publishing career in philosophy, which lasted right into the early twentieth century. Her essays appeared continually in the leading periodicals of her time and made her well known and highly regarded.

In the end, she became most renowned for *The Moral Ideal*, her ambitious account of how conceptions of the good have changed across world civilisations, from ancient India to modern Europe. According to one obituary writer, 'The great book "The Moral Ideal" remains the most enduring achievement of one of the most gifted women of her generation'.[14] For another reviewer, writing in the journal that became *Ethics*:

> This is an able and delightful book. [...] Its range is so wide [...] and its peculiar merit lies in the many fresh and stimulating *aperçus* with which it is filled. [...] It ends with an inspiring working out of the antithesis between the *ought* and the *is*.[15]

These examples typify the praise that greeted Wedgwood's treatise.

But although *The Moral Ideal* clinched her reputation, by the time it appeared she had been publishing philosophy for three decades on a

11 For an analysis of her novels, see Madison Marshall, 'Julia Wedgwood and the Gender-Norm Covenant', in *Recovering Lost Voices: Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, ed. Michaela George and Elizabeth Drummey, ch. 7 (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2026).

12 The reasons for the turn are contested. See Sue Brown, '"[Your novel] quite gives me a pain in the stomach": How Paternal Disapproval Ended Julia Wedgwood's Promising Career as a Novelist', in *British Women's Writing from Bronte to Bloomsbury*, vol. 1, ed. Adrienne Gavin and Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton (London: Springer, 2018), pp. 229–44, and Madison Marshall, *Reading Kinship: Intellectual Influence, Authorial Formation, and the Father-Daughter Relationship of Hensleigh and Julia 'Snow' Wedgwood* (PhD dissn., University of Leeds, 2022).

13 Wedgwood, 'The Boundaries of Science', Parts I and II, *Macmillan's Magazine* 2 (June 1860), 134–38, and 4 (July 1861), 237–47.

14 Anonymous, 'Miss Julia Wedgwood', *Manchester Guardian*, 28 November 1913, 10.

15 F. Melian Stawell, '*The Moral Ideal. A Historic Study*', *International Journal of Ethics* 18, no. 3 (1908), 394–97.

plethora of topics. Her range was shaped by the periodical culture of her time, which valued breadth of reference, and treated the reflective review-essay virtually on a par with the monograph. This culture had several further conventions which were crucial to Wedgwood's publishing career and to the wider ecosystem of women intellectuals and philosophers to which she belonged.

Victorian periodical culture was vast. At least 125,000 serials were published over the century, ranging from prestigious heavyweight titles such as the *Westminster Review, Macmillan's Magazine,* and *Contemporary Review* (in all of which Wedgwood published), through mid-range weekly titles such as the *Spectator* (where she published heavily), down to more ephemeral magazines and newspapers. Unlike twentieth-century academic journals, even the most highbrow Victorian journals were generalist. Each issue covered an array of topics, with no specialist academic credentials required from authors. This generalist climate helped women to publish in a period when universities were largely closed to them (although not altogether closed, as Wedgwood's case shows).[16]

Another feature that helped women to make inroads into publishing was the fact that anonymity was standard for journal essays for most of the century – for *all* authors, whatever their gender. Editors had little reason to block women from publishing when articles would appear unsigned anyway (besides which, a small number of editors were women).[17] Wedgwood made much use of anonymity. In the 1870s and 1880s, she published a huge number of essays anonymously in the *Spectator*. This still-running serial is now a politically conservative and controversialist magazine, very different from its serious-minded Victorian incarnation. In that period it was co-edited by Meredith Townsend and Richard Holt Hutton, who gave it an abolitionist, Christian, and philosophical slant, staunchly independent of party politics. Wedgwood read the *Spectator* avidly and saw it more as an intellectual family and community than a mere 'magazine'.[18] She and Hutton grew very close in style

16 On generalism and periodical culture, see again Stone, *Women Philosophers*, ch. 1.

17 On the positives of anonymity for women, see Alexis Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830–70* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004). Easley discusses female editors such as Christian Isobel Johnstone.

18 See J. W. to Mary Rich, 1 May 1866, 3 June 1866, WM 325.

and substance, and she became one of his most central and trusted contributors, authoring over seventy articles in the journal.

Another of the main journals she published in, the *Contemporary Review*, was different, having a policy of signature. The journal was founded in 1865, when signed articles were becoming more common, embodying the 'theory and practice of personalised criticism'.[19] Having already built up her reputation over the 1860s and 1870s, Wedgwood stepped up into this new niche of the 'personalised critic' whose judgements readers could rely on.

A final noteworthy element of periodical culture was that the leading genre was the 'review-essay' – which was not like the contemporary book review, i.e., a short précis and evaluation of a book. In 'review-essays', authors did not so much review a book as state their own views on the topic that the book discussed. As Wedgwood said of her own practice, 'We propose to review the subject which the authors treat rather than their views upon it'.[20] This made the review-essay genre helpful for women: under the guise of reviewing books often written by men, they could actually expound their own positions.

These conventions enabled women to publish a lot more in the period than one might have expected, authoring around 13% of all periodical content.[21] This involvement of women in periodical culture helps to distinguish Victorian women's philosophy from both the early modern and twentieth-century periods. Early modern women often philosophised in forms such as letters, outside the public sphere, as with Elisabeth of Bohemia in her correspondence with Descartes. Conversely, twentieth-century women generally philosophised within the academy and in specialist institutions and journals. Halfway between the two, Victorian women philosophised within a pre-specialist print culture, which was public but not yet strictly academic.

Skilfully negotiating this culture's conventions, Wedgwood worked her way up to be one of the country's best-known intellectual women. She became the 'thoughtful woman *par excellence*' according to one

19 Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Britain and Ireland* (London: Academia Press, 2009), 19.

20 Wedgwood, 'Utilitarianism', *The Reader*, 19 March 1864, 360.

21 Carol Christ, 'The Hero as Man of Letters', in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse*, ed. Thais E. Morgan (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 21.

newspaper, and was ranked, as Jose Harris puts it, 'second only to George Eliot in her ability to handle difficult, "masculine" subjects and "modern" themes'.[22]

One might ask how anonymous publications could possibly build someone's reputation. The answer is that editors knew who published what, and exchanged views and recommendations; while intellectual and social circles were relatively tight-knit, so that often people informally knew who had published what. Moreover, Wedgwood sometimes shared her essays, before or after publication, with friends, mentors, and teachers, and sometimes others circulated them. For instance, her friend Frederick Denison Maurice, the leading Christian socialist, read her two-part essay on Hegel and said 'I have read no essay for a long time which shows so much of [...] a true metaphysical instinct as yours'.[23] Another then-prominent intellectual, Francis Newman, told her father Hensleigh: 'I read very attentively and with much satisfaction your daughter's article in the Westminster on the Origin of Language. It seems to me quite worthy of a granddaughter of Sir James Mackintosh'.[24] By these means, Wedgwood's publications built up her standing in her contemporaries' eyes.

Today, however, Victorian anonymity presents a challenge. We are no longer in the informal social circles of the time, so how do we know which journal essays are by Wedgwood? Beginning in the 1960s, the pioneering *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* confronted the general challenge of anonymity, using correspondence and archives to de-anonymise the content of forty-five major journals.[25] This effort unearthed some of Wedgwood's essays, such as her early articles in *Macmillan's Magazine* including 'The Boundaries of Science'. However, the *Wellesley Index* did not tackle the *Spectator*. That would have been a gargantuan task: it appeared weekly from 1828 onwards, containing up

22 The *Glasgow Herald* from 3 February 1891, quoted in Brown in *Wedgwood*, p. 3; Harris, 'Wedgwood, Frances Julia (1833–1913)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, new version, 22 September 2011 (originally published in 2004).

23 F. D. Maurice to J. W., 1865, WM E57-31543.

24 Item 50, 15 October 1866, in the *Wedgwood Family Scrapbook*, p. 89. Compiled by (Julia) Wedgwood, this scrapbook has been shared with me courtesy of her descendant Steve Wedgwood.

25 Walter Houghton et al., *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, 5 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). The *Wellesley Index* is the source of Christ's 13% estimate, referenced above.

to fifty contributions per week.

How can we pick out Wedgwood's work from this mass of anonymous material? We have a few clues. She collected ten *Spectator* pieces in *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*. Robert Tener identified thirteen further contributions using Hutton's editorial notebooks in the *Spectator* archive, which unfortunately have since been lost. Sue Brown and I have between us identified fifteen more pieces using family correspondence.[26] In addition, I have identified most of her other *Spectator* pieces using a mixture of methods and sources: her use of initials, cross-references amongst her writings, textual and philosophical analysis, and digital stylometry and concordance, supplemented by contextual information. These attributions are crucial for this book, and underpin my analysis of Wedgwood's philosophy of imperfect antithesis. I will explain and detail these attributions in Chapter 14, reserving this discussion to the end to avoid cluttering the examination of Wedgwood's ideas. This book also has an online appendix presenting several of the stylometric diagrams which support my attributions and are too large to fit within a print book.

1.3 Some of Wedgwood's Influences and Interlocutors

Through her family background and connections, her educational and social circles, and her publication contacts, Wedgwood amassed a formidable array of interlocutors and influences. In this book I shall primarily bring in these influences as and when they become relevant to the understanding and evaluation of Wedgwood's claims and arguments. However, an anticipatory survey can help illuminate the climate of ideas into which she was intervening.

Her uncle Charles Darwin, unsurprisingly, was central. Her relations to evolutionary theory changed over time: Darwinism, she recounted in 1897, had been 'a change welcomed with rapture, followed with great disappointment, and now recalled with feelings combining both'.[27] During the initial rapturous phase, back in 1860, her uncle even said that she had understood him better than anyone else.[28] However, her attitude

26 See Chapter 14 for details.

27 Wedgwood, quoted in Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 244.

28 Charles Darwin to J. W., 11 July 1861, DCP-LETT-3206. For Wedgwood and Darwin's

changed once she concluded that, although evolution was compatible with theism, the evolutionists – including her uncle – had given up trying to reconcile the two.[29] Instead, she thought, they were fostering a naturalistic mentality that threatened our moral life. All the same, she never turned against evolution itself, and she continued engaging with Darwin throughout her work. One way he influenced her was with his 'principle of antithesis' in the expression of emotions, as we will see in Chapter 2.

Earlier I briefly alluded to Wedgwood's membership in an ecosystem of Victorian women intellectuals. She was not a lone figure; a significant cohort of women employed print culture to become highly vocal and visible. A ground-breaking figure here was Harriet Martineau, probably the highest-profile intellectual woman of the century. Martineau never married and supported herself financially by her writing. The prolific author of around fifty books and two thousand journal articles, she became a role model for many Victorian women intellectuals, the younger Wedgwood no exception.[30]

Amongst her achievements, Martineau mediated the British importation of Comteian positivism, translating and condensing his system into English in the 1850s.[31] This influenced the significant positivist strain that we find in Wedgwood, especially her insistence that nature is an unbroken chain of transmission of force. Although Wedgwood affirmed a supernatural realm, she denied it could ever interrupt the continuity of nature. She imbibed this view of nature partly from positivism and partly from evolutionary theory.

Martineau also had an influence on Wedgwood through her sequence of world religions in her 1848 book *Eastern Life, Present and*

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correspondence, see Samantha Evans, ed., *Darwin and Women: A Selection of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also 'Julia Wedgwood', by Myrna Perez and Katie Ericksen Baca, updated by Sue Brown, https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/julia-wedgwood

29 Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 239.

30 See Iain Crawford, 'Harriet Martineau: Women, Work and Mid-Victorian Journalism', in *Journalism and the Periodical Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 317-27, and Stone, *Women Philosophers*, p. 137. Brown, however, argues that Wedgwood's relation to Martineau was more conflicted; see Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 158.

31 See Martineau, ed. and trans., *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (New York: Blanchard, 1855).

Past, which informed Wedgwood's narration of the progression of world civilisations in *The Moral Ideal*.[32] Yet there was a key difference. Martineau's progression led up to secularism and naturalism, which Wedgwood rejected. That rejection ultimately turned her against Martineau, as against her uncle Darwin.[33]

Her relations with both figures followed a parallel arc. Early on, Darwin's support was crucial to her self-esteem and career, for he helped to secure the publication of her first book on John Wesley.[34] Her early friendship with Martineau played a similar supportive role. The fact that both women were deaf cemented the bond, making Martineau not only a role model *qua* independent intellectual woman but also *qua* disabled intellectual woman. However, Darwin's research famously led him to agnosticism, while Martineau became a secularist and agnostic in the late 1840s.[35] When *The Origin of Species* appeared in 1859 she exclaimed: 'What a work it is! – overthrowing [...] revealed religion on the one hand, and Natural (as far as Final Causes and Design are concerned) on the other'.[36] Wedgwood's very different response was a far more measured attempt to balance religion and evolution. Consequently, as her confidence and reputation grew, she distanced herself from these two early mentors. *Why* she defended Christianity so tenaciously, we will explore across this book.

A major influence on that defence was the Scottish theologian Thomas Erskine.[37] During the 1860s she spent long periods with him serving at once as nurse, companion, and interlocutor.[38] A highly controversial figure, Erskine believed in universal salvation, against Church orthodoxy at the time. He also set central importance on first-person spiritual experience. These two moves were connected. Heaven, for Erskine, was simply our joyous experience of spiritual union with God, while hell – where we only ever find ourselves for a finite time – was the spiritual state of despair, self-

32 Stone, *Women Philosophers*, p. 210.
33 See Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 158.
34 Charles Darwin to John Murray, 25 May 1868, DCP-LETT-6207.
35 Darwin to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879, DCP-LETT-12041; on Martineau's secularism, see Stone, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 73–80.
36 Martineau to George Holyoake, Friday 26 1859, in *Harriet Martineau: Collected Letters*, ed. Deborah Logan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), vol. 4, 208–9.
37 See Erskine, *The Spiritual Order and Other Papers* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1871).
38 See Brown, *Wedgwood*, 123-36.

absorption, and withdrawal from God.

Erskine's influence, first, motivated Wedgwood to attend to first-person experience and to endeavour to give a 'faithful transcript' of its character:

> We are dealing with material in which we must be fearless of paradox. It is not for finite minds to harmonise the glimpses which in their rush through the bewildering experience of life they gain successively of the infinite. They must be content with a faithful transcript and a faithful acceptance of other transcripts.[39]

Second, in the long run everybody will get to heaven and there will be no more hell. So heaven does not need hell, and the two are not symmetrical opposites – a leading example of an asymmetrical or imperfect antithesis.

In the early 1870s, Wedgwood became close to a new friend, George Eliot. She admired Eliot's fiction, seeing her as the greatest writer of the age and a woman of genius. In Eliot's novels, Wedgwood found an attention to the complexities of lived moral experience, the ways it outreaches black/white boundaries, and our need to avoid excessive moral condemnation and blame.[40] In such heroes and heroines as Dorothea Brooke, Maggie Tulliver, and Silas Marner, Wedgwood saw epitomised an ethics of self-sacrifice. These characters sacrificed their desires for the sake of others, without shying away from the pain of renunciation. Rather than falsely pretending that their loss was actually self-realisation, Eliot acknowledged it as pain and loss. Wedgwood saw self-sacrifice as the core Christian value, and thus found a Christian ethics in Eliot, despite the latter's professed agnosticism. Moreover, Eliot idealised these self-sacrificing heroes and heroines without any symmetrical condemnation of the surrounding characters muddling out their lives on the 'borderland of good and evil'.[41] This influenced Wedgwood's view of the asymmetry between praise and blame: we can have great moral heroes and heroines without the rest of us standing condemned as benighted sinners.

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39 Wedgwood, 'The Old Order Changeth', *Contemporary Review* 70 (July 1896), 434.

40 See J. W. to Eliot, 8 November 1872, in Beinecke Library *George Eliot and George Henry Lewes Collection*, GEN MSS 963, Yale University Library, https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/17298301

41 Ibid.

Another significant female influence was Frances Power Cobbe, with whom Wedgwood became friends in the 1860s through shared feminist circles. Both women contributed to the landmark 1869 anthology *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture* edited by Josephine Butler; both authored widely-circulated pamphlets on women's suffrage.[42] Beyond feminism, their philosophical views often dovetailed. Both believed that morality depended on religion, that we have free will, and that naturalism threatened our moral fabric. Cobbe followed an arc from eager friendship with Darwin to bitter disappointment, like Wedgwood, and driven by the same issue: our alleged need for religion to undergird morality. In addition, both women became vocal anti-vivisectionists. Cobbe and Wedgwood were fellow-travellers through the Victorian intellectual world.[43]

Martineau, Eliot, and Cobbe were the women whose names most often appeared in Wedgwood's work but, overall, she rarely referred to women. Her only essay explicitly named after a woman was 'The Moral Influence of George Eliot'. In substance, she did write essays on Martineau ('Invalids'), Cobbe ('Dislike'), and on Mrs. Humphry Ward ('Fiction and Faith').[44] But overwhelmingly her references were to men, reflecting the biased citation practices of her time.[45]

Two of the male philosophers she referenced most often deserve mention amongst her influences. The first is Aristotle. Despite her anti-naturalism, Wedgwood regularly praised and referred to his *Nicomachean*

42 Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage, Considered Chiefly with Respect to its Indirect Results', and Cobbe, 'The Final Cause of Woman', both in *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, ed. Josephine Butler (London: Macmillan, 1869), respectively pp. 247–89 and pp. 1–26. See also Wedgwood, *The Political Claims of Women* (pamphlet; London: National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1873), and Cobbe, 'Why Women Desire the Franchise' (pamphlet; London: National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1877). See also Samantha Evans, 'Julia Wedgwood's Pamphlet on Female Suffrage', *1584*, Cambridge University Press, 29 March 2017 (https://cambridgeblog.org/2017/03/julia-wedgwoods-pamphlet-on-womens-suffrage/), and Sue Brown, 'Julia Wedgwood, a Victorian Feminist and Female Intellectual', *Women's History Review* 33, no. 2 (2024), 244–64.

43 On these views of Cobbe's, see Alison Stone, *Frances Power Cobbe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

44 Wedgwood, 'The Moral Influence of George Eliot', *Contemporary Review* 39 (February 1881), 173–85; 'Invalids', *Spectator*, 10 August, 1878, 1011–12; 'Dislike', *Spectator*, 17 February 1883, 212–14; 'Fiction and Faith', *Contemporary Review* 62 (August 1892), 217–24.

45 See Stone, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 40–42.

Ethics, amongst other works. She saw him as a keen observer of experienced moral life, almost a phenomenologist.[46] She endorsed what she took to be his voluntarism, arguing that he combined it with an account of nature as a self-contained and regular order. She called this a 'stereoscopic' view and adopted a version of the same, claiming that our intermittent exercises of free will co-exist with our determination by natural forces.[47] However, she took voluntarism much further than Aristotle and married it with her belief in a supernatural realm. So she was no straightforward Aristotelian – and, indeed, she criticised him at times, for instance objecting that his ethics had no place for the paramount virtue, self-sacrifice.[48]

The second textual influence is negative: John Stuart Mill. Wedgwood invoked him incessantly, and almost always as a critical foil. She objected to his attempt to drive everything supernatural out of existence and to enforce everywhere the strictures of the 'logical intellect'.[49] She rejected utilitarianism, arguing against the claim that everyone desires pleasure. On the contrary, she said, pain is a common point of recoil, but pleasure is not a symmetrically opposite pole of positive orientation that everyone shares.[50] She denied there is any consensus on what we are oriented towards or aspire to: 'Most persons desire love, many persons desire power, some desire knowledge, but you cannot say that the wish for any one of these things is absolutely universal'.[51] Everyone has different ideals and values. She also thought it was reductive to say that we always pursue pleasure through our different beliefs about what may confer it. The aim of life is higher than pleasure, she insisted.[52] While that might ironically remind us of Mill's concept of higher pleasures, she repeatedly criticised that very concept, arguing that we judge what is right and good without any weighing of experiences or summing of desires or pleasures.[53] Her ethical theory was framed, throughout, against utilitarianism.

46 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', *Spectator*, 16 September 1882, 1195.
47 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle on Free-Will–I', *Spectator*, 24 July 1880, 941.
48 Wedgwood, 'Selfishness', *Spectator*, 12 August 1882, 1051.
49 Wedgwood, 'The Relation of Memory to Will', *Spectator*, 7 September 1878, 1122.
50 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
51 Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal: A Historic Study* (London: Trübner, 1888), p. 276.
52 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', *Spectator*, 16 September 1882, 1196.
53 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.

1.4 Scope and Structure of This Book

This book is not an intellectual biography; a very good one has already been written by Sue Brown, which has provided vital background for this project.[54] Nor does this book offer a comprehensive account of Wedgwood's thought. That would entail looking at her 1860s thinking on science and religion,[55] and the origins of language;[56] her 1870 biography of John Wesley; her theological reflections;[57] her many fiction reviews and her philosophy of art and literature;[58] her later work, including *The Message of Israel* from 1894; and her lengthy exchanges in letters, for example discussing the ethics of literature with Robert Browning and metaphysical questions with fellow-philosopher Victoria Welby.[59] A comprehensive account of her thought would also require full examination of *The Moral Ideal*,[60] both in its first and second editions, and of the whole corpus of her journal articles. For example, she penned numerous 1880s articles on political thought, which I shan't consider here.

I am taking a more focused angle on Wedgwood's work through the lens of imperfect antithesis. She first articulated this idea in a *Spectator* article from 1875,[61] though the concept was already at work in earlier articles from that decade. The idea organised many of her *Spectator* and *Contemporary Review* essays from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s. Some of these essays were 'chips from her workshop' during the construction of

54 See Brown, *Wedgwood*.

55 On this, see Donovan Schaefer, 'The Science of Life', in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*, ed. Joel Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 98–100, and Stone, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 136–43.

56 Stone, 'Julia Wedgwood and the Origin of Language', *Intellectual History Review* 34, no. 4 (2024), 751–72.

57 See Robert L. Stevens, 'Intertextual Constructions of Faith: Julia Wedgwood (1833-1913)', in *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Julie Melnyk (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 83–94 (p. 83).

58 See Katherine Malone, *The Lady Critic: Women of Letters and Critical Authority in British Periodicals, 1854-1908* (PhD dissn., Temple University, 2009), ch. 4.

59 See Sue Brown, 'Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: The Unpublished Correspondence', *Journal of Browning Studies* 3 (2012), 29–52; Alison Stone, 'Reading the Correspondence Between Victoria Welby and Julia Wedgwood: Nature, Naturalism, Supernaturalism', in *Victoria Welby and her Significs,* ed. Susan Petrilli and Devon Schiller (Cham: Springer, 2026 forthcoming).

60 For a starting-point, see Stone, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 211–14.

61 Namely Wedgwood, '"The Unseen Universe"', quoted above.

The Moral Ideal, published in 1888.[62] Imperfect antithesis thus continued into *The Moral Ideal* and shaped its structure, and its key principle of the historical law of recoil. After that point, imperfect antithesis seems to have become a less salient idea for her.

A reader might wonder whether imperfect antithesis yields enough material for a book, if it covers only one aspect of a little-known philosopher. I hope to show that it is sufficiently rich, because imperfect antithesis organises her thinking on core philosophical topics: ethics, the self, free will, metaphysics, and the structure of historical movement. Imperfect antithesis is only one strand of her thought, but it is a wide strand, and while other strands of Wedgwood remain outside our frame, that reflects not the narrowness of imperfect antithesis but the rather staggering scope of her oeuvre.

I shall evaluate Wedgwood's ideas as we go. Often my evaluations will be immanent: pulling out tensions amongst her claims, considering whether and how she can resolve them, asking what new problems these solutions generate. I shall not try to establish a revised philosophical canon that includes her, or to rank her against other historical or contemporary figures. She was one of many Victorian women intellectuals and philosophers, as I have noted. She rose to fame, but so did Martineau, Eliot, and Cobbe. The landscape of other slightly-less-famous women philosophers was crowded: Vernon Lee, Victoria Welby, Mary Everest Boole, Mrs. Humphry Ward, and others. All produced rich and complex bodies of work that deserve attention and reconstruction. Restoring Wedgwood is just part of the collective work of restoring this wider landscape.

To be sure, many male Victorian philosophers are likewise forgotten. Even Herbert Spencer, once as celebrated as Mill, has dwindled to a marginal figure. Whether or not we think that needs correction, restoring women is more urgent because they have been omitted from historical narratives more systematically than men. This is partly due to a misperception that women's exclusion from universities must have prevented them making serious intellectual contributions. That was not the case, because women could instead participate through print culture, as Wedgwood's example shows (and it shows that even the

62 Charles Herford, 'Frances Julia Wedgwood: A Memoir', in Wedgwood, *The Personal Life of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Macmillan, 1915), p. xviii.

exclusion from universities needs qualification).

This book is not organised strictly by the chronology of Wedgwood's writings but by themes. Chapter 2 introduces imperfect antithesis as a whole, expands on some influences upon the idea, and explores some of its initial applications. I then trace how it organises Wedgwood's views on a series of issues, moving from pain and pleasure (Chapter 3), the self and self-sacrifice (Chapter 4), relationships and isolation (Chapter 5), free will and determinism (Chapter 6), to the natural and the supernatural (Chapter 7). Broadly, then, I move from interior experience to the exterior world. Having clarified how imperfect antithesis serves as an organising approach, I enlarge on how Wedgwood differs from and relates to Hegel (Chapter 8).

These earlier chapters focus on imperfect antitheses within lived experience, then Chapters 9 to 13 turn to its historical side. The idea always had both phenomenological and historical bearings for Wedgwood, but the latter gradually became her main focus, culminating in *The Moral Ideal* where historical narrative almost totally overshadowed phenomenology. There is a broad connection with the temporal development of Wedgwood's thought here, insofar as she turned to history progressively over time and this book too discusses history in the later chapters. Nonetheless, Chapters 9 to 13 are organised not strictly by publication chronology but thematically, moving from women's changing place in society (Chapter 9), science's recoil against religion (Chapter 10), the recoil of Christianity against Rome (Chapter 11), to the recoil of the moderns against the ancients (Chapter 12), before explaining how these themes converge in *The Moral Ideal* (Chapter 13).

I will ask why Wedgwood shifted focus towards history. I suggest the shift was driven by her concerns about the rise of scientific naturalism. From her perspective, we'll see in Chapters 2 to 7, the highest moral ideal is self-sacrifice. Everyone has different ideals and values, but the ideal that everyone ought to put in first place is self-sacrifice. For Wedgwood, this is desirable because a degree of selfishness is endemic to our status as selves. As a result, we can care for others only by sacrificing part of what we desire for ourselves. Morality requires self-sacrifice; and self-sacrifice requires a supernatural realm. This is because we must have the capacity to transcend our natural and selfish inclinations to be able to achieve any level of self-sacrifice. And we cannot transcend our

nature unless there is a part of us that is not in nature but in a realm that surpasses it – the supernatural. To deny the supernatural, for Wedgwood, is to undermine morality.

These are big claims and some problems immediately leap forward. How can we ever exercise this power of self-transcendence if the supernatural cannot interrupt the continuity of nature, as Wedgwood holds? I will consider this issue in due course; she has answers, but I'll argue the problem remains intractable. A reader might also be thinking: 'Selfishness, self-sacrifice; so far, so Victorian'. Wedgwood *is* quintessentially Victorian. But she advances arguments for her ethics of self-sacrifice, some of which are worth taking seriously, I will suggest. Interestingly too, she sees self-sacrifice as a feminine virtue and the source of women's moral excellence, as well as their difficulties and sorrows. Hers is an early attempt to place women at the centre of ethics and learn from women's moral experience; this, too, makes her worth taking seriously.

To be sure, her insistence that morality requires supernatural ideals will strike many modern secular readers as problematic. Her whole ethics is Christian: her archetype of self-sacrifice is Christ on the cross; the more we lead genuinely moral lives, the closer we draw to Christ. This religious dimension is not an optional supplement in her eyes, but a structural feature of the moral life. I do not necessarily agree, but neither do I dismiss Wedgwood on account of her religiosity. I am guided by Peter Adamson's maxim that approaching historical philosophers means taking their religion seriously.[63] So I will not try to extricate a kind of defensible, minimal, secular Wedgwood. Instead I want to understand the structure, commitments, and tensions of her moral philosophy on its own terms. A secular Wedgwood, I think, would have struck her as a travesty.

To return to the book's structure, her worry is that naturalism undermines morality, but this worry throws up an apparent dilemma. If morality requires transcendent ideals, free will, and a supernatural order, these look like inherent structures of our existence as moral beings. But if they are inherent, how can naturalism ever undermine

63 See Adamson, 'Rules for History of Philosophy', *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*, 31 December 2016, https://historyofphilosophy.net/all-20-rules-history-philosophy

them? And if it can undermine them, doesn't that show that they are not inherent but a contingent product of Christianity as a moral, religious, and metaphysical scheme? The last point pushes Wedgwood towards her historical studies, trying to capture the distinctiveness and historical sedimentation of Christianity, through its recoil against Rome, in turn Rome's recoil against Greece, and Greece's recoil against prehistoric matriarchy. From this perspective, she comes to criticise naturalism for turning its back on the entire heritage of civilisation.

Yet her exploration of lived moral experience nonetheless commits her to seeing the striving for ideals, self-sacrifice, and the supernatural as inherent structures of moral life. She has to figure out how to reconcile the phenomenological and historical sides of her thought. Ultimately, I will suggest, the glue she applies is the concept of progress. Everything changes historically, but these changes have been progressive, leading to our increasingly explicit and developed realisation of the structures that human moral striving has inherently. This commitment to progress connects once again to imperfect antithesis, because using that idea Wedgwood denies that later historical stages – notably Christianity – are the symmetrical negation of earlier stages like the Roman world. The later stages learn from and build on the past, rather than wiping it away in a pure negation. In this way, imperfect antithesis enables the later stages to be richer, more complex, and more ambivalent than the earlier ones.

Wedgwood's commitment to progressive history embroils her in further difficulties, particularly an endemic Eurocentrism. At the same time, her conception of progress depends on imperfect antithesis, and the concept of imperfect antithesis orchestrates her many insights and gives her an original standpoint and a unified vision. We cannot have her insights without her problems or *vice versa*. I will highlight the most enduring insights and the most insurmountable problems in my overall evaluation of Wedgwood's philosophy of imperfect antithesis at the end of Chapter 13.

2. The Law of Imperfect Antithesis

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I lead into Wedgwood's idea of imperfect antithesis, first bringing forward some of her key statements and applications (2.2) and then noting three influences on her idea: Aristotle, Darwin, and Hegel (2.3). I discuss three of her applications: gratitude (2.4), apologies (2.5), and the polarity of remembering and forgetting (2.6). These applications show that Wedgwood is not rejecting antithesis; for her, it pervades human life and the universe. But crucially, real antithesis is imperfect, asymmetrical, and uneven, whereas symmetry is a fictitious construction of the logical intellect (2.7). Because Wedgwood upholds the reality of antithesis, she is not quite a proto-deconstructive critic of binary oppositions, although her project does have certain similarities with deconstruction (2.8). I then explain that her writing insistently uses double negatives or litotes, her linguistic device for holding the imperfection of antitheses in view (2.9). The conclusion sketches the shape of the following chapters (2.10).

2.2 Imperfect Antithesis: Statements and Applications

Here are some of Wedgwood's key claims regarding imperfect antithesis:

> No law of thought seems to us to have a wider range than what we would call the law of imperfect antithesis. Hardly anything in nature, in experience, in human life, is entirely antithetical, and it is in the slightly varying form we are obliged to give the converse of any statement that we

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> often find the most important bearings of the truth therein expressed.[1]

> No source of error is commoner than the fallacy of antithesis. We cannot say that the effect of cold is always the reverse of the effect of heat, nor is there any department in physical investigation in which it could be safely assumed that if you reverse the cause you would simply reverse the effect. Though no one can love good who does not hate evil, we should greatly err if we endeavoured to measure the love of good, in our own hearts or in those of others, by our hatred of evil.[2]

> You cannot reverse any statement respecting a good thing, and be sure that it will be true of a bad thing; there is a certain antithesis between good things and their opposites, but it is not one that will bear any stress of logical deduction. We should subject ourselves to the most continual and bitter disappointment, if we measured the degree in which any one loved truth by the degree in which he hated falsehood.[3]

> What we have to remember in all controversy [...] is that the vibration is never simple. The antithesis is never complete. What one man or one party asserts is not exactly what the other denies.[4]

Putting these statements together, for Wedgwood there are many antitheses in human life and reality – heat and cold, cause and effect, good and evil, denial and affirmation. But we tend to assume these antitheses are simple and symmetrical, that one side is *A* and the other *not-A*, the perfect negation of the first. This is a fallacy. Antitheses are almost always imperfect; the two sides are not symmetrical opposites, but, however subtly, do not mirror one another. The mirror image has some discrepancy from the face gazing into it.

> Let us illustrate [the] bias of the logical faculty by pointing out a similar error in the domain of Art. When a careless painter would represent reflections in still water, he merely draws [...] their inverted forms [... rather than] gives truly the dissimilarity, often striking, between the object and its inverted image. Exactly the same temptation haunts man's reasoning faculty.[5]

Wedgwood applies these ideas very widely, reflecting her view that few

1 Wedgwood, '"Unseen Universe"', 1425.
2 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 189.
3 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.
4 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 332.
5 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

laws have broader scope than imperfect antithesis. Many antitheses that the 'logical faculty' classes as symmetrical – praise and blame, pleasure and pain, right and wrong – are in reality asymmetrical. Here are some examples of her claims.

Pain and *pleasure* are not symmetrical. Pain is a positive, real, and urgent feeling that compels us to seek relief, whereas pleasure is only an abstraction that covers over the wide variety of ideals and values that people pursue.[6]

Truth and *lying* are also asymmetrical. 'It is wrong to tell a lie, and very often it is wrong also to tell the truth'.[7] Truth-telling might be cruel and hurtful, have damaging consequences, or brush away important uncertainties.[8]

Praise versus blame is another fallacious symmetrical antithesis which covers over two slightly different, and real, asymmetrical antitheses. The real and imperfect antithesis of praise is not blame, as the 'logical mind' assumes, but rather thinking that someone's actions are normal and unexceptional. 'You can no more praise a man for not being a criminal, than you can condemn him for not being a hero'.[9] And the real and imperfect antithesis of blame is not praise, but mercy, excusing or forgiving the person.[10]

Because we wrongly assume that every praise entails a corresponding opposite blame and *vice versa*, we end up with too much praising and blaming, extolling and censuring, in daily life:

> There is a tendency in human nature, to which the very meaning of words bears witness, to judge too much, – to stamp neutral qualities with praise or blame, and leave hardly an epithet which can be used to describe a mere quality, without connoting an opinion as to its merit.[11]

Many actions are either unexceptional or forgivable, so we should more often put the 'moral sense' to sleep.

Giving the moral sense a rest is a key task for art: 'that is the function

6 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1194–96.
7 Wedgwood, 'The Misleading Character of Law as an Index to Morals', *Spectator*, 29 September 1883, 1249.
8 Wedgwood, 'The Moral Ideal–II.' *Spectator*, 27 December 1879, 1640–42.
9 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1249.
10 Wedgwood, '"The Majority"', *Spectator,* 26 February 1881, 278–79.
11 Wedgwood, 'Moral Purpose in Fiction', *Spectator*, 25 March 1882, 389.

of Art: it is exactly that the moral sense may go to sleep. But it should awake refreshed'.[12] Art should not expound morality; yet neither should art be totally divorced from morality, depicting facts with no evaluative component, then it would not refresh the moral sense. There is no perfect antithesis here, such that art must be either moral or non-moral. Rather, art at best – as in George Eliot's fiction – offers a thick description of the ambiguities of character and everyday moral dilemmas, 'the borderland of evil where most of us, in this undramatic world, spend the greater part of our lives'.[13] Such descriptions abstain from direct moral judgement but are rich with evaluative insight and experience, which can inform and refresh our real-life moral struggles and responses.[14]

Right and *wrong* are asymmetrical. 'Right is not the opposite of wrong'.[15] It is not the case that whenever some act is wrong, the opposite act is right. Rather, the opposite of wrong is 'permitted', but not all that is permitted is positively right: 'The things we have a right to do are the last things which find place in the aspirations after perfect rightness'.[16] Anyway, *right* and *wrong* are only abstractions covering over a plurality of virtues and vices:

> Human experience is a manifold thing, and right and wrong do not form the only antithesis in human life; at strange, inexplicable moments, when the unfathomable part of our nature seems opened to us, we would say they do not appear to form its deepest antithesis.[17]

Very often, we cannot realise one virtue without falling into some interconnected vice:

> In this world good qualities are never tied up in a bunch. If you have enthusiasm, you must forego scrupulous justice. Where you find much generosity, you will rarely find much gratitude. Where there is entire tenderness, there is hardly ever a very rigorous standard of truth. Not that enthusiasm and justice, generosity and gratitude, or tenderness

12 J. W. to Robert Browning, 3 December 1868, in Richard Curle, ed., *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed by Their Letters* (New York: Stokes, 1937), p. 150.
13 J. W. to Eliot, 8 November 1872, *George Eliot and George Henry Lewes Collection*, GEN MSS 963.
14 Wedgwood, 'Moral Purpose in Fiction', *Spectator*, 25 March, 1882, 388–90.
15 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1249.
16 Ibid.
17 Wedgwood, 'Moral Purpose', 389.

> and truthfulness are in the slightest degree hostile to each other, but it requires the whole sphere of goodness to take them in, and each human being has no more than a fragment of it.[18]

Virtues and *vices* are antithetical, but again not in neatly symmetrical ways. It is not inevitable that an enthusiast be unjust in exactly inverse proportion to their enthusiasm. Rather, finite human beings cannot readily realise one virtue without swinging a bit too far towards it, and away from something else. These movements are not logically precise; they are more like oscillations than exact measures.

Justice and *forgiveness* form an antithesis where 'To the merely logical intellect [...] the ideas of forgiveness and justice appear utterly incongruous'.[19] But, she says, they are not perfect logical opposites, such that having one completely excludes the other. Instead, she speaks of a 'mental vibration' between forgiveness and justice.[20] To forgive is to recognise the causal forces that made someone's action inevitable. To judge is to insist that the person retained the choice how to respond to these determining forces. This sounds a contradiction, but she tries to show how we can hold both attitudes because of the logically imperfect nature of the antithesis.

Across all these issues – of which, evidently, I have here offered only an introductory survey – her overall point is that our intellects misconceive moral life and experience in an overly logical, schematic way. Confronted with the complexity of character and emotion, we grasp for neat symmetries. This is an understandable temptation, but it yields systems divorced from lived experience, of which we ought instead to be giving a 'faithful transcript'.[21]

A potential problem is that Wedgwood herself may be using imperfect antithesis – the idea of asymmetrical opposites – to cover over a diverse array of phenomena. But she would deny that she is forcing this diversity under a common rubric. Her goal is instead to render the diversity of experience faithfully, in its real heterogeneity. She believes that the idea of imperfect antithesis does not homogenise experience but reveals its permutations. For while a perfect antithesis has a neat

18 Ibid., 390.
19 Wedgwood, 'Justice', *Spectator*, 25 October 1879, 1344.
20 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, pp. 332–33.
21 Wedgwood, 'The Old Order Changeth', 434.

symmetrical structure that is the same everywhere, every imperfect antithesis is imperfect in its own way. A symmetrical contrast always requires an imaginary central axis dividing two identical parts, but an asymmetrical contrast allows for unlimited combinations of different shapes, sizes, and arrangements.

2.3 Three Influences: Aristotle, Darwin, Hegel

I mentioned some of Wedgwood's general intellectual influences in the last chapter, but here I want to note three who influenced her idea of imperfect antithesis in particular.

One influence she explicitly signals herself is Aristotle. For Aristotle, each virtue lies in the mean between an antithetical pair of vices – e.g., courage falls between cowardice and rashness. In her view, this correctly registers the role of antithesis in ethical experience. As she also says, Aristotle does not place the mean equidistant between the two vices. In general, one vice is worse than the other and so the mean must lean the other way – e.g., it is better to lean towards being rash than cowardly. Wedgwood praises Aristotle here for his awareness that the antithesis of vices is imperfect.[22] Cowardice and rashness are not symmetrical; cowardice is a bit worse, so the mean requires leaning slightly the other way.

However, she says, even Aristotle was drawn towards the fallacy of antithesis despite himself – or rather the fallacy of *symmetrical* antithesis. The mean still suggests a halfway point within a 'system which always sandwiches a virtue between two vices'.[23] Here Aristotle fell under the pull of logical schematism. In this respect, he went astray, whereas we learn most from him just when he observed the moral life free from logical scaffolding. At these points, she calls him the Shakespeare of the ethical world, the keenest observer of its many-sidedness, and of the many varying forms of antithesis.[24]

A second influence on imperfect antithesis was Charles Darwin, although surprisingly, despite her voluminous engagement with evolutionary theory, she never acknowledges him apropos of antithesis

22 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.
23 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1249.
24 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

in particular. Nonetheless, the 'principle of antithesis' was one of several explanatory principles introduced in his 1872 *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*:

> When a directly opposite state of mind is induced, there is a strong and involuntary tendency to the performance of movements of a directly opposite nature, though these are of no use.[25]

Suppose a dog, feeling aggressive, bares its teeth, stands tall, and lifts its tail. These behaviours intrinsically express its aggressive feelings. They are functional because erect ears catch sounds, the raised posture makes the dog seem bigger to its enemy, and so on. Likewise, clenching the fist inherently expresses human aggression because a fist is functional for hitting, and the tensed muscles express the feeling and prepare for action.

Now, when a dog feels friendly or submissive, this is expressed by behaviours the opposite of the aggressive ones: crouching low, licking, holding down the tail. When a human feels peaceful and unaggressive, this is expressed by an open, flat hand. But nothing in an open hand or a low crouch intrinsically expresses or is functional for acting on friendliness and peacefulness. These behaviours serve to express the feelings they do only because they are the opposite of the behaviours that *do* have an intrinsic expressive link with the opposite aggressive feelings. Open hands and low crouches are expressive only indirectly, through contrast, not intrinsically by their functions. Darwin says we perform these 'directly opposite actions, whether or not these are of any use, under the excitement of an opposite frame of mind'.[26]

Wedgwood was one of numerous Darwin-Wedgwood family members whose help Darwin enlisted when researching *Expression*. He sought their observations and examples, and family members duly recorded observations of animals, infants, and children. Wedgwood corresponded with him on these topics, notably informing him about Antoine Charma's *Essai sur le langage*. She said of Charma:

> He does not seem to have made the same mistake (of supposing the action to be several times repeated at once) with reference to shaking

25 Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Murray, 1872), p. 28.
26 Ibid., p. 318.

> the head, where however it would curiously be much nearer the truth, as one nod is enough both for the baby and the Yes but one movement from right to left would be insufficient for the No.[27]

Darwin took up this point that shaking the head expresses 'no' because it is rooted in the baby's turning away her head to refuse unwanted food.[28] He adopted Wedgwood's point that one nod is enough to express 'yes', because the nod is expressive merely by being the opposite of the expression for 'no', and one nod is enough to establish this contrast.

How does Darwin's principle of antithesis anticipate Wedgwood's imperfect antithesis? For him, some behaviours inherently express certain emotions, while other directly contrasting behaviours express the opposite emotions only by indirect contrast. Thus the two sides of the antithesis are not symmetrical: on one side a behaviour intrinsically expresses an emotion, on the other a behaviour is only indirectly linked with the emotion it expresses. The two sides form antitheses, and antitheses pervade emotional expression, for Darwin – but the antitheses are asymmetrical. Close and emotionally informed observation shows this, even though the pairs could easily be mistaken to be perfectly symmetrical.

The third influence I want to highlight is Hegel. Wedgwood has sometimes been seen as a Hegelian. Sue Brown argues that she 'relied on a Hegelian dialectic' in *The Moral Ideal*, narrating the progression of civilisations on a dialectical pattern.[29] Admittedly, in my own earlier work, I said that Wedgwood never mentions Hegel.[30] It is true that she doesn't mention him in the first edition of *The Moral Ideal*. But in the second edition, and in essays in the *Spectator* and *Contemporary Review*, she refers to Hegel's idea that 'Nature is the Other of Spirit'.[31] The second edition also refers to Hegel's philosophy of world history.[32]

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27 J. W. to Charles Darwin, 1867–72, DCP-LETT-7060.

28 Darwin, *Expression*, p. 273.

29 Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 253.

30 Stone, *Women Philosophers*, p. 197.

31 Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal*, second edition (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., 1907), p. 465; Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942; 'William Law, the English Mystic of the Eighteenth Century', *Contemporary Review* 31 (December 1877), 97; 'The Negative Stage in the Life of Thought', *Spectator*, 24 August 1878, 1067.

32 She mentions 'the decision of Hegel, that with Persia history takes its start', citing his German lectures on the philosophy of history (*Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 161; for the English translation, see Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. John

Even more significantly, in 1865 she published an anonymous two-part review-essay of James Hutchison Stirling's book *The Secret of Hegel*, which included his translation and commentary of the earlier sections of Hegel's *Science of Logic*.[33] The book was important, fuelling the growth of British Idealism. Her review-essay in *The Reader* shows considerable knowledge of Hegel's work in the German.[34] Thus, Wedgwood knew Hegel much better than I realised.

Wedgwood singles out Hegel's view of nature and spirit as one of his core insights.

> If we were to select any one expression as fitted to suggest the whole system of Hegel, it should be one occurring more than once in these volumes, that Nature is the Other of Spirit. [...] Spirit and Nature are antithetical – the convex and concave of the curve.[35]

Yet, she objects, Hegel reduces nature to spirit's self-externalisation; for him, only spirit is ultimately real, and spirit posits nature:

> Nature has no meaning apart from Spirit. We most clearly represent to ourselves the standing-point of Hegel by taking some specimen of extreme materialism, and simply inverting it. 'This universe matter with its functions, one of which is mind,' – take the converse of that assertion, and you are at the starting-point to follow Hegel. Thought, therefore, is alone true existence. [...] Hegel's universe has no [...] duality; with him the mirror makes its own reflection.[36]

Rejecting this monistic stance, she holds that both nature and spirit are real. This criticism of Hegel clearly foreshadows imperfect antithesis. Hegel treats nature merely as the symmetrical opposite of spirit, where the mirror of spirit makes its own reflection, necessarily a perfect reflection. This is what she wants to get away from.

We see the same impetus when she responds to Hegel's philosophy of history and political life. Whereas Stirling focused on Hegel's metaphysics, she outlines and praises Hegel's treatment of the

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Sibree (London: Bohn, 1914), pp. 180–81.

33 Stirling, *The Secret of Hegel*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865).

34 Wedgwood, 'Secret of Hegel', *The Reader*, 18 March 1865, 308–9, and 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', 17 June 1865, 674–75.

35 Wedgwood, 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', 674.

36 Ibid.

'rhythmical movement of Thought' in history, his stages of world history, and his conception of family, civil society, and state in the *Philosophy of Right* (not available in English at the time). She highlights Hegel's treatment of love: 'Love is at once the production and the resolution of the greatest of contradictions – that I give up myself, lose my own individuality to find it in another'.[37] However, as we will see later, her own view is that when I give my desire up for the sake of someone else, I undergo an irrecoverable loss. Self-sacrifice is real and cannot be alchemically transformed into positive self-recovery, which is the move Hegel attempts to make.

Commenting on the overall structure of Hegel's dialectic, she proposes a subtle re-orientation. For Hegel, the dialectical movement is roughly from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, even though he never uses these words (and neither does Wedgwood). More precisely, he speaks of moving from *abstraction* to *dialectic* (proper) to the *speculative*.[38] Wedgwood says that the speculative moment, the synthesis, is much closer to the thesis.[39] The third is not an even balance between the two previous moments. It leans to one side. For example, she applies the pattern to the life-cycle: childhood is the time of over-confident knowledge, youth of hyper-critical doubt, and maturity is the time of 'belief', i.e., knowledge that is admitted to be fallible.[40] But this third stage, she states, is much nearer the first than the second. This is because the two halves of any antithesis are asymmetrical, and so any third moment cannot be evenly balanced either. Just like the Aristotelian mean, it has to lean more to one side because the two sides are not evenly balanced to begin with.

Positively, Wedgwood takes from Hegel the importance and pervasiveness of antithesis. Negatively, she pulls away from his tendency to cast antithesis as perfect symmetrical negation, or logical contradiction, and therefore to pursue rational resolutions of every antithesis. This is the danger of the logical intellect, leading Hegel astray as it did Aristotle. In both cases, a valuable insight into the centrality

37 Ibid.; see Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §158, 199.

38 Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic* [1830], trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991).

39 Wedgwood, 'Dead Secret', 675.

40 Ibid.

of antithesis – and, in Aristotle's case, its asymmetrical structure – is vitiated by an urge to schematise and simplify. Her project is to develop the insight without the schematism.

2.4 Gratitude

To begin to put flesh on imperfect antithesis, let's start with gratitude and apologies, one everyday moral antithesis to which Wedgwood applies it. She opens the 1883 essay 'Gratitude' by complaining that our black/white moral vocabulary crushes many nuances, including the complexities of the semi-moral emotion of gratitude.[41]

In a slightly earlier essay, 'Character and Position' from 1878, she observes:

> A person [...] whose youth has been embittered by severity, looks with amazement on the unthankfulness and captiousness of those whose parents have always treated them as equals. [...] He forgets that no one can be as grateful for a yoke never being put on, as for its being taken off.[42]

She resumes and enlarges on the theme in 'Gratitude'. If someone has never had a yoke put on, has never been treated harshly or suffered at her parents' hands, then she will not feel thankful that her parents treated her as an equal. We only feel grateful to others when they relieve us from a bad state and lift us into a better one. Consequently, gratitude is rare: we are only grateful for benefits that are given rarely, suddenly, or exceptionally. For the most part, we are ungrateful. But this ingratitude is not a moral offence – it is simply the norm. People should therefore not be blamed for being ungrateful.[43]

Children are ungrateful by nature, she continues, and so are 'men of genius' (a questionable notion to which she subscribed). Also: 'The richly endowed are rarely grateful. On the other hand, we must say the same of the needy'.[44] If I'm hungry and someone gives me some food, I don't feel grateful, because I am reminded of my subordinate and demeaning dependency. But conversely, if my table is overflowing and someone gives me food, I won't feel grateful either – I don't need the gift.

41 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', *Spectator*, 31 March 1883, 416.
42 Wedgwood, 'Character and Position', *Spectator*, 12 October 1878, 1267.
43 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 416.
44 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 417.

'Gratitude belongs to the temperate zone of the spirit. It withers alike in the tropic glow of unbroken prosperity and under the icy blast of arctic despair'.[45] Yet according to Wedgwood herself, we don't generally feel grateful for what is normal and unexceptional, i.e., that which falls in the 'temperate zone'. There seem vanishingly few situations where gratitude finds a foothold.

Restricting its domain still further, she holds that gratitude belongs totally outside the realm of law and politics. It can only arise in personal relations, a fact that exemplifies the separation between the spheres of morals and politics.[46] Indeed, if someone feels grateful to their political representative, that is tantamount to *treachery*: 'All grateful feeling, in the sphere of law or politics, becomes treachery to the State'.[47] An arresting and provocative statement; what does it mean?

The claim reflects her sharp distinction of moral from political life: they are 'not conterminous, nor even concentric'.[48] Gratitude faces upwards, towards someone who has shown you exceptional generosity (so that, again, the rich don't feel gratitude, not needing generosity, while the poor don't feel gratitude, resenting a generosity they would rather not depend on). In politics, however, a free citizen is not meant to depend on politicians' favours; citizens are entitled to their rights, and the state and its representatives are obliged to respect them. To be grateful to a politician means either that illicit favours have taken place or, more broadly, that politicians have been acting improperly, acting from private and personal feelings rather than impersonal principles. This betrays the fundamental principles of the rule of law, and the impartial distribution of rights and duties on which a polity is based.

This ties in with her later article 'Morals and Politics', where she bemoans the fact that political life is being degraded by a demand for politicians to be generous, and give citizens more than their due.[49] These generous acts may look benevolent, but they foster people's dependency on the political class, reducing citizens to clients, and diminishing the ability of politicians to act from principle irrespective of their feelings

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 418.
48 Ibid.
49 Wedgwood, 'Morals and Politics', *National Review* 16 (February 1891), esp. 751.

on an issue. Generosity is sentimental, partial, and discretionary; justice must be principled, impartial, and universal. Wedgwood does not want private moral attitudes of preference and affection imported into the political sphere, and she wishes to protect the state from emotional dependency and personalisation.

To return to 'Gratitude', she has ended up explaining why gratitude is generally absent from our lives. Yet although this absence is normal, it is still a loss, not only to everyone who fails to receive it but, even more, to everyone who fails to give it. For looking back in hindsight, we feel guilty about all the gratitude we haven't shown. We should encourage children to be more grateful, to reduce their burden of later-life guilt. Yet much of that guilt is inevitable, 'the heritage of humanity' – every generation is ungrateful in youth and repents in old age.[50]

2.5 Apologies

In 'Apologies' from 1878, Wedgwood argues that more apologies would be desirable socially ('I'm sorry I bumped into you', etc.), but only for minor offences. For big offences, apologies fall so far short of the fault that giving them makes things worse.[51] It adds insult to injury to suggest that a big fault was so trivial that a mere muttered apology can wipe it away.

Neither, she continues, should people apologise for neglecting one another, for they have not been actively thinking of the person they neglected at all. They did not intend to neglect that person; the neglect arose precisely from them not giving the person a thought. Here, she remarks, we find it hard to imagine how seldom other people think of us. Inevitably, this is the very hardest thing for *me* to conceive, since everywhere I look, there I am at the centre of my field of vision. 'By the law of mental parallax', therefore, I assume that someone who was not thinking about me must have been intentionally slighting me.[52] At least then I remain centre stage, albeit as the offended victim. Nonetheless, this is a mistake.

Further, Wedgwood says, people shouldn't apologise by saying 'I

50 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 418.
51 Wedgwood, 'Apologies', *Spectator*, 21 September 1878, 1179.
52 Ibid., 1180.

didn't mean to', for the fault lay in their act, not whatever they intended by it.[53] This is consistent with her view that one should not apologise for unintentional neglect: either way, what I did or didn't intend is irrelevant. She concludes: 'We oppose the habit of making apologies, because we want an apology to have some meaning'.[54] Yet even when an apology has meaning, as a mere sentence it can never mean very much, thus it can only alleviate small wrongs. The real-life place for apologies – as for gratitude – is small.

In sum, we are rarely grateful, and personal relations could benefit from a tinge more gratitude, but although gratitude is a virtue, ingratitude is normal and not blameable. And in legal and political contexts, gratitude has no place. Gratitude is not always good; ingratitude is not always bad. Likewise, apologies are not always good, and being unapologetic is not always bad. These everyday moral landscapes do not conform to an '*A versus not-A*' pattern; their terrain is bumpy, its patterns discerned only by patient observation of everyday life.

2.6 Remembering and Forgetting

In another 1878 article, 'The Relation to Memory to Will', Wedgwood applies the law of imperfect antithesis to memory and forgetting. Generally, we take it that remembering things is desirable, and that we ought to try to remember things. 'That any one *ought* to remember, indeed, and that recollection therefore is, to some extent, a matter of will, we admit every time we blame a child or a servant for forgetting a message'.[55] We also take it, less explicitly, that people ought to forget certain things. To remember too many day-to-day minutiae prevents one seeing what is important, which becomes 'hardly discernible through the cobwebs'.[56] However, although recollection seems to admit of a degree of voluntary control, and practice can bring it under greater control, it is not clear that forgetting can be done voluntarily.

> Can we say that the possibility of remembering at will involves the possibility of forgetting at will? Because we may make a successful effort

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Wedgwood, 'The Relation of Memory to Will', 1122.
56 Ibid.

> to resist sleep, does it follow that we may make a successful effort to resist wakefulness?[57]

Often, we desperately *want* to forget, to 'obliterate a painful past', to let go of all that is crowding into our minds and fall asleep.[58] In a letter, she sighs: 'We do so need the daily dip in Lethe' – in ancient Greek mythology, this was the river the dead passed through, where they forgot their past lives.[59]

Yet, she adds (in her *Spectator* piece), in these cases where we cannot forget, some deeper part of our mind does *not* want to, and tenaciously holds on to memories against our higher-order will. Thus really, we do not want to forget, but we want to want to forget.

> What is surprising is that, however ardently we may wish that such and such things had not been, it is wonderfully difficult even to desire that they should be forgotten. Whilst the past seems a part of oneself, that clinging to life which belongs to our whole being makes itself manifest in the recoil from oblivion, even with regard to what we would so gladly have avoided altogether. We will not go half-way to meet the chill shadow; even pain is less an object of dread than the loss of something that has become a part of our intellectual being.[60]

We deeply fear letting go, stepping into Lethe, because it heralds our future oblivion, and in fearful recoil our minds doggedly cling on even to things we would really rather they would obliterate.

This does not take away the obligation to forget. In particular, we ought to forget many actions and events that aggrieve and irritate us – unless we can forget these accumulated embittered grudges, we will soon be chock-full of resentment. We also need to forget life's profusion of small details in order to see what is important, and to forget the many irritating faults of an individual to remember their good points. 'A man must forget in order to remember'.[61] The obligation to forget thus follows from the obligation to remember; as the latter is a duty, the former must be too.

So, Wedgwood comes back to the question:

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57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 3 April 1901, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file13.
60 Wedgwood, 'Relation of Memory to Will', 1123.
61 Ibid.

> How can I make myself cease to wish what I do wish? – It must be possible, for it is sometimes the demand of conscience. The past must remain, but we may open the door to something that hides it.[62]

When we remember what is important, 'large and fruitful', this can outweigh all embittering debris and throw it into perspective as being outweighed by a greater good.

Wedgwood began by suggesting that remembering is desirable and we ought to cultivate our power of memory, whereas forgetting is not obviously under the same voluntary control. Yet there is a duty to forget, deriving from the obligation to remember. And ought implies can. So, we have to find indirect ways to circumvent our inherent fearful tendency to cling to the past. Ironically, the principal way to forget some things is to remember other, better, more elevated ones. Exercising voluntary control and practice over recollection is the best way to gain more voluntary power to forget.

In several ways, memory and forgetting are not a perfect antithesis. It is not the case that remembering is good and forgetting bad: both are generally desirable, and they are necessary for each other. Yet while both are desirable, they are not controllable to the same degree – another asymmetry. This very asymmetry means that by controlling the more controllable variable (remembering) we can indirectly gain more control over the less controllable variable (forgetting). Recognising asymmetry has ethical and practical benefits.

2.7 Real Antithesis

In a logical or formal antithesis, *A* and *not-A*, the *not-A* pole is merely negative. Wedgwood is interested not in logical but real oppositions, contrasts that are present in lived experience and are multi-faceted in ways that binary categories occlude. Gratitude and ingratitude are opposites, but not symmetrical ones: if they were symmetrical then gratitude would be a virtue and ingratitude a blameable vice, but in fact gratitude is a virtue and a gift and yet ingratitude is normal and unexceptional. Apologising and being unapologetic are opposites, but asymmetrical ones because the former is sometimes good while the

62 Ibid.

latter is generally not bad. Memory and forgetting are opposites, but in this case, they are asymmetrical because although one retains and the other lets go, both are desirable. Thus, as I remarked earlier, it is the nature of imperfect or asymmetrical antithesis that not all antitheses are imperfect or asymmetrical in the same ways. Still, an asymmetrical antithesis remains an antithesis, only it is a real one rather than a logical fiction. Wedgwood's view is not that many supposed antitheses are not such, but that many supposedly logically symmetrical antitheses are really uneven and asymmetrical.

'The concave', observes Wedgwood in a letter, is 'so marvellously unlike the convex'.[63] The antitheses that concern her, then, are not equivalent sections of a sphere (like *a*) or complementary (like *b*) but are more like *c*. See Figure 1.

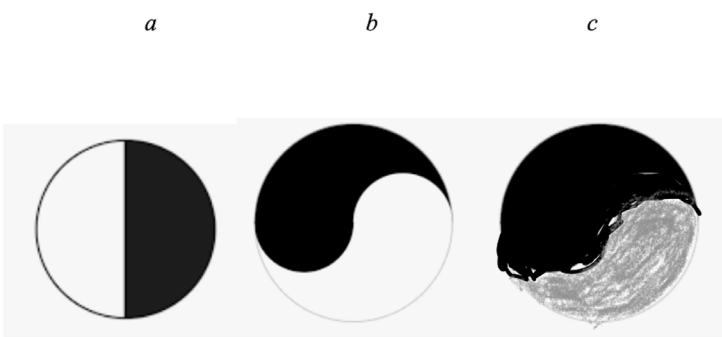


Fig. 1 Images *a*, *b*, and *c*. Image created by the author (2026).

2.8 Wedgwood and Deconstruction

When Wedgwood speaks of the 'fallacy of antithesis' and complicates it with a non-binary picture, she seems to anticipate feminist and deconstructive critiques of binary oppositions. For deconstructive critics, any binary opposition – say, mind/body, reason/emotion, action/passion, man/woman – privileges one term over the other.[64] The

63 J. W. to Jane Gourlay, September 1875, WM 447.

64 See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), trans. Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris, 1986), pp. 63–65.

privilege may not be overtly stated, but there is a power hierarchy in play. Deconstruction traces how the privileged term, normally ranked 'one', depends on the subordinate term, normally ranked 'zero', revealing how the subordinate term is really more than zero. The interdependency undermines the claim that the terms are a binary and destabilises their hierarchy.

Wedgwood agrees that real antitheses are not binary. Their form is not one *versus* zero but more like one *versus* one-quarter, one *versus* one-eighth, two-eighths *versus* seven-eighths, etc. However, she objects more to the logical push for symmetry than the power relations implicit in the binary construal. For instance, she does not object that the antithesis between good and evil hierarchically privileges the good. She is against evil. Nor does she object that the praise/blame, right/wrong, truth/lying antitheses respectively privilege praise, rightness, and truth. To be sure, with some antitheses, she wants to dial down their moral temper, saying that truth-telling isn't always right, and that many actions are unexceptional and don't warrant blame. Even so, her stated concern is not to critique the power relations involved in privileging praise over blame, but to capture real-life moral complexity.

Nevertheless, it looks as if a critique of hierarchy is tacitly part of this project. For example, she reminds us that although we tend to think remembering is desirable, we (ironically) don't always remember that forgetting is often desirable as well. She does not express this concern in terms of correcting a hierarchical privileging of remembering, yet implicitly she is carrying out that correction.

However, we might also differentiate Wedgwood from deconstruction on the grounds that she *upholds* many hierarchical oppositions: spirit and nature, self and body, ideal and reality, public and private. But deconstructionists have no wish to destroy oppositions either. For Derrida, deconstruction is the critique of what we cannot do without:

> The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by [...] opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived only on this opposition and its system. But we cannot do without the concept of the sign [...][65]

65 Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1966), in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278–95 (p. 281).

Destabilising oppositions presupposes their existence; they have structured our thought and framework of meaning, so that we cannot think without them.

This deconstructive view is still not quite the same as Wedgwood's. She does not say that (for instance) the public/private opposition is pervasive and inescapable, yet embodies a power hierarchy that we must question and destabilise from within. Rather, for her, the public/private opposition is real, rightful, and important, and understanding and preserving it requires attending to its really asymmetrical character. Asymmetry matters, in her view, because we cannot make sense of our moral lives or inhabit them faithfully without acknowledging this reality. For deconstructionists, asymmetry is evidence of a conceptual instability, but for Wedgwood asymmetry is the shape of reality. Her task is not to *critique* oppositions as internally unstable but to *vindicate* oppositions that we cannot do without and inhabit them as the asymmetrical oppositions they are.

2.9 Litotes

Wedgwood makes copious use of double negatives (litotes), a hallmark of her writing. A double negative in a sentence leads us almost back to a positive, but not quite. True double negatives should not be confused with apparent ones such as Mick Jagger's 'I can't get no satisfaction' or Olivia Rodrigo's 'I never felt this way for no-one'. These are really intensified single negatives, meaning: 'I can't get even a tiny bit of satisfaction' and 'I never felt anything remotely like this for anyone'.

In contrast, true double negatives, or litotes, tumble over one another in Wedgwood's 1872 essay on Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, 'The Constitution and Course of Nature' (all emphases mine):[66]

> The assertion will *not* be thought *un*warranted by any one who has studied what was once called by a wise man 'the most modest book that ever was written'.
>
> Nature, Butler urges in reply, brings *nothing* to *confute* the anticipation of continuance which arises in the mind of one who is conscious of individual existence.

66 Wedgwood, 'The Constitution and Course of Nature', *Spectator*, 30 November 1872, 1524.

> Goodness is in this world a thing so hidden that we can *hardly* discern its natural consequences, but it is *not* the less true that they are natural.
>
> On the whole, it was *not* nearly so *un*true then as it would be now to say that all good men were Christians [...]

What does this profusion of double negatives do? First, they understate: 'he is not undistinguished' isn't the same as 'he is distinguished', but suggests instead 'he is *somewhat* distinguished, *but* ...'. Repeated understatement embodies carefulness, asserting no more than is strictly warranted, proceeding through small distinctions. Second, double negatives convey a meaning slightly different from what is explicitly said. They gesture to what language cannot pin down, to something that escapes the words used. For that reason, they generate a degree of ambiguity and obscurity. These qualities set Wedgwood's writing far apart from the bold, confident, declarative style of her friend Frances Power Cobbe, as well as from the plain-spoken, no-nonsense style of her older mentor Harriet Martineau.

Above all, then, two things about litotes are vital for Wedgwood. They hint at a meaning beyond words, and thus at a supernatural domain beyond the natural one in which words refer to things in a relatively straightforward manner. Also, litotes embody in language the principle that two antitheses do not simply cancel one another out and return us to ground zero. 'Not a bad runner' does not boil down to 'a good runner'. Instead the statement points to the asymmetry *between* 'a bad runner' and 'a good runner', the gap where these two opposites don't exactly mirror each other. To use another of her favourite metaphors, litotes sit on the watershed between rivers, the barely perceptible ridge where two bodies of water do not quite merge into a seamless whole. Litotes hold in mind the imperfect nature of antithesis.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has made some initial forays into the idea of imperfect antithesis. With this starting-point established, Chapters 3 to 7 will trace how the idea orchestrates Wedgwood's thought on a series of oppositions, beginning with pleasure and pain. These chapters will follow a thematic rather than chronological progression, unfolding the bearings of imperfect antithesis in progressively widening circles, from

experience, to the self, to ethics, to free will, to the nature of the universe.

As we work through these domains, we can consider how fruitful the idea of imperfect antithesis is. What does it bring to light? How powerful is it as a framework? Our bare outline of imperfect antithesis in this chapter does not yet show much about its promise and possibilities. But for Wedgwood, its entire point is to illuminate the varying and uneven texture of real life. The more illumination the idea offers in multiple areas, the more grounds we will have to take imperfect antithesis seriously, and to take Wedgwood seriously as the philosopher of imperfect antithesis.

3. Pleasure and Pain

3.1 Introduction

Wedgwood's asymmetry of pain and pleasure is, in many ways, foundational for her broader approach to imperfect antithesis, a core asymmetry out of which others radiate. She develops this asymmetry most fully in the first part of the article 'The Moral Ideal', from December 1879, and 'Pleasure and Pain', from December 1882.

In this chapter, I first outline her view that we recoil from pain but have no symmetrically equivalent orientation towards pleasure (3.2). I look at her account of the lived experience of pain and its connection with the felt overwhelming presence of the body (3.3). Then I clarify how pain and pleasure remain an antithesis, albeit an imperfect one (3.4). This leads into a puzzle. Morally, Wedgwood places supreme value on self-sacrifice, and self-sacrifice means voluntarily undergoing pain (3.5). If pain is utterly bad and overwhelming – as she maintains – why and how would anyone voluntarily incur it? Her answer is that while pain is overwhelmingly bad for us as bodies, moral guilt is worse for us spiritually. Further, pain enhances our ability to sympathise with others, though this positive moral effect of pain does not justify its existence (3.6). She incorporates animal pain and suffering into this picture (3.7). I conclude that although there are some tensions amongst her claims about pain, her self-defence would be that these tensions reflect our real dislocation between body and spirit (3.8).

3.2 Actual Pain, Ideal Aspiration

Pain, says Wedgwood, is an unbearable, overwhelming, imperious feeling that compels us to try to remove it. At least when pain is bad

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enough, we have no choice but to seek relief. In contrast, it is not true that whatever anyone pursues, they are actually pursuing pleasure, by way of whatever they think will confer it. The things people pursue and strive for are heterogeneous at root. 'The world of aspiration is surely as various as the world of conviction, and men's sympathies are not less divergent in their influence than their creeds are'.[1]

She gives examples. The horrors of hell as depicted by Dante are horrors to all, but his Beatific Vision has appeal only for a few. Two train-travellers may both fear a crash, yet they are taking the train to totally different destinations. She also imagines the following parable:

> A fountain endowed with a magic power to fulfil wishes, but needing time for its spell to work, [is] the resort of an eager throng, ignorant of the fact that the wish fulfilled was not the wish of him who possessed the fulfilment, but always the unfulfilled wish of the predecessor of him who realised it. What varied forms of wretchedness suggest themselves as the result! Here, a shy student is driven across a Scotch moor, [...] gun in hand, mysteriously impelled towards a pursuit of which he loathes every detail [...][2]

Thus the 'pole of repulsion', pain, 'has no corresponding pole of attraction'.[3] Some theorists – namely utilitarians – class everything people aim at as 'pleasure', but this simplification is misleading. There is really no single feeling, 'pleasure', that orients everyone's actions. 'It is a fact of melancholy significance, [...] that the words descriptive of Pain and Sorrow are so much more definite and appropriate than those which we have to apply to their opposites'.[4]

We aim for *ideals*, she maintains, not for pleasure – as Thomas Carlyle says, the object of life is larger than enjoyment.[5] But couldn't pleasure, the hedonistic life, be one of the heterogenous aims we might adopt? Possibly, but by steering straight for pleasure, one is almost guaranteed not to achieve it. 'The effort would be self-defeating' because pleasure is

1 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1247.
2 On Dante and the fountain, see Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1196, 1195, and on the train-crash, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605. She suggests that Joseph Addison anticipated the fountain allegory, but I have not found it in his work.
3 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
4 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1194.
5 Ibid., 1195.

not an end in itself, only ever a byproduct of achieving some larger object.[6]

She is taking aim at John Stuart Mill, against whose ethics she argues repeatedly (even against his brand of feminism, as we'll see later):

> Mr. J. S. Mill seems to have thought it possible to keep the idea of pleasure as a simple and ultimate reality, while yet claiming for one class of pleasures an absolute superiority over another by referring the decision as to this superiority to one who knows both classes.[7]

That is, Mill tries to preserve the hedonist idea of 'pleasure as a simple and ultimate reality' while acknowledging that we have various ends, some of more worth than others, by distinguishing higher from lower pleasures. She takes Mill to be saying that to decide which ends are most worthwhile, we need to experience both sorts of pleasure and then recognise that some of them are higher.[8] She objects:

> The person who is most certain that you ought not to give a glass of wine to a drunkard, is generally the person who is furthest removed from the power of comparing the relative advantages of sobriety and intoxication.[9]

It might sound as if she is objecting to the teetotaller's overconfidence. But that cannot be right, for then she would be agreeing with Mill as she understands him, and saying that to know, one must try both. Her intention is the opposite, as we can see from her later remark in the second edition of *The Moral Ideal*:

> To the question, Is it better to lead what is called a pure life, or to satisfy every natural instinct? – the Scientific Spirit can only answer, Try both, and you gain the power to make a choice. The Moral Spirit says, Try both, and you lose the power to make a choice. There is no common ground here.[10]

That is, she takes her teetotaller example to show that one can decide which of two actions is best, either for oneself or someone else, without having to have experienced both actions. We can form judgements on what is best which are drawn from no experience whatever. Even more

6 Ibid.
7 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
8 For Mill's position, see *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863), esp. pp. 14–15.
9 Ibid.
10 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 465.

strongly, it may be someone's *lack* of experience that most qualifies them to judge the merits of two alternative courses of action. One can better perceive that getting drunk is undesirable if one has never indulged in it, and never succumbed to the temptation that can cloud judgement. Succumbing to lower pleasures impairs judgement; abstaining from them enables clear-sighted certainty.

She continues this anti-Mill line of thought with another suggestive example:

> Or take another case, where it is impossible that any one should compare two aims before he acts on the view that one is best. A man falls accidentally into the sea, and you, being a good swimmer, save his life; you are regarded as his benefactor. Another man throws himself purposely into the sea, and you do the same, and most people have the same opinion of this action as of the first. Yet the first gratifies, and the second opposes, a strong desire. And no human being knows what that experience is, to which the strong desire leads [i.e. what happens after death]. In utter ignorance of one alternative, we decide that the other is best.[11]

The imaginary case appears to show several things. We regard it as right both to prevent a suicide and to prevent an accidental drowning, despite their very different relations to the desires of the other person; thus, the rightness of an action is not determined by its consequences for the satisfaction of desires. There is also, again, the claim that we routinely judge certain actions right (or wrong) without having to compare any experiences of the alternatives between which we are judging. We do not and cannot possibly think 'well, having experienced both life and death, I know death is more painful, so I'd better rescue the drowner'. We have no experience of what death is like. If our moral evaluations depended on comparative experience, we would be stumped what to do faced with a drowning person. We are not, so it is not comparative experience that determines our moral judgements.

Is she fair to Mill? John Rawls argues that Mill orders pleasures lexically: we should always go for higher pleasures over lower ones unless the higher ones are unavailable or exhausted.[12] If so, then Mill would avoid Wedgwood's criticism, since ongoing comparison would

11 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.

12 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 42–43.

not be needed for judgement. But there is still the question *why* one should prioritise higher pleasures. Roger Crisp argues that for Mill higher pleasures are not higher merely quantitatively, giving more of the same thing that lower pleasures give. Rather, higher pleasures are a qualitatively different kind of pleasure that we recognise when we experience it. They are more pleasurable by nature, not degree.[13] Crisp says: 'Those who can judge the value of experiences correctly are those who are not only sensitive to the salient features of those experiences [...] but able to attach to those features the evaluative weight they deserve'.[14]

Wedgwood would ask why they deserve this weight. If it is not because they are, say, more intense or durable etc. – that would be quantitative – then it seems to be a bare stipulation. If it isn't to be a bare stipulation, then these pleasures must be more complex, or deeper, or engage our higher faculties, or be more self-conscious or rational. All these are evaluative criteria independent of pleasure. We are back with the position that it is not value that depends on pleasure, but pleasure on value.

I think that overall, her line of objection to Mill is quite compelling. If Mill does believe in experiential comparisons, then he becomes vulnerable to her teetotaller and drowning objections. If he believes in a qualitative hierarchy of kinds of pleasure, then he is forced back to agree with her that values are prior to pleasure. And then Wedgwood can press her further point that these values flow down out of the moral ideals we are committed to.

The importance for Wedgwood is to undermine the idea that pleasure serves as a positive reality in human life and a supreme pole of orientation towards which everyone is inclined. Her anti-Mill arguments support her view that we are oriented towards not pleasures but ideals – specifically, moral ideals, and the values they generate. Thus pleasure and pain are not symmetrical: pain is the universal pole of recoil, but pleasure is not the universal pole of attraction. The idea that everyone desires pleasure is a logical fiction, spawned by mistakenly assuming that pain must have a symmetrically opposite counterpart.

13 Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 39.
14 Ibid., pp. 35–36.

3.3 The Painful Sensation of Having a Body

One doubt we should raise about Wedgwood's position is whether 'pain' is just as much of a simplifying rubric as pleasure. Is there really one single feeling going on in all the following: suffering from a migraine; being starving hungry; being severely sleep-deprived; having cancer; being wounded by someone's cruel remark; dropping a heavy book on one's toe? Wedgwood, however, says 'yes, there is': 'Experience forces on every one the conviction that there is a definite reality called Pain, and that we are all agreed as to its meaning, at least as far as the sensations are concerned'.[15] These sensations have something in common: simply the fact that *they are sensations*. Pain of all kinds 'brings us into the world of sensation',[16] and this is what constitutes pain. It pulls us into our bodies, and we apprehend their presence as a pervasive sensation that we seek to get away from.

A healthy person, Wedgwood explains, does not feel healthy; they are free from bodily sensation, and this absence of sensation is what their health consists of. This chimes with her belief that pleasure is less vivid and real than pain. Feeling healthy is not a positive pleasure, only the unimpeded ability to pursue ideals *above* pleasure. It is a sick person or, say, someone with toothache who is drawn inescapably into their own body, which presses its needs unrelentingly upon their attention. 'The toothache forces upon us the conviction that we have teeth; the absence of the toothache simply allows us to eat our dinner in peace'.[17] Be it throbbing eyes, a gnawing stomach, a foggy head, an aching heart, one is engulfed in one's embodiment, and its presence floods the mind.[18] For Wedgwood, it does not matter that there are qualitative variations amongst these several sensations; they are united simply in being

15 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 'The child awakening in terror seems actually to see the darkness. The growing night appears a more definite invader than the growing day; darkness imprisons, light restores the prisoner to the open world; we are alone with darkness while light leaves us amid the surrounding scenery, and in ordinary conditions calls no notice to itself. How much in the inward world echoes this symbolism! Pain is the most definite sensation there is; ease, to one who has not known pain, is no sensation at all. The healthy know not of their health, only the sick of their sickness'; Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 108.

overwhelming sensations of the body, which marks them out as pain.

Wedgwood's views look forward to the phenomenological tradition, especially Jean-Paul Sartre. For him, ordinarily I 'am' my body because it provides the taken-for-granted and unnoticed horizon of my actions, my point-of-view and instrument. If I go for a walk, I do so as my body, but this body does not obtrude on my attention and only serves to realise my project. Nonetheless, all action has a minute 'kinaesthetic' quality, 'although invisible', which occasionally steps into view. 'There exist some privileged experiences in which it [the kinaesthetic quality] can be apprehended in its purity, in particular what we call "physical" pain'.[19] Pain is my body manifesting itself to me *as* body, by obtruding on my attention. Subsequent reflection and interaction with others can convert pain into an ache and then a disease, but the primordial phenomenon is the pure obtrusion of the body.

Sartre and Wedgwood agree on the basic character of pain. They differ on the role of the body in experienced life, for unlike Sartre she does not quite say that the body is the necessary horizon of my actions. On the contrary, she thinks that in pursuing ideals, we reach beyond the body. Like Sartre, her goal is for the body to be invisible, but not so it can silently and effectively underwrite my projects, rather to leave me in peace to attend to and pursue ideals that transcend the material world. Nonetheless, since Sartre conceives action as transcendence of the given towards the not-yet, the two thinkers are not miles apart.

I have highlighted the affinity with Sartre to bring out that Wedgwood is trying to capture the lived experience of pain. Rather than treating pain merely as an abstract variable in a calculus, as in utilitarian theory, she wants to return to pain, the lived phenomenon. For her, pain is not a simplifying rubric, but a genuinely shared experience with a definite character: overwhelming bodily sensation, an imperative nature, and a vivid and inescapable presence.

I find this account of pain quite compelling. I am also drawn to her claim that pleasure never has an equivalent overpowering vividity. In fact, if we think of our most intense, ecstatic pleasures, we may well find that they contain an admixture of pain just where they become intense and

19 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1958), pp. 324, 331. See Sarah Richmond, 'Sartre and the Doctors', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18 (2010), 517–38.

ecstatic. From Wedgwood's perspective, this makes sense: only on the pain side do we find overwhelming bodily sensation, and wherever we find that sensation we have some kind of pain, even if pleasurable pain.

When we are in pain, she maintains, we temporarily drop whatever ideals we value, and we simply crave respite from our body's demands. Pain pulls us down into our corporeal life and its urgency, driving out the mental space to pursue anything more worthwhile. Whatever our ideals, pain interferes with their pursuit.

> Every longing that we could compare with it – though we might express it as something positive – as the desire for water in great thirst – is in reality no more than the wish that some feeling would end.[20]

We just want to be let back out of our bodies, as it were. But as long as pain persists, we are held down in embodiment and thus in the chain of physical causes and effects, the realm of necessity. Since we are dragged down into necessity, we cannot avoid doing whatever actions our bodies impel us to in order to obtain relief.[21]

From the direction of pain, then, we seek above all to escape from bodily feelings. Conversely, in our opposing orientation – which is not towards pleasure but towards moral ideals – we are pursuing things we do *not yet* have. This, for Wedgwood, is structural: an ideal is what is not-real, not-empirical, not-present; it transcends the actually existing world, and is something towards which we aspire beyond given reality. To pursue an ideal, we have to transcend what is, and this requires an exercise of freedom. Free will and moral ideals are concomitants, and their opposite concomitants are pain and determination by the body.

> To contend that the will is always free against the invitations of pleasure, does not bind us over to assert that it is always free against the commands of pain; [...] in the sense in which we may withstand pleasure, we *cannot* withstand pain.[22]

20 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

21 Compare Elaine Scarry's view that pain reduces the subject to its sensing body: 'The body is its pains, a shrill sentience that hurts and is hugely alarmed by its hurt [...] The body, this intensely – and sometimes, as in pain, obscenely – alive tissue'; *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 30.

22 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

3.4 Avoiding the Fallacy of Perfect Antithesis

The key differences between pleasure and pain are these. Pain is positive, real, corporeal, and determines action (at least if bad enough). Conversely, pleasure is merely a label, covering a plurality of ideals and values, which I can choose to follow freely.

Pain and pleasure are often seen as a perfect antithesis, but this is a logical fallacy.[23] In one version of this fallacy, we see pleasure as a positive state with the opposite character to pain: a state supremely and universally desired, the goal of everyone's actions, inexorably magnetising. Wedgwood suggests that Plato saw pleasure and pain as antithetical sensory states of this kind, in turn misconstruing the form of the Good – on the ideal level – as being the same kind of universal magnet to the soul that pleasure is to the body.[24]

An alternative form of the fallacy reduces pleasure to relief from pain. Schopenhauer is sometimes taken this way (not an author to whom Wedgwood refers) – to hold that only pain and suffering are real, and that happiness is not a positive state but only the absence of suffering.[25] Epicurus, too, held that the most complete pleasure is freedom from pain and disturbance (although, unlike Schopenhauer, he thought this was achievable and sufficient for a good life).[26] We might think that Wedgwood agrees, given that she says:

> When Carlyle urges that, 'the healthy know not of their health, but only the sick of their sickness,' he seems to forget that the healthy know not of their health because, in the sense in which the sick know of their sickness, there is nothing to know.[27]

But actually her position differs from Schopenhauer and Epicurus. To say that we pursue 'pleasure' meaning only relief from pain or suffering is to treat human action as being oriented solely by its pain axis. She

23 Ibid.

24 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–II', 972.

25 See Joshua Isaac Fox, 'Does Schopenhauer Accept Any Positive Pleasures?', *European Journal of Philosophy* 31 (2022), 902–13, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12830 (Fox argues not).

26 See Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, trans. George K. Strodach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012), esp. p. 61.

27 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195. She's quoting Carlyle, 'Characteristics', *Edinburgh Review* 54 (December 1831), 351.

disagrees: we are also oriented by our ideals and values, by what we aspire towards. This ideal-striving axis of existence is just as real as the bodily and pain-related axis, although because we strive towards ideals that have no perceptible existence in the natural world, this aspirational axis is harder to get hold of. Still, she insists:

> Surely, then, the human aim must be a thing *more definite* than pleasure, *more positive than the escape from pain*. [my emphasis …] If we confess that the attempt to describe the spring of human activity in terms of pleasure, and thus to make the attendant circumstance of fulfilled desire its object, has led to incoherence, we may approach a true ethical science more closely than has as yet been given to our modern speculation. The deeper experiences of life – the apprehension of all tragedy, and of music – nay, even the thrill of an intense joy, seem to carry us afar from this feeble antithesis of pleasure and pain, to hint at a depth in our souls lying beneath its influence.[28]

There are values of deeper meaning to us than mere 'pleasure'. These values are tied to our moral ideals, and they transcend the physical world. Ideals are futural and aspirational, possible and uncertain, rather than actual and given. Wedgwood herself in this passage accidentally speaks of 'the human aim', singular, but she makes clear it is *not* singular. 'Nowhere are human beings so unlike each other as on the ground of preference'.[29]

These views lead to some of her most direct statements of the law of imperfect antithesis. Recognising the asymmetry of pain and pleasure would 'simplify the metaphysical problem lying at the root of Ethics […] The whole course of ethical theory, in modern times, has suffered from its absence'[30] – i.e., the absence of recognition of the asymmetry, especially in utilitarian and happiness-based moral theories. When we start to reflect on pleasure and pain, logic steps in and misleads us that there is a tangible reality of pleasure corresponding to that of pain, 'and that the reverse of everything that is true of pleasure is true of pain, so that there is a human aim, in the same sense as there is a human point of recoil'.[31]

28 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1196.
29 Ibid., 1195.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.

She appeals to Aristotle: 'The truth which seems to us so inadequately recognised, though it is the temptation of logical minds, was yet clearly discerned as a fallacy by the great thinker to whom we owe the very existence of Logic as a science'.[32] She means Aristotle: he was keen to observe, and to eschew the temptation to schematise. 'He more than once returns to this want of symmetry between the two halves of the moral world'.[33] For example, his two vices corresponding to pleasure and pain are intemperance (the impulse towards pleasure) and cowardice (the impulse to flee pain).

> Their relation to the will ought, therefore, from a narrowly logical point of view, to be identical; but in truth, there is no correspondence. Cowardice is, as compared with intemperance, half-involuntary. Pain dominates the mind as pleasure cannot do,—we choose pleasure; in flying from pain, we have hardly any choice. 'The mental balance is altogether upset by pain.' How much ethical theory might have been simplified, if that truth had always been borne in mind![34]

Cowardice is less bad than intemperance, because someone acting from cowardice is overwhelmed by the threat or reality of pain, their 'mental balance' being upset. A wounded soldier fleeing a battle is acting almost involuntarily. No-one is forced to gorge themselves on food or get blind drunk in the equivalent way. They freely choose to capitulate to these unworthy pleasures, and so their action is worse.

This contrast makes clear how imperfect antithesis is guiding Wedgwood, yet it might be objected that the over-eater's actions do not fit with her view of pleasure. If pleasure is as dim, faint, and feeble as she claims, how can it motivate this person to over-indulge? Her answer must be that the person does not positively aim for the sensory pleasure of engorgement but instead fails to act up to a higher ideal – of a moderate and temperate life – to which they probably are committed. They do not actively choose pleasure, but rather fail to choose the actions that follow from their ideal. There is some experiential truth to this.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., partly translating Aristotle; compare Crisp's modern version 'Pain upsets and ruins the natural state of the person who is experiencing it'; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 3, ch. 12, sect. 1119a, lines 23–24. This is where the contrast between intemperance and cowardice occurs.

Perhaps Wedgwood would add that if the person *is* positively pursuing pleasure, then it must be because they hold a hedonistic ideal, which is a mirage, resting on the mistaken assumption that pleasure is a universal magnet, in turn resting on the logical fiction of pleasure/pain symmetry.

However, this presents another problem. If only pain is a vivid reality and pleasure merely a fictitious construct, then surely we have here a thesis with no opposite half, not an imperfect antithesis at all. Wedgwood disagrees. There is a real antithesis at work because everyone is oriented positively towards ideals, as well as being oriented negatively away from pain. But this antithesis (ideals/pain) is imperfect because ideals are plural and transcendent whereas pain is singular and corporeal. Still, we are genuinely oriented in two directions – towards ideals and away from pain – and we should not reduce human life to a single pole.

Furthermore, the positive orientation towards ideals includes pleasure as a subordinate element. For I may feel pleasure on realising my ideal – though I may not, depending on what the ideal is, or how well I manage to realise it. We could say both that the would-be over-eater feels pleasure if they manage to abstain, and that by abstaining they deny themselves pleasure; the relation between ideals and pleasures is complex, variable, and uncertain. Thus, pain is the direct, constant, and universal object of aversion; pleasure is only an indirect, secondary, and contingent object of attraction. The real and asymmetrical antithesis between pain and ideals incorporates a real and asymmetrical antithesis between pain and pleasure (as a subordinate and fluctuating component of realised ideals).

Wedgwood's treatment of pain and pleasure parallels some of her other imperfect antitheses. She mentions joy and grief.[35] When grieving someone's death, we imagine that the time before they died was full of joy. Very likely it was not. What would bring us joy is the imagined restoration of the dead person, but while they were alive, their presence was simply normal, no cause for joy, since there they were in all their shortcomings. The fact that their presence was not joyful – and may have been tortuously difficult – does not prevent us from suffering grief when they are gone. This parallels pleasure and pain: we don't positively

35 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

enjoy health, except briefly when it is restored after painful illness; but we feel pain all the same while we are ill. And recall gratitude: we don't generally feel grateful for our blessings, unless they are unexpectedly handed to us after long deprivation. All four phenomena – grief/joy, pain/pleasure, illness/health, ingratitude/gratitude – have a similar unbalanced structure.

3.5 Self-Sacrifice and Pain

Intolerably bad as pain is, the apparent paradox is that we can aspire to undergo pain. For Wedgwood, sacrificing oneself for others is the highest moral ideal of Christianity. Jesus Christ exemplifies this sacrifice. He enjoins us to love the neighbour as the self (Mark 12:31), and to give the other person our coat *and* our cloak: 'him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also' (Luke 6:29).[36] For this to be sacrifice, rather than largesse or superabundant generosity, one has to undergo some loss – to suffer pain.

> Pain is a terrible thing to inflict or endure, and the power to do so [...] depends on our feeling ourselves a part of some larger whole, for the good of which it is necessary that that pain should be endured or inflicted.[37]

Her leading example is a woman who sacrifices her intellectual work to minister to the claims of others. Over time, across endless interruptions, she loses her power of attention, and struggles to gather her thoughts.[38] This is not the severe pain of a terrible disease, but it remains pain: mental fragmentation, feeling confused and incomplete, tired and mentally dishevelled, knowing one will never achieve as much as a man, never realise one's potential. This woman suffers the felt presence of a weary, baffled, defeated mind.

How can Wedgwood object to these demands on women and still extol self-sacrifice? As we will see, she thinks that we should value and esteem women for their virtue of self-sacrifice, without denying that

36 Wedgwood, 'Justice', *Spectator*, 25 October 1879, 1345. All Bible quotations refer to the King James Version.

37 Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage in its Influence on Married Life', *Contemporary Review* 20 (July 1872), 364.

38 See Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage, Considered Chiefly', 250–55.

this virtue involves genuine loss and sacrifice. That is, we shouldn't make-believe that since self-sacrifice is a virtue, women haven't really lost anything in pursuing it. They have gained virtue, but at a real and painful cost to themselves.

Beyond women's specific case, we can voluntarily subject ourselves to pain and suffering if we have made self-sacrifice our moral ideal (as we ought to). As spiritual beings, we can choose to subject ourselves to deprivation on our bodily side. But don't we then become inexorably compelled to seek relief, in a futile circle? Her account of pain seems to imply so. Yet on her account of self-sacrifice, we can subject ourselves to pain, and presumably endure it, for the sake of others. That suggests that we must have the freedom to refrain from seeking pain-relief after all. Wedgwood wrestles with this problem amidst her various reflections on pain, on which she often wrote, reflecting her belief in its vivid and positive reality, unlike its ghostly opposite pleasure. Let's look at her attempted solution.

3.6 Glimpses into the Meaning of Pain

In 'Invalids' from 1878, later included in *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*, Wedgwood writes about people suffering serious illness, her central example being Harriet Martineau, bedridden for years by a uterine tumour. Wedgwood is uncomfortable with platitudes that pain and suffering are sent to try us. All the same, she thinks that prolonged pain can foster our awareness that pain is bad for others as well as ourselves. 'If we can say that we know anything of the purpose of pain, it is to make the sufferer more merciful, more tender'.[39] Having suffered, we can sympathise better when others suffer, and this can make us more willing to sacrifice ourselves to shield others from pain.

Wedgwood distinguishes transitory from chronic pain and illness. We assume that adding up many transitory pains sums to chronic pain; thus, anyone who has ever had a day's illness thinks they know what chronic suffering is like.[40] She disagrees. Any pain that passes away, however long it had lasted, is quickly forgotten, precisely because its

39 Wedgwood, 'Capital Punishment and Vivisection', letter to the *Spectator*, 10 December 1881, 1569.

40 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 348.

disappearance is not a sensation but the absence of any sensation.[41] There is no longer anything there to remember. This makes these transient pains qualitatively different from chronic pain that one can never forget, that stays with one always and becomes part of one's make-up.

The transitory nature of non-chronic pain is crucial, for Wedgwood. Pain once ended is immediately forgotten. In contrast, if I do something wrong, my guilt can stay with me for the rest of my life. It can always surge up, even when I think I have assuaged my conscience.

> Violent bodily anguish, we believe, has a certain irresistible intensity which for the time makes every other seem dim; but that which we remember without reluctance the day after it is past must be pronounced more tolerable than that which, across an intervening tract of busy years, we still recoil from as on its first aspect. [...] What he feels in realising his own wrong-doing is a worse thing to endure, for one man or for many men, than any suffering. [...] The sense of wrongness is an evil worse than any pain whatever.[42]

Whatever my body might say, pain is *not* the worst evil: wrongdoing is. And realising this, when faced with a choice between pursuing what I desire at a harmful cost to someone else, or putting that other person first even at a painful cost to myself, I become better able to put the other person first regardless.

But still, if pain compels me to seek relief, will I not then inevitably try to cast off the pain I've just subjected myself to? Wedgwood would presumably say 'yes, mostly, but not entirely'. If the pain is bad enough, seeking relief will indeed become inevitable. If the pain is less intense, then I may be able to steel myself to endure it. Presumably we can develop this power of endurance, like learning to run gradually lengthening distances. I may still fail at endurance on any given occasion, but then I will feel guilty, be reminded of the chasm between guilt and pain, and be spurred to try again.

Pain thus has two moral effects: first, enhancing our sympathy with suffering others; second, standing out by its transitory nature as less bad than guilt. Wedgwood denies that these moral effects *explain* why pain exists. Pain might make someone more virtuous, at best, but that does

41 Ibid., p. 351.

42 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', *Spectator*, 11 April 1874, 470. See also Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 351.

not licence the inference that God has sent us pain as a spur to virtue. In an 1885 letter, she tells Victoria Welby:

> I incline to think that we are not meant to be satisfied by any view of evil attainable here. It seems to need the kind of horror that is incompatible with any intellectual adjustment to the space that it occupies.[43]

To explain why evil exists – including natural evil such as pain and disease – is tantamount to justifying it, showing it has a necessary and rightful place in God's scheme. This takes away our horror at evil, misleading us to acquiesce in the sufferings of others rather than trying to relieve them. To preserve the moral imperative to help others, to relieve their pains, we have to avoid explaining evil (away). Why there should be any pain at all must remain a mystery, even though given that pain is part of the world, it can have certain moral benefits.

3.7 Animals in Pain

Wedgwood's thought on pain encompasses animals. A passionate opponent of vivisection, along with her friend Cobbe, she thinks there can be no justification for humans inflicting pain on animals. Doing so is worse than painlessly killing them, in her view. In letters to the *Spectator*, she argues that animals are wholly bodily beings, and so for them pain is an even more unmitigated evil than for humans. Pain has no redeeming quality of guiding an animal towards virtue, and no animal can possibly voluntarily assume its pain or mentally abstract away from it.

> It is but a little way that in this world we can see into the meaning of Pain. Perhaps the tendency of our day is to exaggerate its evil, to forget all that is elevating, all that is softening, in its influence. But it is elevating, it is softening, only for us. For the creatures beneath us, it would appear pure evil. Shall we, who may find in it the waters of purifying, condemn those to whom it seems but as the scorching flame to taste its utmost bitterness? We recoil from doing it when the sufferer would be human, even though he be the guiltiest of human beings; even though, as far as human eye can see, to suffer would be the best thing for him. Why should this horror vanish when we deal with those for whom suffering, as far as we can see, is the worst thing?[44]

43 J. W. to Welby, 15 February 1885, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file12
44 Wedgwood, 'Capital Punishment', 1569.

Like Cobbe, Wedgwood is unpersuaded of the medical benefits promised from vivisection, but she adds that even should they come to pass, vivisection remains impermissible. We do not perform medical experiments on convicts awaiting execution (she says in the same letter), because we know it would be absolutely wrong. If we recognise this even regarding people convicted of serious crimes, and belonging to the same species as the intended human beneficiaries of medical experiments, then we should recognise the absolute wrongness all the more in the case of morally innocent animals, for whom physical pain is a purer evil than for any human being.

Wedgwood quarrelled with Welby over this issue. Welby claimed animals undergoing vivisection were, effectively, sacrificing themselves for the higher cause of truth. Animals could not know the fact, but if they could, they would willingly donate their bodies in pursuit of truth. Anyway, she added, their pain is far less bad than human pain because animals lack the added mental consciousness of pain.[45]

Horrified, Wedgwood protested that the lack of a conscious dimension makes pain purer and worse for animals. It is beside the point to say that animals would sacrifice themselves if they understood what was at stake, since in fact they cannot. Assuming pain is not something an animal can do or should be made to do for us. *We* should shield animals from pain, not the other way around. Indeed, since we human beings can understand why sacrifices may be necessary for discovering truth, if anyone is to make such sacrifices, it should be us. Perhaps scientists should lead by example, she even suggested.[46]

Anaesthesia might seem the self-evident solution now, but it was not obviously viable at the time. The mid-1870s had witnessed a protracted parliamentary struggle in which Cobbe and her allies sought to pass legislation to make anaesthetics mandatory, proposals that the scientific community – headed by Wedgwood's uncle Darwin – got watered down.[47] Given this resistance from scientists, mandatory anaesthesia struck neither Wedgwood nor Welby as a realistic option. In any case,

45 Welby to J. W., 5 August 1892, 23 and 30 November 1892, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file14.

46 J. W. to Welby, 1 December 1892, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file14.

47 See Susan Hamilton, 'Introduction' to *Animal Welfare and Anti-Vivisection 1870-1910* Vol. 1: *Frances Power Cobbe* (London: Routledge, 2004).

many experiments were toxic and invasive, liable to leave animals in chronic pain if they survived.

> Anaesthetics, were they always used [...] would prevent but a small part of the pain. A considerable proportion of the medical investigation [...] consists of the production of disease, in which the mere puncture of inoculation may be a trifle, while the disease itself is [...] acute and prolonged suffering.[48]

And, in Wedgwood's terms, an animal life of chronic pain or disease must be far worse than an animal experience of temporary acute pain.

3.8 Conclusion

Do Wedgwood's various claims about pain fit together? I have suggested that there is some tension between her claim that we necessarily seek respite from pain and that we sometimes can, and should, voluntarily assume pain for the sake of others. But she would say this tension reflects the real conflict of our lives, torn between the bodily recoil from pain and our higher moral imperatives. 'In our present condition there is something in what we mean by *self* that is a dislocation', she says: 'Man here appears as an isthmus between two worlds'.[49] This duality derives from our ambiguous status as beings of body and spirit. For the body, pain is overwhelmingly bad; for the spirit, virtue is more important.

Saying that we are dislocated beings does not *resolve* the tension between the determination to pursue relief from pain and the freedom to assume pain voluntarily. But I suspect that Wedgwood would say that we should not be trying to resolve it. That is the logical intellect endeavouring to get its dominoes neatly lined up, whereas philosophy should be illuminating the real and sometimes unbearable tensions that permeate our lives. There are times when all we can do is acknowledge that if reality forms a whole, it does so at a distance beyond our present lines of sight.

48 Wedgwood, 'Twelve Years' Trial of the Vivisection Act', *Spectator*, 9 March 1889, 339.

49 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 29 June 1884, 12 August 1885, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file11 and 12.

4. Self and Unself

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I look at how the imperfect antithesis of selfishness and unselfishness organises Wedgwood's thought on the self and ethics. She criticises her contemporary, James Hinton, who believes that we can be educated to the point where the selfishness/unselfishness dichotomy is overcome. Wedgwood thinks this is unrealistic, and that the real antithesis of selfishness and unselfishness is where the challenges of ethical life get started (4.2). Having a self entails some level of selfishness; being unselfish is the highest moral ideal; and given natural selfishness, being unselfish necessarily means making some sacrifice of oneself, which must be a hard struggle (4.3).

Wedgwood also puts forward a historical account of selfishness as a distinctly modern development (4.4). This seems to conflict with her view that selfishness is inherent in being a self, but I suggest that the two views can be reconciled if history advances progressively towards realising inherent features of the self. Her view of the self and insanity bears this out (4.5).

I then introduce a worry about her ideal of self-sacrifice (4.6). For her, self-sacrifice is good intrinsically, not in its consequences. This presents a risk that self-sacrifice is a veiled form of self-fashioning and self-inflation. Another problem is that Wedgwood thinks women are much more given to self-sacrifice than men (4.7). This at worst praises women's moral exploitation, although at her best Wedgwood – like other Victorian women intellectuals – sees here a way to place women at the centre of moral life and foreground their experience.

I conclude (4.8) by drawing together the several imperfect antitheses that orchestrate her thought on these questions. Above all, unselfishness

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is the highest virtue; yet selfishness is normal, and ordinarily is neither blameworthy nor vicious.

4.2 The Trouble with Altruism

For Wedgwood, altruism and selfishness are not a real antithesis – not least because *altruism* and *unselfishness* are not equivalents. The term 'altruism' was a fairly recent arrival on the British intellectual scene, popularised by the Comteian positivists. A version of altruism was adopted by James Hinton, a philosopher and contentious advocate of a radical form of free love whose ideas were widely discussed in the 1870s and 1880s. Wedgwood criticises Hinton in the 1878 articles 'Altruism and Selfishness' and 'Self and Unself'. Whether she is fair to him we may set aside; our concern will be simply with 'Wedgwood's Hinton'.[1]

As she presents Hinton's view, we must each be educated to internalise a genuine desire never to harm others and to embrace the good of the whole. Having reached that standpoint, we can safely pursue all our passions and desires, for our own fulfilment and flourishing will increase the sum-total of happiness in the world and benefit everyone. This can be guaranteed, since we will never desire anything that would bring harm or suffering to others.[2]

Wedgwood's line of attack may seem oblique. She points out that women have been expected to live for others for a long time, and their

1 On 'altruism', see Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Wedgwood's knowledge of Hinton's personal life coloured her cynical view that his fine-sounding claims about altruism had negative real-life consequences, especially for women. Hinton lived polyamorously with his official wife, as well as Caroline Haddon, Mary Everest Boole (Wedgwood's friend), and another fourth woman. Haddon defended Hinton against Wedgwood's criticisms in 'James Hinton's Altruism' (letter to the *Spectator*, 18 May 1878, 634–35), to which Wedgwood replied with 'Self and Unself'. Two years later, in her Aristotle essay, Wedgwood continued to criticise Hinton, referring to his posthumous *Chapters on the Art of Thinking* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879). Afterwards, her antagonism to Hinton deepened when his son was convicted of bigamy, and the emotional fall-out distressed (Mary) Boole so deeply that she became seriously mentally ill. To Wedgwood, all this confirmed the disastrous real-life consequences of Hinton's free love ethos. See her letters with Boole and Hinton family members, WM 595; and on the Boole–Hinton dynasty, see Gerry Kennedy, *The Booles and The Hintons* (Northampton: Atrium Press, 2016).

2 Wedgwood, 'Self and Unself', *Spectator*, 18 May 1878, 630.

experience shows that such a life is far from ideal.[3] One of its worst facets is the constant interruption of a woman's attempted intellectual work by the claims of others. 'There is nothing that so much dries up the fountain of impulse as the constant interruption of small and doubtful claims'.[4]

Wedgwood had been making this point for some time. In her 1869 contribution to Josephine Butler's anthology *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, Wedgwood had described how social and family claims and duties undermine and can even destroy women's powers for sustained work and thought.[5] Of course, she was by no means the first to make this critical point. Mary Wollstonecraft famously argued that women were forced to sacrifice their intellects and education in order to become alluring and frivolous objects for men.[6] Harriet Taylor Mill, too, argued that demanding that women be good wives and mothers made it impossible for them to pursue intellectual work on an equal footing with men.[7] Like Taylor Mill, Wedgwood brought a personal angle to her critique. Although Wedgwood never married or had children, she routinely woke at 4 am to read and write before the social duties arising from her extensive family network commenced at breakfast, and she lamented, aged 58, 'I ought to have been something larger than I am',[8] feeling that her social ties had prevented her from realising her potential.

Men rarely put up with the same interruption and fragmentation, she observes in her critique of Hinton. But her claim is not that men ought to put up with it like women. There are good reasons for a person with a 'rich nature' to pursue their interests and projects. 'We cannot at once live for our own aims and for other people's, and *we must not expect* from men who take one line the kinds of virtues developed by the other'.[9]

So people are entitled to pursue the path of genius, and their doing so may ultimately benefit humankind. But, she stresses, let's not pretend

3 Wedgwood, 'Altruism and Selfishness', *Spectator*, 11 May 1878, 596.
4 Ibid.
5 Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage, Considered Chiefly', 252.
6 Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792] (New York: Matsell, 1833), pp. 41–43.
7 Taylor Mill, 'The Enfranchisement of Women', *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* 55 (1851), 104.
8 Quoted in Barbara Wedgwood, *Critical Study*, p. 9.
9 Wedgwood, 'Altruism', 596; emphasis altered.

the individual is not being selfish. 'You cannot get work done without loss in the moral world any more than in the physical world'.[10] A real drawback of the intellectual life is that in pursuing it one has to neglect other people's claims.[11] 'Egotism' is 'the inevitable drawback of all eminent mental life'.[12]

Where does that leave women? She believes they are by nature and custom more willing to sacrifice their needs for the sake of others; doing so will often come more spontaneously to women than men. All the same, this self-sacrifice remains hard, and entails genuine and sometimes severe losses on women's part, which should not be dismissed. Moreover, because self-sacrifice is hard, women's own needs, desires, and claims will tend to find indirect outlets instead. They may enthusiastically identify with their men's desires, living vicariously through the men – 'that vicarious selfishness that [...] is my worst bugbear in wives and mothers'.[13] Or women may throw themselves self-sacrificially behind a political or religious cause.[14]

Regarding Hinton, Wedgwood's point is that he is trying to wave a magic wand and dissipate the difficulty and suffering involved in self-sacrifice, converting it into joy and affirmation, and this will not do. One can only pursue one's desires so far before a conflict with the desires and claims of others will inescapably emerge, and having to do something for others will harm rather than benefit us. Once we acknowledge these conflicts, the real dilemmas and intricacies of ethical life get started.

4.3 Imperfect Antithesis of Selfishness and Unselfishness

The real challenges of ethical life begin with the polarity of selfishness and unselfishness, for Wedgwood. As we've seen, she does not claim that no-one should ever be selfish. Yet she does regard self-sacrifice – unselfishness, putting the claims of others first, giving them the cloak and the coat – as the highest Christian ideal.

10 Ibid.
11 See Wedgwood's 1878 article 'The Drawbacks of the Intellectual Life', in *Teachers*.
12 J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 22 August 1868, WM 401.
13 J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 18 August 1865, WM 401.
14 Wedgwood, 'Woman and Democracy', *Woman's World* 1 (June 1888), 338.

In the last chapter, we saw that Wedgwood believes our values are various and flow down from our moral ideals. These moral ideals, too, are various. Yet she still thinks we ought to embrace unselfishness, or self-sacrifice, and place it at the head of our values. We can and do value other things besides: in her case, to read the classics, exchange letters with friends and family, engage in philosophical writing, advance women's education, paint watercolours, and commune with God in prayer. But ideals shape values, and the highest and best ideal is self-sacrifice.

What makes it best? Wedgwood never confronts that question head-on, but effectively her discussion of selfishness shows her answer. Since we cannot pursue our desires very far without coming up against conflicting desires from others, we cannot lead much of a moral life unless we are willing to undergo some self-sacrifice. That is, because the self always gravitates to put its desires first and neglect others, morality requires self-sacrifice.

Reciprocally, before anyone can be unselfish and perform an act of self-sacrifice, they have to have a self in the first place:

> You cannot be really disinterested to any purpose unless there is a 'you', and a 'you' of some import, to take interest in others [...] It is the free, conscious, and separate life and aims of each personality which alone give real value to service.[15]

There are several senses of 'having a self' in play here: being an 'I', a centre of experience and agency; being a separate embodied individual; having one's particular set of aims, desires, and purposes. Together, these create an inescapable pull towards selfishness, not because of any innate depravity, but because each individual will inevitably feel the press of their own needs and desires in a way they cannot feel the needs and desires of anyone else. In that way, the several senses of having an 'I' inevitably go together. Yet the same conditions that make selfishness inevitable also make self-sacrifice possible, when the self (the 'I') renounces some of the claims and needs arising from its embodied life, and some of its own desires and purposes (e.g., to carry on uninterrupted intellectual work), in order to pursue the freely chosen higher moral ideal of loving the neighbour.

15 Wedgwood, 'Self and Unself', 631.

Here a real antithesis is at work: selfishness and unselfishness, rather than the fictitious antithesis of selfishness and altruism. Altruism is only a mirage, a pretended transmutation of selfishness into unselfishness. In reality, there is an opposition, and we can only be unselfish by first *having* a self, and second *sacrificing* something of that self. Until you admit to having a self (in all senses) which pulls naturally against any sacrifice, you cannot perform the sacrifice in defiance of that pull. You will then, like Hinton, merely pretend you are being altruistic while really doing exactly as you like.

Extending her criticism of Hinton to utilitarianism, she protests that even John Stuart Mill is loath to admit the real conflict between selfishness and unselfishness. He states that we can only aim at happiness, 'only it might be some one else's happiness', and that we ought be educated to appreciate as much.[16] This 'recalls the trick of the Alchemists, who hid a lump of gold in the compound from which they professed to extract it'.[17] The self-deceit is to assume it is *easy* to sacrifice one's own desires in order to benefit someone else, to posit an almost automatic transposition from self to other. This reflects a 'failure to acknowledge that although the *true* life is unselfish, the *natural* life is not'.[18] Acting unselfishly is hard work, it is *arduous*, one of Wedgwood's hallmark words:

> Man [...] must, if he would follow Christ, turn the cheek to the smiter, give the coat to him who has taken the cloak [...]. If any one thinks the command, thus understood, to be easy, he has never tried to obey it.[19]

The antithesis of unselfishness and selfishness is not symmetrical or perfect. The self and its desires cannot completely be overcome, and so unselfishness only ever exists as a more-or-less successful pull *against* a still-ever-present self. Unselfishness must co-exist with selfishness, opposing it, but presupposing what it opposes, in a conflictual entanglement. Wedgwood expresses this idea in a metaphor:

> The very warmth and colour of disinterestedness spring from the diffraction of the various interests, as they break and blend into each other. If you have no life of your own to sacrifice, you have nothing to

16 Wedgwood, 'Selfishness', *Spectator*, 12 August 1882, 1053.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 290.

> give. If you go aside from nothing of your own to serve another, the service is vapid and colourless. It is the breaking of the ray of light which creates colour. It is the breaking of one interest against another in life, which gives the moral colour to true service and the affections which that service fosters. Without the self, there is no not-self.[20]

The selfishness/unselfishness antithesis is also imperfect because, although unselfishness is the highest ideal, it is not always wrong to be selfish. This recalls how gratitude is a virtue, but ingratitude is normal and not blameworthy; and how apologies are desirable, but being unapologetic is not ordinarily wrong. Likewise, despite insisting that men of genius *are* selfish, Wedgwood does not want them condemned or blamed for it: 'It is a loss that we have no epithet for a course of conduct that guards the interest of the self but one so much coloured by condemnation as selfish'.[21] She wants to describe their conduct as selfish with the condemnation stripped out of the word. A genius, she believes, *must* overlook the claims of others to concentrate on serious creative work. For men of genius to have their artistic, reflective, and creative desires frustrated would be far more painful than for most people, so geniuses do not have the same option of unselfishness as ordinary folk. We should not be too heavy-handed in imposing unselfishness on everyone alike.

Moreover, much attempted unselfishness only leads back to veiled selfishness, as in women agitating for the interests of their husbands. Because unselfishness presupposes selfishness, we cannot do away with the latter completely, and should not try to, or it will only re-appear in disguise. Unselfishness can be praised without this entailing that everyone who falls short of being unselfish merits blame, and without it entailing that everyone who strives for unselfishness truly is a paragon of virtue.

This point is significant, because modern readers might otherwise be repelled by Wedgwood's Victorian notion that everyone is inherently selfish and needs to strive for goodness by battling against their own worse nature. But while her views are indeed quintessentially Victorian, Wedgwood mitigates their apparent severity by stressing that selfishness is normal and mostly not vicious. Unselfishness is the highest virtue,

20 Wedgwood, 'Self and Unself', 630.
21 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 418.

but selfishness is generally not blameworthy. Here we see an interesting moral payoff of the idea of imperfect antithesis.

4.4 Unselfishness as a Historical Ideal

Wedgwood's 1882 essay 'Selfishness' gives the topic a historical dimension. Only in the last 300 years, she says, has self-sacrifice become recognised as a virtue and selfishness as a vice. This new outlook arose with the rise of individuality, charted in literature by Shakespeare and in politics by declarations of the Rights of Man. For the first time, the individual was conceived to exist outside of any relation either to God or to polity.

It may seem paradoxical that the rise of individuality and of ideal unselfishness coincided. But just as unselfishness metaphysically presupposes the self and its selfishness, historically we had to recognise the separate self before there could be any demand that it renounce its claims and interests. It made no sense to extol the sacrifice of selfish interests before they were even acknowledged to be a force.

Living long before this discovery of the separate self, Aristotle did not conceive of 'selfishness' as a vice: 'Where is the mean between Selfishness, and its opposite excess, in the "Nicomachean Ethics?"'[22] For him, neither selfishness nor self-sacrifice came into ethics. Only once the individual was detached first from the city-state then from divine government, and attributed separate desires and interests, could its pursuit of these desires be assessed either positively or negatively. 'It is only in our own age that men have awakened to the *distortion* in that character which finds its centre in self'.[23] The danger had to appear before it could be condemned.

Yet despite these historical claims, Wedgwood also treats selfishness as natural, arising inherently from the bare fact of being a self that inevitably finds its own mental life far more salient than anyone else's, under her concept of 'mental parallax' that we encountered in Chapter 2. She explicitly says:

> As long as men and women have existed, they must have been tempted to give their own interests too large a proportion of their attention, – to

22 Wedgwood, 'Selfishness', 1051.
23 Ibid.

> 'pass by on the other side,' when the wounded fellow-traveller suggested an inconvenient claim; to look at their own needs through a magnifying glass, and at their neighbours' with half-shut eye; to fail, in short, in whatever demands the sacrifice of self. We do not suppose that the temptation varies from age to age; [...] it is not likely that [people] were either more or less selfish than they are.[24]

So how can she also maintain that selfishness is particular to modernity? Perhaps the answer is that the self is also particular to modernity. But that only seems plausible if 'self' means a being standing apart from all social and political ties, which is more restricted than Wedgwood's self in the very thin sense of the 'I', bearer of a first-person perspective. She is torn between historical and ahistorical views of both the self and selfishness.

However, we can see a way to reconcile her views from some further things she says about the rise of unselfishness as an ideal. Unselfishness and self-sacrifice, she says, are feminine virtues, and the highest Christian ideal is most often embodied in women.

> All that system of thought and feeling which we associate with the teaching of Christ has, under the influence of the theory which associates it with woman's sphere, taken a feminine, I might say, an effeminate tinge.[25]

She comments in 'The Moral Ideal' on the profound change from the ancient world, where *virtus* was male and female virtue was more-or-less an oxymoron.[26] Even though overall this change is a great gain, a loss has come with it: the heroic, martial, citizenly virtues of the ancients can no longer exist in the unequivocal shape they used to have. Nonetheless, we should not go back to the patriarchal world in which they had their place:

> The study of classic antiquity shows with hideous plainness what is the character of that civilisation which dwelt exclusively on the male side of life, which had no reverence for weakness, no compassion for suffering, no honour for purity.[27]

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24 Ibid.
25 Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage in its Influence', 364.
26 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
27 Wedgwood, 'Morals and Politics', 757.

This view presents another puzzle about Wedgwood's chronology. How can unselfishness be the highest Christian ideal *and* come after modern individualism, although Christianity came onto the scene centuries earlier? Her ultimate answer is as follows. The separate individual self began to emerge along with early Christianity,[28] and so did the ideal of self-sacrifice – loving the neighbour, relinquishing the coat. But these values did not come to full fruition overnight. Rather, Christianity hybridised with existing Roman power structures, its values got distorted, and self-sacrifice became perverted into medieval asceticism. Instead of sacrificing the self for the other, this was about sacrificing one's own flesh because it was judged base, evil, and sinful, and retreating from social relations into the cloister because the entire world was deemed evil and sinful.[29] Self-sacrifice remained a feminine ideal – 'the monk in the cloister was to be chaste, meek, obedient, self-denying' – yet actual women were judged supremely sinful, while the feminine ideal was appropriated by men.[30] With the Renaissance and modernity, the value of nature, including the wealth of human nature, was thankfully restored.[31] The individual self now re-emerged and entered into its full complexity and richness. This laid the preconditions for the recovery and development of the true and original Christian idea of self-sacrifice which had long been lost.

This historical narrative suggests the lines along which Wedgwood can resolve her tension about whether the self and selfishness are inherent or historical. The movement of history has restored the self to the separate existence it began to have with early Christianity. Thus the self became separate around the first century A.D., then its separateness was lost again in medieval Christendom, then it was restored. But even in early Christian times, the self was not simply created or constructed as a separate entity. Rather, people at this time began to recognise explicitly the structural features that human existence intrinsically has – the separateness of the self, and with it a degree of selfishness – and concomitantly people began to recognise that acting morally requires self-sacrifice. This was not simply a change of outlooks, but a *growth*

28 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 189.
29 Ibid., pp. 326–28.
30 Ibid., p. 379.
31 Ibid., pp. 381–83.

in human insight and self-understanding. Thus, the self always has a separate existence, phenomenologically, but it is only over history that this existential reality has become fully explicit, recognised, and embodied in social reality. This, I propose, is the best way to reconcile the several things Wedgwood says about the self.

4.5 Unself and Insanity

Wedgwood believes in a separate self, but 'separate' does not mean utterly isolated and withdrawn into a private world. On the contrary, according to her remarks about the refraction amongst selves, 'I' presupposes 'you'. Only in my reflection back upon myself from you can I know myself as the separate individual I am. This entanglement and mutual refraction is why self–other relations, and the tension between unselfishness and selfishness, are central to our moral lives.

It can happen, however, that someone withdraws dramatically into the self and mentally severs all relations with others. For her, this defines insanity – not in the wide sense of mental ill-health, but the narrower sense of the disorders now classed as psychotic, where someone's perception of reality is distorted, at worst so deeply that they can no longer even distinguish themselves and their psychical experiences from the outer world.

> The insane person is the person who acts as if he were alone in the world, the person for whom his fellows have become things, the man who is ready to kill a child that he may watch a windmill, to whom the taste of the moment is more than the lives of his fellows. He interprets to us the true meaning of the impulses of luxury, self-indulgence, and vice; he teaches us the precipice which we approach whenever we exchange the we for the I. There is no delusion, however wild, which does more than detach and exhibit clearly the blinding tendency of the spirit that makes self its centre. Insanity is only this process fully achieved, the complete loss of all proportion which comes upon the mind, when it surrenders itself to that centripetal impulse, the hopeless confusion on which the finest intellect may enter if it confuse the far with the near.[32]

Wedgwood finds the consummate literary expression of this centripetal impulse in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. She remarks

32 Wedgwood, 'The Treatment of the Insane', *Spectator*, 27 September 1884, 1267.

that unlike most fiction, it doesn't deal with the relations between man and woman – on the contrary, there is not even one named woman in it.[33] This dramatises that, for Dr. Jekyll, there is no other; instead, he plumbs the dismal depths of his own self. 'Mr Stevenson represents the individualising influence of modern democracy in its most concentrated form'.[34] This might mean that once the individual is detached from civic and theological hierarchies, their selfishness cascades forth and *homo homini lupus*, 'man is a wolf to man'. She may also mean that when we throw aside relations with others, we lose proportion, and can't see that our own aims are not the only ones in the world. Even the most trivial whim can then take absolute priority over the most urgent claim from others. At the extreme, the insane person cannot even perceive that there *are* any others with their distinct minds. Pursuing the path of genius, while legitimate, courts this risk of tipping into insanity, precisely because it is a selfish path. Little by little, the self can grow until it presides solitary over the universe. Paradoxically, it then ceases to be a self: too much self, and the 'you' and 'we' disappear, there are no boundaries, and the overgrown self flips into an unself.

Wedgwood's reflections on insanity reinforce again that the self that concerns her is not only a thick social construction of modernity. She is concerned with the self in a more fundamental sense. To be a self *at all*, an 'I' and not a 'you', requires that one also be aware *of* 'you', and see oneself as part of a 'we'. These are existential rather than social structures. Because of the refraction amongst selves, and their dimension of separateness, insanity is a perpetual risk of our existential condition, a risk that some ways of life can exacerbate.

4.6 Dilemmas of Self-Sacrifice

There are problems with Wedgwood's moral ideal of self-sacrifice. One problem is that it risks defeating itself. Consider the related version put forward by Cobbe in her 1855 treatise the *Essay on Intuitive Morals*, which influenced Wedgwood.[35] For Cobbe, virtue takes priority over

33 See Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1886).

34 Wedgwood, 'Fiction', *Contemporary Review* 49 (January 1886), 595.

35 On Wedgwood's admiration for Cobbe's thought, see Brown, *Wedgwood*, 282. For

happiness, and virtue is defined by doing one's duty.[36] Duty subdivides into two parts: first, to conduce to the virtue of others, and second, to produce their happiness. The first part takes priority. So my first duty is to conduce to your virtue – which primarily consists in your conducing to my virtue. Our mutual efforts to conduce to one's another virtue seem to go around in an empty circuit. Subtract these empty efforts, and my next duty is to increase others' happiness and put their happiness before my own. But in turn the other person has to put my happiness before theirs. Wouldn't it be more straightforward for everyone, first, to stop the mutual exhortation, and second, to cut out the middle and just pursue their own happiness directly?

Perhaps Wedgwood's asymmetry of pleasure and pain alleviates this problem. I should sacrifice myself – subject myself to some pain, and forego some of what I desire – to shield you from pain, because pain is an overwhelming evil that you, like all living beings, wish to avoid. The pain I subject myself to is an evil for me, but still I may assume it, to a degree. Potentially, then, if I self-sacrifice to some degree to shield you from a worse pain, and you do the same for me, we finish with less pain all around.

However, that reconstruction is unfaithful to Wedgwood. She does not think self-sacrifice is desirable only to reduce all-around pain. To her mind that would be reducing the highest ideal to the lowest, moral values to a calculus of desires. Self-sacrifice, our highest ideal, has *intrinsic* value, not merely beneficial consequences in lowering net pain.

If self-sacrifice is intrinsically valuable, though, then that leads to another problem. The Christian ideal of giving up one's cloak and coat is not supposed to be about extolling one's own supreme virtue in doing without both things, fashioning oneself as a virtuous self-denier. The ideal is to renounce coat and cloak faced with the *other* person's claim. If I am self-sacrificing to style my superbly noble and Christ-like self, what I lose (a bit of desire or pleasure) is trivial besides my gain (my moral elevation). This tension marks a serious pressure on Wedgwood's moral

instance, Wedgwood engaged with Cobbe on the life after death (see J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 22 October 1872, WM 401) and with Cobbe's concept of *heteropathy*, i.e., deliberate maliciousness; see Wedgwood, 'Dislike', 212–14.

36 See Cobbe, *An Essay on Intuitive Morals*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1855), and see her summary in *The Duties of Women* (Boston, MA: Ellis, 1881), esp. p. 86.

philosophy, since the ideal of self-sacrifice risks reproducing the very self-centredness it is supposed to overcome.

In one place Wedgwood virtually admits this point. We have become 'effeminate' and overestimate how bad pain is, when sin is much worse:

> There is no department of life, we firmly believe, in which we do not need to be reminded that Sin is an evil incommensurably greater than Pain. [...] We have yielded to an effeminate incapacity to contemplate endurance.[37]

If sin outweighs pain so incommensurably, then I lose next to nothing if I give up my coat and cloak to gain the infinitely greater advantage of acting rightly and eschewing sin.

Thus, Wedgwood's ethics has the problem that if self-sacrifice is done for the sake of reducing your pain, it is pointlessly circuitous (as with Cobbe), but if self-sacrifice is done for its intrinsic merit, it risks being covertly self-aggrandising and not truly self-sacrificial at all. I will come back to this challenge in later chapters. Ultimately, I will suggest that Wedgwood has an answer, but it depends on her wider metaphysics. Before proceeding further, I want to take stock of another set of tensions within her self-sacrificial ideal.

4.7 The Gender Angle

Another problem with the Victorian ideal of self-sacrifice is its link with women, which Wedgwood accepts. This deep-seated constellation of ideas went back at least as far as the authors Hannah More and Sarah Lewis, two prime architects of Victorian gender norms (neither of whom Wedgwood ever mentions). For More, women should sacrifice their social vanities to become moral arbiters in the home and, indirectly, the nation.[38] Lewis, for her part, argued that women should find their happiness solely in fostering the happiness of others. They should exert a quiet influence, doing good through selfless service to their family members.[39]

37 Wedgwood, 'The Development of Christianity', *Spectator*, 9 August 1873, 1019.
38 More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* [1799] 11th edition (London: Cadell, 1811).
39 Lewis, *Woman's Mission* (London: Parker, 1842), esp. pp. 68–69.

Closer to Wedgwood's immediate time, she was very much the heir to her idol George Eliot, who celebrated self-sacrifice most dramatically in the case of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* from 1859, and, less obtrusively, that of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* from 1872, who settles for quiet obscurity.[40] Eliot acknowledges the pain and loneliness of these self-sacrificing women, but like Wedgwood she holds on to the ideal of self-sacrifice, personified by Christ himself.[41] More widely, the ideology of the self-sacrificing woman found expression not only in *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss,* but also in many other works, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's 1853 novel *Ruth* and Mrs. Henry Wood's wildly popular 1862 work *East Lynne*, the most extreme example. Wood's heroine Isabel Vane suffers for her momentary infidelity by being almost killed, hospitalised, disfigured, relinquishing her home, name, identity, outer appearance, children, and finally her life. She endures everything without complaint, becoming a saintly figure, a female Christ.[42]

These works seem to be praising women's moral exploitation.[43] The problem is reinforced in Wedgwood's case by her latitude towards men of genius; she apparently upholds self-sacrifice for women, selfishness for men. Indeed, she said she should have been larger than she was because she had internalised the self-sacrificial ideal and so felt that, having dutifully attended to her social and family claims, she could not possibly have also fulfilled her intellectual potential. I disagree with her self-assessment, but the point is that her self-sacrificial ideal prevented her from adopting a positive self-assessment. It was a wounding, damaging ideal.

Why did Wedgwood and so many influential women writers take up these ideas? I think it was because the ideology of female self-sacrifice was double-edged. It could and did legitimise women's exploitation, but it also made women the central moral agents and the principal bearers

40 Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Blackwood, 1860); *Middlemarch* (London: Blackwood, 1872).

41 Victorian readers stressed Eliot's ethics of self-sacrifice: see, e.g., John Crombie Brown, *The Ethics of George Eliot's Works*, 3rd edn. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1881). Incidentally, he justified his third edition appealing to Wedgwood's commendation of his book in her 'Moral Influence of George Eliot'.

42 Gaskell, *Ruth* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1853); Wood, *East Lynne* (London: Bentley, 1862).

43 For critical analysis of this ongoing pattern today, see Jules Holroyd, *Oppressive Praise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

of the difficulties of moral life, best placed to write about them from first-person experience. This yielded a body of fictional literature that placed women centre stage in an unprecedented way. And this makes sense of the irony of successful female authors writing prolifically about self-sacrificing women, fulfilling themselves in their writing careers, not sacrificing their literary ambitions one iota, while achieving this success by idealising the self-sacrificing woman.

The ambiguity of the ideology is encapsulated in one of Wedgwood's remarks. 'Woman, if she is not to sink below man, must keep a position in some sense above him'.[44] The ideal of the self-sacrificing woman both debased *and* elevated women. The elevating side drew intellectual and creative women to espouse the ideal despite its underside of debasement.

Thus, the ambiguity of the ideal allows Wedgwood to try to balance two concerns: recognising that women have sacrificed a great deal, suffered, and forsaken much of their potential; and recognising that many women truly value the same self-sacrifice. To embrace the ideal of self-sacrifice is to honour women's perspectives and values, as she sees it. She also wants to honour their experience by acknowledging that self-sacrifice is hard, not natural or easy. To make-believe it is easy and fulfilling, the route to plenitude and not deprivation (viz.: Hinton) is the conceit of someone who knows nothing about giving things up. By acknowledging the pain of self-sacrifice, she hopes to do justice to women's experience, for unlike Hinton women *do* know its hardship and sorrow. Self-sacrifice is virtue and suffering at once.

Wedgwood's connection between women and self-sacrifice is both a strength and a limitation of her ethics. Positively, it represents her attempt to articulate women's experience and put that experience at the centre of ethical theorising. Negatively, the ideal can be punitive and condemn women to suffer in the name of virtue.

4.8 Conclusion

Several imperfect antitheses organise Wedgwood's thinking about the self. First, one must have a self to be unselfish; one must have the

44 Wedgwood, '"Male and Female Created He Them"', *Contemporary Review* 56 (July 1889), 122.

impulse towards selfishness to be able to sacrifice it. *Un*-selfishness both presupposes and negates selfishness; *self*-sacrifice presupposes and negates the self. If the antithesis was perfect, the negation would contain nothing of the presupposition but be its total opposite. Instead, the thesis (self) always remains part of the antithesis (unselfishness). This is not true in reverse: one can be a self without ever aspiring to be unselfish at all. So the antithesis is asymmetrical.

Second, 'I' requires 'you', and in turn you and I exist only as part of a 'we', just as colours can arise only when there is white light to break up and refract. 'I' and 'you' are not a perfect antithesis: you are not my mere negation or absence, but have your own life. It is hard for me to see it: by the law of mental parallax, I mentally convert your concern with things different from me into your being not-concerned with me. But the more I appreciate that you are a real and independent centre of experience in your own right, the more I have a counter-weight against my centripetal selfish impulses.

Third, without 'you' or 'we', the self cannot be an 'I', one among others; instead it becomes an *un*self, a formation far removed from the unselfish ideal. Like Dr. Jekyll, the unself has gone so far into its selfish urges as to lose sight of others, undoing and dissolving the boundaries that define a self. Without borders, the self evaporates, like water draining out of a broken container. This dissolution leads not to a desirable unselfishness, but to an utter indifference to the claims of others. Without a self, there can be no unselfishness; this is the flip-side of the fact that unselfishness requires a self.

Fourth, as we have seen, selfishness arises inherently from the fact of being a self, so that unselfishness is a hard struggle. Unselfishness is our highest ideal, most often achieved by women, albeit still with much more imperfection and backsliding than women like to admit. But although unselfishness is a virtue, selfishness is normal and not always a vice – much of the time it is not blameworthy, it is simply the way human life is.

This last point mitigates what might otherwise sound like emblematic Victorian sermonising, and it shows the moral purchase of imperfect antithesis. If selfishness and unselfishness were a symmetrical antithesis, then, since unselfishness is the highest ideal, selfishness would be the worst evil. But this Wedgwood denies. For her, we can revere

unselfishness and self-sacrifice *and* accept those who pursue a selfish path. She was in practice more ready to condone men than women, yet the overall principle stands, flowing out of imperfect antithesis. The principle softens the apparent austerity of her ethics of self-sacrifice, for the intent is not to cast blame on everyone's normal behaviour, but rather to accept selfishness as normal and unexceptionable – while yet celebrating those people, often women, who occasionally transcend it.

5. Relation and Isolation

5.1 Introduction

This chapter expands on the disagreements with utilitarianism which fuel Wedgwood's ethical thought. First, I look at her criticisms of John Stuart Mill (5.2), which are bound up with imperfect antithesis through her claim that the pleasure/pain antithesis is a logical fiction. The real antithesis lies between pain, from which we recoil, and moral ideals, to which we aspire (5.3).

I then look at the relational ethics she puts forward as a critical alternative to Henry Sidgwick's utilitarianism (5.4). Anticipating feminist care ethics, Wedgwood argues that we are always embedded in relationships which supply our aims, and that it is always right to do whatever most fortifies our whole web of relationships. I identify several problems with this relational ethics, however, problems that led Wedgwood herself to move away from it (5.5).

More broadly, Wedgwood objects that utilitarianism foists a logical grid upon moral life, and she instead urges attention to lived experience. Lived experience is disparate and uneven and, in key cases, our real-life values are asymmetrical: we can recognise and value the good with no reference to the bad (5.6).

5.2 Hume to Mill

Wedgwood's views on pleasure and pain, selfishness and self-sacrifice, are bound up with her dispute with utilitarianism. She articulates her objections in two essays criticising John Stuart Mill and two more on fellow-utilitarian Henry Sidgwick.

The first essay is the 1874 piece 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics',

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her most focused critique of Mill.[1] This essay, and its companion-piece 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', argue that David Hume laid the groundwork both for utilitarianism and, more surprisingly, Comteian positivism. It is worth briefly noting why Wedgwood links Hume and positivism.

Comteian positivism was a surprisingly influential current in nineteenth-century British thought, mediated by Harriet Martineau's translation and condensation of his work.[2] For Comte, knowledge derives solely from empirical data and their scientific systematisation. His system expounds the totality of scientific knowledge as it stood at the time. His single most famous claim is that thought passes through three stages: theological, metaphysical, and 'positive' or scientific.[3] Theology explains phenomena with reference to supernatural agencies; metaphysics explains them with reference to abstract forces and powers; and finally science begins with observation. Reflexively, Comte positions his own system as lying at the scientific stage.

Despite her scepticism about the positivist-derived concept of 'altruism', Wedgwood has time for Comte's three stages, relating them to successive views of nature. On the theological view, the world originates in a divine will. On the metaphysical view, causes or 'hidden

1 She had long engaged with Mill. In the 1850s she read Mill's *Logic*, prompted by her uncle Darwin (see her 'Miss Julia Wedgwood, Authoress', *Women's Penny Paper*, 23 May 1891, 2). In 1864, she briefly sketched her criticisms of utilitarianism in the essay 'Utilitarianism' in *The Reader*. In 1869, she wrote to her mother of her hostility to Benthamism and to Mill's atheism (J. W. to Frances Wedgwood, 4 March 1869, WM 252.15). In the 1870s, she discussed Mill's *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1873) with Emelia Gurney, who replied: 'I wish you would write a review somewhere of Stuart Mill. I saw […] one in the *Spectator*, and it wants much more' (Gurney to J. W., 22 November 1873, in Ellen Mary Gurney, ed., *Letters of Emelia Russell Gurney* (London: Nisbet, 1902), p. 129). Perhaps that goaded Wedgwood to get her criticisms into print.

2 See Martineau, ed. and trans., *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*. The link with Hume was already enshrined in Martineau's intellectual programme: before translating Comte, she had pursued a version of a science of society, influenced by Adam Smith and developing the Humean naturalistic tradition. See Karen Green, 'From Utopian Republicanism to Scientific Socialism', in *Women and Republicanism*, ed. Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026), pp. 108-31. On women followers of positivism more broadly, including Martineau, see Mary Pickering, 'Auguste Comte and the Curious Case of English Women', in *The Anthem Companion to Auguste Comte*, ed. Andrew Wernick (New York: Anthem, 2017), pp. 175–204.

3 Martineau, *Positive Philosophy*, pp. 25–26.

connections' bind events together. The positivist and Humean view dispenses with hidden connections; experience reveals only regularities, 'invariable sequences' captured under covering laws. Positive laws replace metaphysical causes.[4]

For Wedgwood, Hume dispensed with theology and metaphysics just as Comte did. When Hume applied the same observational starting-point to ethics, the result was utilitarianism (the theory, if not yet the word). All we can know with certainty are identical propositions or sensations; the substantial basis of ethics must then lie in sensations, specifically pleasure and pain. Morality becomes the science that uses our knowledge of 'our own feelings in their proper order of combination and sequence' to calculate the best means to obtain pleasure and minimise pain. 'Right' only means 'tending to advance happiness', 'wrong' to retard it.[5]

Wedgwood now continues to Mill, oddly without mentioning the intervening figure of Jeremy Bentham. She omits him in order to highlight a dividing-line that she considers central: the French Revolution. Hume wrote before it, and Mill after. Writing before this watershed, the only people whose pleasure and pain really concerned Hume were the elite.[6] (She is not claiming he explicitly said this, just that the elite formed his taken-for-granted horizon.) In this context, a focus on pleasures and pains made sense. If I increase the pleasure of someone in my exclusive social circle, this will bounce back to directly enhance my own pleasure. For example, if Mme. Poshe is delighted that I have praised her dress, then she will treat me more kindly. The narrowness of Hume's circle made the transition from my pleasure to other people's pleasure unproblematic.

Mill, conversely, comes after the Revolution, and so his concern is with the general happiness of all people – *really* all people. He 'assumes the unity of the human race as a reality'.[7] This extension of moral concern beyond the narrow elite is to the good. Yet it makes the transition from my happiness to the general happiness a problem, given Mill's empiricist starting point. For why should I care about people with whom I have

4 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', *Spectator,* 4 April 1874, 435–36.
5 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', *Spectator*, 11 April 1874, 468.
6 Ibid., 469.
7 Ibid.

not the remotest link, or about 'humanity', an abstraction hooked onto nothing in my sensory experience?

5.3 The Critique of Utilitarianism

Framed by that overarching question, 'why should I care about the abstraction "humanity"?', Wedgwood sets out a series of objections to Mill's utilitarianism.

For Mill, the way to ensure people care for the general happiness is to educate them to that effect (reminiscent of Hinton). Wedgwood objects:

> The system which resolves morality into something else, needs morality as its sanction. Every man is a part of mankind, we are told, and the influence of education and sympathy will bring this truth home to him so vividly that it will cease to be possible for him to act as a solitary being. But how is education to produce this result, apart from that leverage implied in the word ought, which is the very word Mill proposes to explain?[8]

She recognises, however, that Mill tries to get around this problem with the concept of higher pleasures, for then one can through education learn to appreciate that the higher pleasure of serving humanity trumps lower pleasures such as over-eating, getting drunk, etc. But as we know, Wedgwood objects that the hierarchy of higher and lower pleasures tacitly relies on independent evaluative criteria and therefore moral distinctions.

> When he asserts – as he was, we believe, the first of his school to assert – that pleasures vary not only in intensity and duration, but also in absolute value, we fail to see what reality of experience, advocated by the opposite school, he does not concede.[9]

She admits that Mill tries to get round this worry in turn by appealing to the experience of qualified judges who have tried both kinds of pleasure and prefer the ones that are most truly pleasurable. She replies that the test of experience has nothing to do with it: 'There are such things as mutually exclusive pleasures. Can the same person appreciate, for instance, the

8 Ibid., 470.
9 Ibid.

satisfaction of gratified spite and the satisfaction of perfect forgiveness?'[10] Her point is not only that one does not need to have felt gratified spite to appreciate perfect forgiveness. More strongly, a person may only be able to appreciate perfect forgiveness if they have never gratified their spite. If I have ever done so, I will be bound to feel cynical about perfect forgiveness. Thus, comparative pleasures have nothing to do with the assessment and are even likely to lead our assessments astray.[11]

That judging pleasures requires education, evaluative criteria, and qualified judges shows that pleasure is a more complex notion than duty, yet the appeal to pleasure was meant to be simplifying ethics:

> The whole worth of this analysis of duty into the means of pleasure depends on the question whether the substance thus obtained is more elementary than that from which it was obtained. If, after all, the thing you say is a compound is found in the substances into which you have resolved it, your analysis [...] has not given us anything elementary.[12]

Running in the background through these critical points is the asymmetry of pain and pleasure:

> The word 'pleasure' recalls the vaguest of all our emotions, as the word 'pain' recalls the most definite, and the antithesis between two things so different in vividness has always seemed to us a source of large error.[13]

The asymmetry of pain and pleasure means that increasing pleasure cannot be the criterion of an action's rightness, first because pleasure is vague and indefinite, and second because we do not aim for pleasure, even though we seek respite from pain.

She enlarges further on these criticisms in her two-part response to Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* the following year. Here she quotes Mill: 'Utilitarianism, to take Mr. Mill's own account [...] implies "that pleasure, and the absence of pain are the only things desirable as ends,

10 Ibid.

11 Mill himself remarks that: 'It may be questioned whether any one has [...] ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many [...] have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both'; *Utilitarianism*, p. 15. He takes this to back up his point that competent judges prefer and prioritise the higher pleasures. Wedgwood would say it backs up *her* point that they are best placed to do that if they never savour the lower ones.

12 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', 470.

13 Ibid.

other things being desirable as a means to these ends"'.[14] She says this is not meant to be an 'identical proposition', although:

> We have sometimes wondered whether the above account of Utilitarianism was not of this kind, – whether, if the above sentence were analysed, we should not find pleasure defined as that which is an end to men, and an end described as whatever gives pleasure. However, we are certain Mr. Mill must have meant something more in this treatise than that men want only what they wish for.[15]

Saying that pleasure is everyone's end or goal is not meant to be a tautology, but to tell us that people want one class of things rather than another. The point is meant to concern substance and not words.

> Of course, if you call every end a pleasure, you have no difficulty in proving pleasure to be the only end. But the moment the proposition ceases to be identical, it ceases, we think, to be true.[16]

Implicitly, she continues, Mill holds that certain ends – such as 'purity, fortitude, and generosity' – are not as ultimate as immediate satisfactions of the brain and body.[17] This is his substantial claim: we aim for something lower-level than these moral ideals, and the latter have to be decomposed into the former. Now, purity, fortitude, and generosity are virtues. Thus, for Wedgwood, Mill is effectively denying that virtues can be ends in themselves. For him virtue is not itself happiness, but happiness must consist of a more immediate, lower-level and not intrinsically moral satisfaction. Otherwise there is no distinctive content to Mill's claims, which would be no different from the claim that we ought to act virtuously.

She maintains, however, that our everyday life does not fit Mill's account. All the time, we directly pursue moral ideals that are defined independently of any bodily or lower-level satisfaction. In fact, it is easier to understand ourselves as pursuing these ideals than to laboriously break down what we are doing into a striving for pleasure, which is vaguer and more indefinite than purity, generosity, fortitude, or other

14 Wedgwood, 'Mr Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics', first notice, *Spectator*, 13 March 1875, 343, quoting Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 10.
15 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', first notice, 343.
16 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', 470.
17 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', first notice, 343.

virtues. Utilitarianism offers a heavily theory-driven reconstruction of experience, whereas our lived moral experience is simply that people at their best perform generous actions, try to live a pure life, bear their difficulties with fortitude, and so on. These actions may give pleasure, but only as an indirect side-effect.

Returning to the initial motivational deficit issue – how I am to get from caring about my own happiness to that of humanity – she calls it a 'sophism' to say that the general happiness is larger than my individual happiness, so that as I want the smaller thing I must want the greater, as being more of a good thing.[18] This isn't obviously true in general: I may like a little square of chocolate daily, but would I like many bars of chocolate for every meal? The problem is compounded with happiness, because greater *general* happiness summed from the third-person perspective is not obviously more of the same thing as my *individual* happiness from the first-person perspective. And so the problem remains:

> How is the perception that a particular course is better for the majority to be converted into a determination in one to sacrifice his happiness for the sake of the majority? In other words, – what are the dynamics of Utilitarianism?[19]

For her, these dynamics require appeal to independent moral ideals, which call us to care about other people even at personal cost. Admit these ideals, and the whole point of constructing a utilitarian theory of ethics falls away.

She sums up:

> Utilitarianism, we have said, is futile as an explanation of Ethics; first, because it professes to analyse the idea of duty into a regard for the general interest, and then requires the idea of duty to oblige individuals to attend to the general interest; secondly, because it professes to analyse the idea of morality into a means of happiness, while happiness is itself a complex thing, made up in a large measure of the sense of rightness which was to be resolved into it.[20]

18 Ibid., 344.
19 Ibid.
20 Wedgwood, 'Mr Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics', second notice, *Spectator*, 20 March 1875, 374.

I think there is a lot in Wedgwood's arguments. We cannot reduce moral duty to a sum of the satisfaction of natural desires or pleasures. This is circular if we include the pleasure some people derive from acting virtuously, and it is impractical, since what is pleasant is vague, indefinite, and a fleeting side-effect of higher aims. Let us get back to lived experience, Wedgwood says, and there we find people simply aiming to lead virtuous lives, pursuing the virtues that flow out of their moral ideals. The pursuit of moral ideals is a much more familiar everyday phenomenon than a laborious logical reconstruction of life into sums of pleasures and pains, desires and satisfactions.

5.4 Sketch of a Relational Ethics

Sidgwick wrestled with the gap between egoism and impartiality, which would seem highly germane to Wedgwood's concerns with selfishness and self-sacrifice, but strangely, in her response to his 1874 treatise *The Methods of Ethics*, she ignores this issue and goes in a completely different direction.

Her core objection is that Sidgwick has made a misguided attempt to solve the problems of ethics by conceiving the individual in isolation from others:

> He proposes, apparently as a simplification of the whole problem, the conception of a being out of all moral conditions. 'When we imagine a conscious being alone in the universe,' he says (p. 378), 'it seems clear that only its own happiness could be to it an ultimate good.' Possibly, but in this statement of the case the problem is entirely got rid of. So far as each of us is cut off from communion with any other mind, his condition ceases to throw light on any moral question. You cannot, by multiplying a millionfold the aims of a being who stands out of relation to every other, represent the aims of a community.[21]

This is unfair to Sidgwick. He certainly makes the claim Wedgwood quotes; it is a thought-experiment designed to show that virtues would

21 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', second notice, 374. See Sidgwick: 'if, as I have said, when we imagine a conscious being alone in the universe, it seems clear that only its own happiness could be to it an ultimate good [...] we may perhaps conclude that Common Sense will admit, as its most certain moral intuition most precisely stated, the First Principle of Utilitarianism'; *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1874), p. 378.

have no value to a hypothetical isolated person unless they brought the person happiness. But this is only a step in his argument. He continues that since, in fact, you are a similar being to me, from the point of view of the universe your happiness must be as important as mine. Hence his well-known dualism of practical reason, an insurmountable tension that results from our *not* being alone in the universe.

But never mind that. Her account of Sidgwick does not really matter, because she merely uses the objection to his supposed methodological individualism as the springboard to her alternative. It starts from the reality that we are members of a 'corporate unity', a social whole. We must rediscover the standpoint of the ancient Greeks, she says, for whom there was no individual separate from a member of the polity. The individual was conceived to be constituted through-and-through by their relations with others.

This leads her to reject Sidgwick's definition of ethics as the 'science of conduct', defining ethics instead as

> The Science of Aims, or the science of Relations. For all moral aims are relations, and the very meaning of the word 'ought' is that these take precedence of every other, not ought to take precedence – of course we must not use the word defined in our definition of it – but actually do so.[22]

Whatever values we aim at, they are always relational, for we are constituted by our relationships, and so every aim we adopt builds in a reference to these constitutive relations. If I aspire to be generous, this means generosity to those I care about; to be pure, preserving myself from corrupting relations around me; and so on. Every aim has a relational content because we are relational beings, i.e., members of a corporate unity. As she says, her point is not that we *ought* to take relational aims, but that we inescapably *do*, because relationality is our essence.

Nevertheless, given that we invariably have relational aims, she infers that the particular relational aims we ought to adopt are always the ones that most strengthen our relations with others. Conversely, what is wrong is whatever isolates us from others:

> The gradation of organic union is the gradation of claim, with its negative side — that every impulse which leads to mere severance is an antagonist

22 Ibid., 375.

> to duty, that in the acts of purest aversion, if we take the word in its literal sense, the right attitude will always be one of membership.[23]

She admits that this principle may seem to help little with conflicts of duties, since we all stand in manifold relations – to close family, more distant family, animal companions, neighbours, colleagues, fellow-citizens of the same state, etc. Which ones should we put first? Her answer is that we should always prioritise the strongest relation: the more organic the union, the greater the claim. We should also do whatever most strengthens organic relations as a whole. Yet these two principles together still leave ample scope for conflicts of duties. Antigone, presumably, was right to prioritise her dead brother over the state, since family relations are stronger than civil ones. But she must also have been wrong to prioritise her brother, because he was a traitor, an antagonist of the state, and thus an opponent of the wider organic union.

A similar tension arises with regard to her inclusion of animals in the relational ethic. The gradation of claims, she says, must include 'all gradation of sentient life in its gradual approach to Humanity'.[24] But it is not clear whether animals have more claim depending on my organic relations to them – so that I should prioritise my companion animals – or whether animals have more claim depending on their evolutionary closeness to humanity – which means primates would come first, then lemurs, then lagomorphs (hares and rabbits), and so on.

These tensions aside, it is striking how Wedgwood prefigures feminist care ethics, which likewise rejects the attempt to construct ethical theories starting from a hypothetical isolated individual. By abstracting the person from their relations with others, the fundamental content of moral life is missed out, according to care ethicists. For them, just like Wedgwood, we are first and foremost embedded in networks of relationships, and this embeddedness gives us a goal: to maintain the fabric of the relationships that we are in anyway.[25]

Carol Gilligan introduces the care standpoint claiming it is characteristic of women and girls, giving the example of Amy, who is asked whether a man should steal a medicine from the pharmacy to help

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 See especially Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

his sick wife. Amy answers 'no', because the consequences could damage the pharmacist's relations with his employer, his family, and so on. The salient fact for Gilligan is not Amy's 'no' so much as her reasons for it: the attention to a network of relationships, and the refusal to consider the moral dilemma in isolation or abstraction from this network, or to see the man with the sick wife in isolation from the wider fabric encompassing the pharmacist and his relationships.[26] As Wedgwood would see it, Amy approaches ethical problems in terms of a 'science of relations' and not a Sidgwickian 'science of conduct'. The right starting-point for ethics is how to sustain the communal fabric in which individuals are already embedded, rather than to bridge individuals who are falsely imagined to be isolated from any community.

5.5 We Can't Go Back to Athens

Wedgwood moved away from her relational ethics after this initial proposal. I see several interconnected reasons for this.

In her response to Sidgwick, she explicitly urged a return to the ancient Greeks. 'What we conceive the true ideal of morality was the ideal of the old world rather than of the new', she stated.[27] The task was to recover the ancient corporate unity.[28] Admittedly, the unity of the Greek city-state was premised on its enmity to rival city-states, on exclusivity, but she wanted to reclaim the 'gold' of unity without the 'alloy' of rivalry.

However, she came to think there could be no going back to the ancients. The ancient corporate unity required not only the exclusion of rival city-states but also the internal exclusion of slaves and women. Emancipate slaves and women, and there can be no Greek *polis*. Moreover, the French Revolution and democracy, the rise of individual personality, and modern liberty as the opportunity for independent

26 Ibid., pp. 27–29.

27 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', second notice, 375.

28 These claims prefigure the communitarian diagnosis of modern moral fragmentation, and its positive view of ancient societies where 'the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, […] which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically human goods are to be attained; […] There is no "I" apart from these' (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edn. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 172).

personal self-realisation, are developments that cannot be undone, and should not.

> [Plato] and his contemporaries meant by Liberty something which was compatible with any amount of despotic regulation of individual life. The ideal Republic of liberty-loving Greece would have been a despotism more intolerable to modern feeling than the most despotic kingdom of modern Europe.[29]

> The change of moral ideal from ancient to modern life may be roughly described as a substitution of the aims of the individual for those of the citizen, a transference of hope and fear from corporate to personal achievement. The transition takes place by the same law of development as that which transforms the zoophyte into the animal; it is a change from a lower to a higher form of life; the gain is immense and obvious.[30]

The rise of the separate individual is a progressive gain. But it means our relations with others can never have the unquestioned and total priority they did for the ancient Greeks. The priority of the whole depended on the individual being entirely a social member, with no existence outside the whole. Now that we do exist outside the whole, and cannot lose this sense of our individual selves, our relations with others will always be contentious and fraught. We now 'find our unity as we find our fractionalness'.[31] We can only unite from a starting-point of difference.

Let's relate this back to the earlier problem about whether separate selfhood is inherent in our existence or a contingent historical formation. The solution I suggested in Chapter 4 is that Wedgwood thinks that history has gradually realised the inherent separateness of the self. This is confirmed by her seeing the emergence of fractious individuals as a progressive gain. Individuals are fractions, our relations are fractured, and as we each have a self, and have selfish interests, we can only unite with others by relinquishing some of our interests. The ancient Greeks did not acknowledge this; they did not recognise a separate self. That was a *limitation* – not merely an interesting historical difference on a par with modernity, but a flawed outlook.

The flaw manifested itself in pushing women, slaves, and foreigners

29 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 104.
30 Ibid., p. 189.
31 J. W. to Victoria Welby [1882–85], in Welby, *Echoes of Larger Life*, ed. Mrs. Henry (Nina) Cust (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 97.

outside the *polis* and constructing a penumbra of barbarians forever at the gates. These exclusions were necessary, because the 'other' had to be pushed outside the self to maintain the illusion that it was fully part of a corporate unity (rather than being a partial fraction of a fragmented unity). In this way, the existential reality of our fractured selves was denied and projected onto those who were expelled outside of the civic unity. In turn, the historical emergence of the separate self reflects a progressive rediscovery of the intrinsic character of existence, formerly and problematically disavowed by the ancients.

These claims conflict with Wedgwood's relational ethics, which held up the ancients as the model to get back to. Thus, she had to abandon that ethics, and she did. Having realised it would be undesirable to return to the classical world, in *The Moral Ideal*, Wedgwood implicitly criticised her earlier relational ethics:

> At the very moment at which these lines are written (1887) it is less necessary than it was a short time ago to dwell on the social weakness produced by modern individualism. Perhaps we now more need reminding of its strength. But this reminder points out the difference of the two ideals quite as forcibly. We cannot attain the antique unity of the Family. The attempt without this to merge individuality in the State tends to deprive us of both the ancient and the modern unity. When we make the effort we are hindered as much by our virtues as by our vices; we are neither good enough nor bad enough for the thing we are trying to do. At our best, we cannot so surrender our own rights; at our worst, we cannot so trample on those of others. For the unity of the State, based as it was on the unity of the Family, was preserved by the relegation of all the perplexities of modern civilization to a region with which the State refused to concern itself [...] a Greek or Roman saw all Liberty against a background of slavery.[32]

However, since we moderns stand in ever-fractured relationships, don't we come back to the motivational deficit problem: what is to motivate me to self-sacrifice? How do I get from selfishness to unselfishness? Here, Wedgwood insists that the ethical task isn't to build a bridge leading in smooth steps from egoism to impartiality. Instead, we need to confront and acknowledge the fact that putting others first entails a sacrifice of oneself, a break from egoism – not a continuous transition, but a sharp

32 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 131.

cut. To seek an ego-based motivation to be unselfish misses the fact that to be unselfish the self has to transcend part of itself. We cannot lay stepping-stones over a deep chasm; only a leap will do.

These claims depend on Wedgwood's view that we pursue not pleasure but higher ideals. Although we recoil from pain and suffering, we also pursue moral ideals, one of which is self-sacrifice – indeed, this ought to be everyone's highest ideal. As to how this pursuit of ideals enables us to sacrifice our desires, in one sense, there is no mystery here. Whenever we chase after ideals we reach beyond the given, beyond our present state, beyond our embodiment. The ideal of self-sacrifice only makes explicit this constant orientation. In another sense, Wedgwood is frank, it is a miracle whenever someone manages to transcend their selfishness (see Chapter 7). The miracle is that our spiritual side allows us to transcend and transfigure our selfish urges – to jump across the chasm.

We might think these are pretty heavy metaphysical and religious assumptions, and that even if she is right that utilitarianism has a motivational deficit, at least utilitarians don't fill the deficit or paper over the dualism of practical reason by appealing to a mystical notion of miracle. Plus, if 'pleasure' is a vague term, aren't 'spirit', 'ideals', 'miracle', and 'self-sacrifice' even worse?

I think Wedgwood would reply that these concepts might look vague and ambiguous to the logical mind, but existentially they are real and familiar. Unless we are lost in a maze of definitions and derivations, we know what self-sacrifice concretely means: look at Silas Marner, Maggie Tulliver, Isabel Vane, or Jesus Christ. These examples show that egoism can be surmounted. It is miraculous; but there are everyday miracles, and we see them around us.

5.6 The Role of Imperfect Antithesis

Imperfect antithesis orchestrates Wedgwood's criticisms of Mill, which ultimately turn on her view that pleasure and pain are not a true antithesis; that the real antithesis is between pleasure and moral ideals, and is asymmetrical. On the other hand, her relational alternative to Sidgwick ultimately fails because it does not fit with imperfect antithesis. For Wedgwood, the imperfect antithesis of selfishness and unselfishness

is ultimate. But it disappears from sight on her relational ethics in which the concept of 'relationship' covers over the antithesis of self and other, and with it the fact that unselfishness entails self-sacrifice.

In other broader ways, Wedgwood's anti-utilitarianism is bound up with imperfect antithesis. She complains that utilitarians take an overly logical approach to ethics. They also mistakenly align ethics with jurisprudence, which casts half of ethics into the shadow, for law and morality are not concentric.[33] Modelling ethics on logic is even worse: it throws not half of morality into shade but the whole of it.[34] Real life does not fit logical binaries.

For example, against the idea of qualified judges, she says that I can appreciate the value of something important – above all deep, mutual love, the greatest good – without having ever lost it.[35] A mother can love her child, and know that this love is the most important thing in her life, without having ever lost or become estranged from her child. By extension, I can know what is right without having to have done wrong. I can know what is good without having to have suffered the bad. Wedgwood says that utilitarians brand such claims 'intuitionist', appealing to some magical and mysterious faculty for apprehending moral truths independent of experience. Not at all, she says. We know love's value having enjoyed it, but we do not have to have experienced hatred to appreciate its value. On the contrary, it may be that if we have ever succumbed to hatred, we can never enjoy pure love in the same way again. Again, she denies that recognising value depends on comparative experiences or the weighing of pleasures.

'Mark, we are not defining an issue', she adds, 'We are enunciating the truths which all must believe'.[36] Her aim is to not to provide a logically watertight set of definitions, but to capture lived experience. She consistently opposes starting from mere 'nomenclature', setting up definitions and then deriving conclusions from them.[37] Again and again,

33 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', first notice, 343.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 See, e.g., Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', 470; 'Aristotle–I', 941; *Teachers*, p. 60. As she says in *The Moral Ideal*, 'Logic, we may believe, is a law of men's thought concerning objects of thought which can be expressed in adequate nomenclature; a guide, therefore, which must be regarded as fallacious when we deal with that concerning which all language is not only inadequate, but to a certain

she says she wants to talk of *things*, realities and experiences, not words. When we attend to lived moral experience, we find it does not obey logic. We can know the good straight away, without any need for the bad. This is not a mystery needing elaborate explanation; it is a plain fact of experience. And it is another way that our real-life values are asymmetrical. We can recognise *A* (good is good) without having to recognise *not-A* (good is not bad). The good need make no reference to the bad at all. Logic loves symmetry, but real-life phenomena are out of equilibrium. We can have virtues without vices, good without bad, certainty of the right without having to experiment with the wrong.

However, this concern to illuminate real-life moral experience undercuts her relational ethics yet again, for on her own account that ethics does not faithfully register our lived moral experience today. We moderns do not feel we are members of a corporate unity; instead, we tend to find our relations with others conflictual, troubled, and an uphill struggle. We have to give others our cloaks and coats against our own urges, not as a direct expression of our corporate wholeness. We are – as Wedgwood puts it in *The Moral Ideal* – too bad to be like the ancient Greeks, too selfish and individualistic. But we are also too good, capable at best of a marvellous self-sacrifice that was not a possible ideal for any Greek. An account of our moral lives rooted in lived experience must start with our conditions as modern heirs of democracy, individualism, and Christianity, with a social life enormously far removed from ancient Athens and Sparta.

Despite these problems, the relational ethic was a waystation towards her developing ethics. She never wholly jettisons the idea that the right thing to do is whatever strengthens a relationship – that 'what we all want is *more relation*'.[38] And this relational background begins to overcome the problem of self-sacrifice flipping into covert self-amplification. Self-sacrifice has intrinsic value, for Wedgwood, not because it embodies a supremely styled self but because it realises our relational bonds – bonds of fractional unity, conflictual entanglement. Because our unity is fractional unity, it can be realised only through a degree of self-loss, the loss of a part of that in me that fragments our unity and makes me a fraction, namely, my separate individuality. In

extent misleading' (p. 25) – namely, lived experience.

38 J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 27 June 1880, WM 401.

sacrificing it I make our unity a little more real. I become, not more of an aggrandised excellent self, but a more organic member of a larger whole. My self-sacrifice makes humankind, and the whole web of living beings, become a little more of an intertwined whole, and a little less of a jostling mêlée of self-interested actors. But the difference from her anti-Sidgwick stance remains. We are not already in an organic unity, but must strive, with difficulty, for greater union, and that greater union necessarily remains incomplete and fractured.

Still, we can make the union a little less fractured through our self-sacrifices. To say that is not to return to the idea Wedgwood criticises in Hegel, that I 'lose my own individuality to find it in another', and that in finding it again there I more than regain everything I had lost.[39] She takes something from this idea: there is a loss, and there is a greater gain. But unlike Hegel she maintains that although the gain is greater, it does not outweigh or take away the loss, which remains irrecoverable. Resisting any conversion of self-sacrifice into self-realisation or self-fulfilment, she holds on to the asymmetry between loss and gain, which means the former can never be fully absorbed or incorporated into the latter.

39 Wedgwood, 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', 674.

6. Free Will and Determinism

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is on Wedgwood's account of free will. I begin with an 1864 article in which she gestured towards combining determinism and free will along Kantian lines, assigning determinism to phenomenal nature and free will to noumenal reality (6.2). I then discuss her 1879 two-part dialogue on free will. I trace how the dialogue unfolds, as it is quite complex (6.3). Then I explain her position: we have free will, revealed in immediate first-personal experience, but much of the time we have no chance to exercise it and remain caught up in the chain of natural determination (6.4). Wedgwood thus holds that voluntarism is true *and* determinism is also largely true. This is another imperfect antithesis: we have free will and achieve virtue when we freely choose the good, but mostly we don't exercise our free will but follow the causal chain, and there's usually nothing wrong or blameworthy in that.

I find Wedgwood's views on free will interesting in several respects (6.5). First, there is her application of imperfect antithesis. Determination is normal, indeed predominant, yet we still have free will, which enables us to pursue the highest moral ideal, self-sacrifice. Second, she attempts to capture our first-person awareness that sometimes we face choices yet mostly we are simply borne along on the course of events.

Wedgwood takes a similar view in her 1880 essay on Aristotle on free will (6.6). She expands into a wider antithesis between natural determination and moral freedom, arguing that metaphysically the universe is a law-governed and determined whole, although from a first-person perspective we are free to choose between right and wrong (6.7). However, this expanded framework brings into the open a fundamental problem about how we can ever exercise free will if the order of nature is determined (6.8).

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6.2 Wedgwood's Early Kantian Gesture

In an 1864 essay in *The Reader*, Wedgwood sums up an argument against free will from the American Calvinist philosopher Jonathan Edwards:[1]

> The will determines our actions [...] the acts of the body are caused by the acts of the mind. But when you have got to this point, unless you say the acts of mind are caused by something that is *not will*, you are involved in the absurdity of an infinite series of acts of will extending backwards [...][2]

For my act of will to be undetermined by causal antecedents and yet not be totally random, it must be explained by another prior act of will. That act of will requires a prior act of will in turn, and another and another, the whole series extending back before my birth – before I had even come into existence. To avoid this absurdity, Edwards argues, we must after all take the will to be determined by motives. Thus, he endorses a form of compatibilism.

Wedgwood says that his view has logic on its side, and is 'unanswerable on its own ground' as much as Euclidean geometry.[3] Nonetheless, the truth is on the other side. A chain of causes determines what I wish to do (e.g., type out this sentence). But do I *will* to act on my wish (as we might now say, what about my second-order decision whether to act on my wish or not?). 'Now the question is, Is the intermediate link which connects my wish and my will homogeneous with the rest of the chain?'[4] She hints not, though admits that from Edwards's perspective that makes no sense. 'There is no conception of Free-will which, while we contemplate man under the relations of time, does not appear to us entangled in the absurdity we have quoted from Edwards'.[5] Her solution is to invoke Kant:

> Kant would have replied to Edwards [...] 'From your point of view, you are perfectly right. On the plane where you stand you *can* see nothing but these relations of cause and effect [...] There is that in will, in spirit,

1 See Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* (Boston, MA: Kneeland, 1754).
2 Wedgwood, 'Books on Free-Will and Necessity', *The Reader*, 30 July 1864, 131.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 132.
5 Ibid.

> [...] which will not bear to be contemplated under these relations of before and after. Time belongs to the world of phenomena; Will to that "cogitable" world of which man is the true citizen while he has not yet been naturalized in the world of the sense – the connexion between the two being for us [...] perfectly inscrutable'.[6]

As she understands Kant, we are free agents on the spiritual level, but on the level of natural phenomena which we also inhabit, our free will is invisible. We cannot see how the levels fit together, how the sections form a sphere. Re-using one of her favourite metaphors, she says that the two lines – natural determination and free will – only converge at a distance beyond our sight.[7]

Thus, Wedgwood upholds free will, but wants to accommodate the truth of determinism by relativising it to appearances. But this is only a gesture towards a solution; saying that the connection is 'inscrutable' ultimately evades the task of explaining how both sides can be true. Subsequently, she made more sustained efforts to explain how determination and free will could co-exist.

6.3 Wedgwood's Dialogue on Free Will

By the time of this two-part 1879 dialogue, Wedgwood's views are entwined with her ethical claims about our plurality of moral ideals and the supreme value of self-sacrifice. Choosing to sacrifice one's interests and desires for the sake of others requires an exercise of free will. All the same, she does not say that determinism is simply false.

The interlocutors are Theletes – 'the one who wills', from *thelēsis*, will or volition – and Philonomus – i.e., lover of law (*nomos*). He is a lawyer by profession, whereas Theletes is a failed former Oxford student. The conversation starts around a mutual friend Dystyches (from *dys-tyche*, unfortunate or ill-fated). Theletes does not want to put Dystyches forward for a post because he is prone to indiscretion. Philonomus asks: why can't Theletes, who believes in free will, trust Dystyches to overcome his temptation to indiscretion? 'Here, then, is a typical case for a preacher of Free-will'.[8] Yet Theletes allegedly *knows* Dystyches will

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid; see also Wedgwood, 'Boundaries', first dialogue, 135.
8 Wedgwood, 'A Dialogue on Fate and Free-Will', Part I, *Spectator*, 11 January 1879, 46.

fail. 'How does your certainty that he could not keep my cousin's secrets differ from the certainty that a horse you were buying could not bear your weight?'[9]

Theletes protests that the certainty of evil and of good are asymmetrical, but Philonomus presses his case:

> You, and every sane human being, invariably act upon the supposition that action is an effect of cause or law – whatever you like to call it – and that in the world of Man, just as in the world of Nature, an accurate knowledge of the past means a strong opinion as to the future.[10]

Freedom is a 'perfect harmony between action and will', he continues, referencing Edwards: acting on one's own will without any impediment. 'We have never denied that one link in the chain of cause and effect is *volition*; [...] that desire is a reality, as much as gravitation'.[11] But volition is a link within the causal chain and does not stand apart from it. Philonomus can therefore both foresee Dystyches's failure and hold that he is free, since the failing will issue from his own will. The will must be seen as cause *and* caused, as being part of an organised scheme. Voluntarists like Theletes practically assume as much (e.g., when not recommending Dystyches for this job), although they *think* they believe in free will.

Theletes admits: 'I never saw so clearly before the position from which Free-will was invisible'.[12] Nonetheless, he states his side in the dialogue's second part. He begins by guiltily recalling his breakdown at Oxford and his family's needless sacrifices to send him there. Philonomus assures him that it was not his fault, and he need feel no remorse. Theletes replies:

> It is meaningless to remind me that what rendered vain the sacrifices my family had gone through to send me to Oxford was not my will, but my fate, if my will is but a part of my fate. [...] No matter whether will is or is not a mere result, in every case, so far as it is also a cause, we are bound to exert it.[13]

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 47.
13 Wedgwood, 'A Dialogue on Fate and Free-Will', part II, *Spectator*, 18 January 1879, 79.

Thus, he seems to suggest that even on Philonomus's determinist (or compatibilist) view, it still makes sense that he feels guilty about the part his (admittedly determined) will played in the causal chain of events.

Anyway, Theletes does not really take that view, for he continues:

> I feel, when I have done wrong, that I have done something I could have avoided,—the accusation of conscience directed against that which I mean when I speak of myself. When you change the absolute statement, 'I could have done otherwise,' for the conditional one, 'I could have done otherwise, if I had preferred it,' you remove that on which self-reproach rests; you turn what seems the most profound reality of life to a dream.[14]

Philonomus's perspective is coming to prevail, Theletes laments, and it does away with self-reproach. No-one could ever have done other than they did, so guilt, remorse, and reproach are mistaken sentiments, which are on the way out.

Philonomus responds that doing away with pointless self-reproach would be a good thing: it is unproductive, and the best thing is to try and act rightly in the future. Indeed, his whole aim as a lawyer, he says, is to prevent future crime. Theletes replies that we punish people for criminal actions they have *already* committed. The criminal law presumes free will, and with it moral guilt and culpability. Philonomus retorts that this is a 'blunder' on the part of the law:

> I do not concede that the incapacity to distinguish between the victim of moral insanity and the victim of evil passions is a confutation of Determinism. Suppose all crime were treated as moral insanity, the influence of such treatment would still be deterrent, and might become much more so when criminal law was a consistent embodiment of this view.[15]

He hates vices and wrongdoing; they *are* evils, but evils that result from prior causes, best tackled by tackling those causes (tough on crime by being tough on the causes of crime). Conversely, if wrongs are held to issue from mysterious acts of free will, there is no orderly way of preventing them from occurring. The law will flounder in chaos.

In response, Theletes says he now recognises even more clearly that free-will is 'almost invisible' in our daily relations with others, even our

14 Ibid., 80.
15 Ibid.

legal relations.[16] Most of what goes on in life adheres to necessity. But 'almost invisible' is not non-existent. He continues:

> I do not consider, as many do [...] that the problem will be solved when we have analysed our conceptions successfully, and expressed them clearly. I believe, indeed, that there is confusion of thought in the matter. I think men have inverted the relation between Cause and Will. They do not recognise that Will is the older, as it is also the simpler conception; that to try to express Will in terms of Cause is to express the known – and indeed the thing best known – in terms of the unknown. They need to return to the perception that Cause is no more than the shadow of Will on the outward world. But when all confusion is cleared away, the more clearly it would be seen, I believe, that there are two beliefs, and weighty reasons for both. When we were speaking of Dystyches, I felt that we were confronting those which told for necessity; while in turning from his fate to my own, I was forced to recognise the meaning of moral freedom.[17]

There are at least three claims here. First, we cannot conceive of a causal chain, an ordered and complete transmission of force, except by extrapolating from our more immediately-known experience of will, the older and more familiar notion. (This will be explained in Wedgwood's two essays responding to the Duke of Argyll on nature, to which we will turn later.) Second, we have immediate knowledge of free will in our own individual experience, which is why Theletes feels guilty about Oxford. Third, there are weighty reasons on behalf of determinism too.

Philonomus presses him to side with *either* free will or determinism, for truth is absolute, and one belief must be true and the other false (*A versus not-A*, perfect antithesis). Theletes refuses. Knowledge of one's own free will is a matter of immediate consciousness, knowledge of others' free will is only inferential.

> It is to this very core of certainty that I trace my conviction of Free-will. When I review that which I am most certain of – my own past – I find a portion of it blend with that stream of cause and effect which we call Nature. I know that all occupation of regret with this part of my past would be as much wasted as regret for a storm in which those dear to me had perished. And I see – and you see, when you try to console me for such a case – that the whole of this part of life is as a background to

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 81.

> something different. I see a portion of this irrevocable Past detached from its background, by my consciousness that it lay with me to have decided that it should not have been.[18]

There are streams of cause and effect in our lives, but at certain moments decisions are possible. These times of decision may be only occasional, but they are vital and carve dividing-lines between portions of the flow of events.

We can understand these claims by going back to Wedgwood's view of pain and pleasure. Under pressure of severe pain and distress, like being in a deadly storm, we cannot but act on these forces. But when these overpowering factors are absent, and the question is what moral ideals to act on, then there is scope to exercise free will. In a situation where I can either put my desires first or prioritise the other person, and where I am not borne down by overwhelming pain or distress, then I have a choice. In any case, no voluntarist would say that we can choose anything whatever, at any time. We cannot choose to fly. In many situations, no alternatives are available to choose from (if I fall off a cliff, there is regrettably no available option of taking flight). But occasionally alternatives do present themselves, and then I can exert free will.

Some moral ideals are harder to act on than others. Pursuing unselfishness is very difficult and means going against one's inclinations. And different people are inclined towards different things. Dystyches has a selfish impulse to boast about knowing other people's secrets. If he is granted access to secrets, it will be extremely hard for him not to be indiscreet. So Theletes wants to protect him from temptation – not because all Dystyches's actions are determined, but because morality involves a struggle with selfish desires and we should not strengthen the latter's hand.

Theletes also claims he cannot have the same immediate insight into the free will of others that he does with himself. He sees other lives 'by a fainter light' than his own:

> That I can always distinguish the two [the occasions of determination and free choice in one's own life], I do not pretend. But I know that the difference which I sometimes discern so clearly is there, whether I can discern it or not. And if I seem to lose this distinction in other lives, I

18 Ibid.

> remember that I discern their experience by a fainter light than my own; and that it is not wonderful that to such beings as we are, some important truths should not be simultaneously visible.[19]

In a reply in the *Spectator*, F. W. Harper objected to this self/other division. According to Theletes, I am free to the extent I have a non-phenomenal 'I'. Well then, says Harper, others too must be free to the extent they each have a non-phenomenal 'I'. 'I know it of myself, and so far as I know another to be a non-phenomenal "I", I know it of him', says Harper.[20] What goes for one must go for all.

This objection looks compelling, but perhaps Wedgwood can meet it. Theletes knows in the abstract that others must have free will, as he does himself, yet he knows about others largely through observation, unlike his own case. Observing others' actions, they seem largely caught up in the chain of force, thus determined. Theletes can still surmise that ultimately other people retain a power to make free choices – at least occasionally and when alternatives permit – just as he does. But he cannot have immediate first-personal certainty of that power in the case of other people, whereas he can with himself.

6.4 Imperfect Antithesis of Free Will and Determinism

Wedgwood does not cast voluntarism and determinism as an antithesis where the former is true and the latter false. They are asymmetrical: free will is real, but much of our lives and actions is determined as well. The poles relate not as true to false but 'more true' to 'also largely true'. Hence Theletes tries to accommodate the views of Philonomus, taking his case on board by accepting that the bulk of our lives is shaped by the chain of natural force. Theletes still knows first-personally that on occasions he has exercised free will, and he infers that others can do so too, and that the capacity remains ever-present even if seldom exercised. But the rarity of its exercise, and the difficulty of observing it in action, is where determinism comes in.

That said, 'determinism' is for Wedgwood a loose tongue. Theletes speaks of 'Necessity, or to use the newer and I think *inferior* word, […]

19 Ibid.
20 Harper, 'Free-Will', *Spectator*, 7 August 1880, 1010.

Determinism'.[21] As we saw in her account of Hume, she rejects what she sees as the 'metaphysical' idea of causation as a hidden connection. She prefers the newer and better concept of force. Nature is an unbroken transmission of force, obeying the regularity of law and invariable sequence. Consequently, she is wary of 'determinism', thinking it embodies the metaphysical concept of causation.

However, Wedgwood is not as far from causal thinking as she believes. 'Necessity' implies causal necessity. And the whole thrust of her thought on free will is that there is a large weight of determination in our lives – *causal* determination. Introducing the word 'force' instead of 'cause' doesn't really change the concepts in play. Whether we talk of force or cause, the substance of her claim remains the same: on the one hand is our submergence in the continuity of nature, on the other our dimly visible free will.

The structure of this asymmetrical antithesis recalls some earlier imperfect antitheses we looked at. Gratitude is a virtue, but ingratitude is normal and generally not a vice. Self-sacrifice is the highest virtue, but being selfish is normal and not usually blameworthy. Likewise, we have free will, but determination is normal and does not indicate failure or weakness.

There is another, different way that imperfect antithesis also comes into Theletes's argument. He agrees with Philonomus that the current practice of attributing guilt for illegal actions is misguided. But why, since he does not share Philonomus's determinist scepticism about guilt? The answer is found in Wedgwood's 1883 essay 'The Misleading Character of Law as an Index to Morals'. The scope of the criminal law is much narrower than morality, she says there. The law only prohibits the wrong but does not mandate the good:

> Ethics is a doctrine of right and wrong; Law is founded on a doctrine of wrong exclusively. It ignores not only a part of one hemisphere of the moral world, but all the other.[22]

Law and morality are disparate because our moral ideals are plural, and there is no consensus on them. So a common life, regulated by law, has to be neutral with respect to these ideals – in modern language,

21 Ibid., 80; my emphasis.
22 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1248.

it must be neutral between different conceptions of the good. There is consensus only that pain is bad, and so the law may properly prevent us from inflicting pain on others. The asymmetry of ideals (attraction) and pain (repulsion) defines the scope of law.

When she says that the law ignores a part even of the hemisphere that it does regulate – i.e., wrong actions – she means that the law does not and should not prohibit all wrongs, only those in which we inflict pain on others. It is not, for instance, a criminal offence to lie, except in certain defined situations such as libel, perjury, fraud, etc. Not all moral wrongs are, or should be, criminal offences.

> The State abdicates with equal distinctness its jurisdiction over the larger portion of the region it enters. The relation of Law to Morality is doubly incomplete. It is an expression of only a part of the national disapproval, and it is not an expression of any part of the national approval. The antithesis between what is right and wrong is quite unlike the antithesis between what is legal and illegal.[23]

Because law is narrower than morality, legal guilt is narrower than moral guilt. And in some cases, for instance if a poor man steals some money from a rich person, we may regard him as legally guilty but not morally guilty at all. Philonomus would eliminate moral guilt and legal guilt with it, while Theletes preserves moral guilt but separates it from legal culpability. Thus the scope for legal culpability is shaped by the disparity between law and morality – the fact that the antitheses *right*/*wrong* and *legal*/*illegal*, being imperfect, do not completely map onto one another.

6.5 Locating and Assessing Wedgwood's Views

What can we take from Wedgwood now? I do not suggest that she contributes directly to contemporary debates in analytic philosophy of action, nor that her nineteenth-century treatment of the issue supersedes more recent work. However, she does make an interesting attempt to combine voluntarism and determinism, and not in familiar compatibilist ways. Instead she joins a strong conception of transcendent free will to an equally strong insistence on the weight of natural determination. Her position is proto-phenomenological, leaning on each person's first-

23 Ibid.

person direct acquaintance both of their own free will and of being mostly borne along by events without ever exercising any choices. Moreover, the links she makes between free will and moral responsibility have not gone away – whether we need free will to make sense of moral responsibility and legal culpability is still very much debated.

It may be helpful to locate Wedgwood amongst her contemporaries. We have seen that she was influenced by Kant. In an essay on Thomas Carlyle, she claims that his core ideas are a literary translation of Kant, and she endorses Kant's distinction between practical and theoretical perspectives:

> The most striking idea in the philosophy of Kant, [is] – the close connection of action with *certainty*, as contrasted with the scepticism of the pure understanding; the sense of a command, as the one experience which allows us to transcend our own individuality […][24]

This shows how Wedgwood took Kant in a proto-phenomenological direction, as pointing to the first-person certainty of freedom in each person's own case.

Two female contemporaries who influenced Wedgwood, from opposing directions, were Martineau and Cobbe. Martineau upheld determinism. She maintained that there are invariant laws regulating every department of life, including human actions, speaking in her *Autobiography* of 'eternal and immutable laws, working in every department of the universe, without any interference from any random will, human or divine'.[25] This ties in with the positivist side of Wedgwood, her emphasis on the continuity of nature and therefore the pervasiveness of determination.

Conversely, Cobbe was a voluntarist. In *Intuitive Morals*, she defended human autonomy, heavily influenced by Kant. For Cobbe, we can transcend our natural desires and impulses and regulate our actions by the moral law:

> The Moral Law is the simplest of all things. It is the result solely of the nature of the action and the nature of the agent. These two terms being given, the obligation of the rational free agent to perform the right action results necessarily […][26]

24 Wedgwood, 'The Hero as Man of Letters', *Spectator*, 16 April 1881, 508; my emphasis.
25 Martineau, *Autobiography* (2 vols.; London: Smith, Elder, 1877), vol. 1, 111.
26 Cobbe, *Intuitive Morals*, p. 9.

Cobbe's understanding of Kant resonates with Wedgwood's. Both women find in Kant a statement of the immediacy and certainty of morality, which for Cobbe makes a necessary demand on us and for Wedgwood, similarly, imposes a command and makes a claim on us which calls us to transcend our selfish orbits. For both women, Kantian ethics is not an abstract system but latches onto our direct experience of free action. Plausibly, Wedgwood was trying to mediate between Cobbe's voluntarism and Martineau's determinism, just as in other domains she sought a middle ground between these two female influences.[27]

What makes Wedgwood distinctive among her contemporaries is twofold. First, her view of freedom is connected with her view that the supreme virtue is self-sacrifice, not self-realisation. A self-realisation view would line up more readily with determinism and/or compatibilism. Instead, with her self-sacrifice orientation, Wedgwood has to see free will as the power to break away from natural determination. Only if we can break from our desires can we ever sacrifice a part of what we desire. At the same time, precisely because free will requires a break, its exercise must be rare – something very difficult can only be achieved on an occasional or fleeting basis (otherwise it would be easy). It is difficult because our natural bent is away from self-sacrifice – we are determined in certain (selfish) directions by our nature and the desires it gives us. In sum, we are dislocated, pulled unevenly both ways.

Her second distinctive feature is to approach free will and determinism through the lens of imperfect antithesis. This doubly integrates her conception of free will with her ethics, not only through the link with self-sacrifice, but also through the affinities between the imperfect antithesis of free will and determinism and her other imperfect antitheses. Gratitude and normal ingratitude, virtue and its non-blameworthy absence, self-sacrifice and usually non-vicious selfishness, free will and the everyday large presence of determination – in all cases, Wedgwood rejects either/or, black/white thinking. The result is an intensely moral conception of free will, without intense moral condemnation of people's routine everyday behaviour. People hold moral ideals, yet they rarely do much to put these ideals into practice, and that is normal, part of the ordinary dislocation of human life.

27 Stone, *Women Philosophers*, p. 211.

6.6 Free Will in Plato and Aristotle

Wedgwood's next intervention on free will is the two-part essay 'Aristotle on Free-Will' from 1880. Not very felicitously named, the piece spends much longer on her own position than expounding Aristotle. I shall not assess it as Aristotle scholarship, but will be concerned solely with 'Wedgwood's Aristotle'.

She praises Aristotle for grasping the problem of moral responsibility for the first time, in particular contrast to Plato. This is ironic, since Aristotle was 'the philosopher of Nature', the first thinker to grasp nature as a self-contained causal order.[28] Here she mentions Mill's essay on nature. Mill distinguished *nature* meaning everything that exists and conforms to the regularity of law, from *nature* meaning everything that is not a human artefact or creation.[29] She is not sympathetic, and instead recommends that we should approach the meaning of *nature* via Aristotle. In turn, his essential view is

> contained in the saying of Hegel, the profound significance of which is perhaps deadened to the reader by frequent quotation, that Nature is the Other of Spirit. Nature is bound in indissoluble sequence – Spirit is a force whose governing impulse lies wholly within itself [...][30]

But since Aristotle recognises a self-contained order of nature in his *Metaphysics*, why doesn't he embrace determinism? The answer comes out through his contrast with Plato. For Plato, the ultimate reality is the Forms, the ideal realm beyond nature. One cannot know this realm and its supreme orchestrating form of the Good without desiring the Good. Once the soul apprehends the Good, it must be drawn to the Good, as its spiritual magnet. Thus Plato denies that one can possibly know what is good or right and act otherwise. 'Plato knows only two pair of spiritual antitheses, – the pleasant and the painful, appealing to the sensuous,

28 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942.

29 Mill, *Nature, the Utility of Religion, and Theism* (London: Longmans, 1874), esp. pp. 6–8, concluding that: 'We must recognize at least two principal meanings in the word Nature. In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means, not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man'.

30 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942.

animal nature; and the true and the false, appealing to the spiritual [...]'[31]

In contrast, Aristotle sees that there are facts about what is good and bad, holding independently of our will – and based in the order of nature – but that we have the free will to act on our knowledge of these facts or not. He thereby grasps, if imperfectly, the distinction between nature and spirit. Plato conflates knowledge and will; Aristotle distinguishes knowledge, desire, and will.

> We may act against desire, – herein lies the capacity of virtue. We may act against conviction, – herein lies the capacity of crime. Both possibilities would vanish at once, and it is only at the meeting of their slopes that we are enabled to distinguish the great watershed of our moral being, – the Will.[32]

We can act against our desires for pleasure and against our knowledge of moral facts. Both draw us like a magnet, but the will 'may avert the magnet'.

Although I'm setting out 'Wedgwood's Aristotle', I must admit that she attributes to him a stronger kind of voluntarism than he holds. That we can will to act against our rational knowledge is much more a post-Christian than an Aristotelian idea. But perhaps she would concede this. She does say that Aristotle recognises the freedom of the will only imperfectly, dimly foreshadowing what Christian thought goes on to grasp better.

From this perspective, she alleges that Aristotle does not fully cast off the Platonic legacy. Aristotle, she says, entertains the idea that even our freely chosen actions can be said to be caused by the pleasure they are expected to produce. But then he rejects this view, because it would make everything necessary – which it cannot be, or there could be no guilt.

> He seems to find (and herein he reminds us of Butler) the great practical truth, that man deals with man as if wrong conduct were unnecessary, a sufficient refutation of all perplexing arguments on the opposite side. And when he quits this moral point of view, and deals with the question as one of logic merely (as he does elsewhere), his argument seems to us to lose all force, and to become confused and full of fallacies.[33]

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 972.

From this, Wedgwood takes the key denial that 'that there can be a necessary guilt. And since in this world unquestionably there is guilt, man must here and now be free'.[34] As in her earlier dialogue, she takes guilt and free will to be correlative: we feel guilt when we have chosen to do wrong. For a determinist this feeling must be delusional: there may be a causal explanation for feeling guilt ('necessary guilt'), but that feeling does not hook onto any reality. Wedgwood instead maintains that guilt *is* real and genuine – it registers the truth that I *chose* to do wrong – and so free will exists. To think otherwise is unfaithful to our lived moral experience.

Wedgwood concludes as follows:

> 'No man prefers a crime, or spurns a bliss,' is quoted by Aristotle (iii., 5.4.) as a well-known saying with reference to the Will; and in dissolving the fallacious bond of antithesis, and disentangling the true from the false half of the saying, he seems to us to hint at all that has been truly said in this great controversy for two thousand years. 'No man spurns a bliss, but crime is voluntary.' That short sentence sums up the truth of both these great parties.[35]

This phrase 'no man prefers a crime, or spurns a bliss' comes from Alexander Grant's Greek edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which she is citing.[36] According to Grant, Aristotle is paraphrasing, not endorsing, the Platonic view that the mind cannot know the good and not desire it, just as the body cannot sense a pleasure and not desire it. Wedgwood says that Aristotle retains the true part of the saying: the body cannot but pursue pleasure, i.e. 'No man spurns a bliss'. But he discards the false part, 'No man prefers a crime', and instead says that one *can* know that certain acts are wrong and still choose to perform them. Some people do prefer a crime.

Grant's translation of the key phrase is quite loose. Compare Roger Crisp's modern translation: 'The saying that "no one is voluntarily wicked, nor involuntarily blessed" seems partly false and partly true; for no one is involuntarily blessed, but wickedness is voluntary'.[37] 'Blessed'

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 973.
36 Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, 2 vols., 3rd rev. edn. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1874), II, 26–27.
37 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Crisp, Book 3, ch. 5, sec. 1113b, lines 15–16.

translates *makarios*, whereas 'bliss' comes from Old English *blīþs* (the source of *blithe*). 'The meaning of bliss and that of bless have mutually influenced each other since an early period', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, having been linked through the Christian idea that the blessed in heaven enjoy bliss.[38] Nonetheless, translating *makarios* as 'bliss' brings a connotation of sensory ecstasy or delight not found in 'blessed'.

In any case, it is not clear that Wedgwood really thinks even half of the saying is true, since she denies that we are all motivated by pleasure. Perhaps our bodies, just *qua* bodies, never spurn a bliss? But she says our bodies recoil from pain, and that only this negative pole is the object of consensus. Perhaps she still accepts the point if put negatively: no one relishes a pain. That is, if pain is real and bad enough, we necessarily recoil from it, pursuing relief. No exertion of free will is possible here, whereas free choice is possible on the positive pole of action where we are pursuing our ideals.

Yet Wedgwood has already said, in this Aristotle essay, that the will can act against desire, as well as against knowledge. So can it act against the desire for relief from pain? As we saw in Chapter 3, she thinks 'yes, to a degree'. We can subject ourselves to an amount of pain in the name of self-sacrifice. This goes against our strongest impulses, so we are likely to fail at self-sacrifice and fall back into seeking respite from pain. But we can practice self-sacrifice and get better. People's actions faced with pain are mostly, but not wholly, determined.

Meanwhile, we are free to choose our highest ideals and act in line with them, yet we mostly make no such choices and are carried along by events. Only intermittently do situations arise where we have to make choices and act up to our ideals or fall short. Looking back over our lives, we see a dislocation of aims and achievements: big ideals, mediocre results. This mediocrity is perfectly normal.

Thus, despite herself, Wedgwood does not agree with even half of the statement she quotes from Aristotle. On the pole of right and wrong action ('Crime is voluntary'), we have free will, but in practice we seldom use that freedom. On the pole of pain and pleasure ('No man spurns a bliss'), we don't pursue 'bliss' but recoil from pain, and that recoil is largely, though not wholly, determined. In place of that

38 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), entry: 'bliss, *n.*'

deceptively simple statement of Aristotle's, Wedgwood has a profusion of imperfect antitheses that do not neatly align with one another.

6.7 Free Will, Nature, and Spirit

In her Aristotle essay Wedgwood remains unwilling to adopt a straightforward voluntarism/determinism antithesis. We see this from the following statement:

> Ask whether *there can be two kinds of impossibility,* and you leave no room for any but the Deterministic answer. Ask whether *guilt can be inevitable*, and you simply invite an expression of belief in Free-will. We believe, for our own part, that the last certainly is the more absolute. But we must not pretend that those who attend only to the first question can receive any other answer than that which it suggests. No one will be able to assert Free-will effectively till he allows that there is a position from which it is invisible.[39]

To clarify: if one holds that both knowing the good and not desiring it, and detecting a pleasure and not desiring it, are impossible, then one is a determinist. In contrast, if one believes that people feel guilty because they recognise they have chosen the wrong course, then one endorses free will.

Yet free will remains largely 'invisible', and in an even wider sense than in her 1879 dialogue. Now, she adds, the will is invisible when we look at nature as an ordered law-governed whole, as in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. He combines this view with voluntarism in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but he does not harmonise the two viewpoints and simply holds a 'double point of view'. His 'mind is too perfectly candid to be systematic'.[40] There is an ordered universe in which every event is regulated by law; yet we can act freely.

Surely, though, as Philonomus previously said to Theletes, we cannot have both *A* and *not-A*? Wedgwood continues to side with Theletes. Looking at perceptible facts about the physical world, and generalising to the regularities covering them, we will not find free will anywhere, not because it is non-existent but because it is not the kind of fact that shows

39 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 941.
40 Ibid.

up to empirical perception. Instead free will is known first-personally, from the inside, along with my status as an 'I', the 'mysterious and inexplicable reality behind all phenomena'.[41] Nature is the sum-total of perceptible phenomena, whereas the 'I' with the power of free choice is known not to my physical senses but immediately, just in my having experience at all. Writing to Victoria Welby, she explains:

> Just as the world of things must be construed in the language of *sensation* (that is, the channel by which the personal opens into the *material* world), so the world of persons must be construed in the language of theology (that is, the channel by which it opens into the *eternal* world). [...] [Matter is] fleeting and unstable. We have something in common with it. We too must speak of a time when we *were not*. But we cannot therefore accept a time when we shall cease to be. We stand between the material and the eternal world, partaking in the vicissitudes of *things*, [and] in the stability of *God*.[42]

Within matter, we are determined. But there is another side of us that is in the spiritual world. Much of the time this side is submerged; the link with spirit is never broken, but it lies dormant and we totally ignore it. Occasionally, though, we glimpse our own spiritual side and rise into it, reaching for ideals beyond the material world.

6.8 A Concluding Problem

Wedgwood's view on free will is that we are determined most but not all of the time, yet the 'double point of view' seems to eliminate the space even for an occasional exercise of free will. From the empirical standpoint, nature is an ordered whole, completely regular with no breaks or interruptions – *ever*.

Wedgwood insists that nature is an unbroken continuity. For example, she says that Alexander John Scott recognised that:

> This [...] agency [...] in the material world, was *one*; that our division of its operations into electricity, galvanism, magnetism, &c. was simply a convenient nomenclature for different stages of the action of one principle – through all its forms demonstrably the same.[43]

41 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–II', 973.
42 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 29 June 1884, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file11.
43 Wedgwood, 'Preface', to Alexander Scott, *Discourses* (London: Macmillan, 1866), p. xiv. Scott had taught Wedgwood moral philosophy at Bedford College.

Yet her view of free will seems to entail that when we exercise this power, we break the chain of natural regularity – our choices and actions interrupt nature from the spiritual side. This is the very thing that she says the unbroken continuity of nature makes impossible.

Presumably, the idea that we only make free choices once in a while is meant to solve the problem. That idea has an experiential ring of truth, and ties in with the large presence of determination in our lives to which experience also seems to attest. But the idea does not really help with the metaphysical problem, because *any* exercise of free will seems ruled out if nature is one unbroken whole. Conversely, if we ever do exercise free will, then nature seems to be necessarily a broken and fractured whole, punctuated by people's intermittent choices. Can Wedgwood solve this problem? To answer this question, we must move on to her antithesis of the natural and the supernatural.

7. The Natural and the Supernatural

7.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the antithesis of the natural and the supernatural, which is fundamental to Wedgwood's thought. She maintains on the one hand that nature is a self-contained and continuous order in which there can be no supernatural breaks, on the other that our power of free will is a supernatural ability to transcend natural determination and turn its flow in a new direction. This unusual combination of views, powered by imperfect antithesis, seems a plain contradiction (7.2).

Can she solve it by adopting a weaker, perhaps compatibilist, view of free will? I argue not; her ethics of self-sacrifice commits her to a stronger voluntarism, for she frankly says that self-sacrifice is a miracle. I enlarge here on how her ethics and metaphysics connect (7.3). She asserts not only that normativity is irreducible but also that there is a supernatural realm, distinct from nature, of which we are aware in our immediate experience. Though contentious, I find this bold and interesting.

The way she tries to solve her contradiction, instead, is to argue that our entire understanding of nature as a unified order of force depends on (i) extrapolating from the unity of the self to the unity of nature, and (ii) extrapolating from our immediate knowledge of free will to a similar power in nature – force – which is, effectively, spiritual (7.4). Consequently, we do not interrupt nature when we act freely, because nature already contains spirit. However, this solves the interruption problem only by relinquishing her core claim that nature is self-contained.

I then broaden out to Wedgwood's wider family of attempts to argue that nature presupposes and leads into spirit (7.5). Imperfect antithesis

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organises these attempts. Ultimately, nature and the supernatural are an imperfect antithesis because the latter is the bigger half of the sphere, with arteries running into the opposite half and a power to redirect it.

Finally, I explain how Wedgwood's supernatural metaphysics solves one problem with her ethics of self-sacrifice but introduces another problem in turn (7.6).

7.2 Wedgwood on Freedom and Nature

The natural/supernatural antithesis brings us to the heart of Wedgwood's thought. This antithesis may be hard for a modern academic philosophical reader to relate to, since in contemporary professional contexts it tends to be assumed that 'supernatural' entities are irrational, spooky, and methodologically suspect. As Fiona Ellis sums up, naturalism

> has become a slogan in the name of which the vast majority of work in analytic philosophy is pursued [...] The naturalist stands opposed to supernaturalism [...], this is said to rule out things like gods, demons, ghosts, and souls.[1]

Wedgwood instead adopts a metaphysics in which there are both natural and supernatural orders. In her time, she was not alone in this; many broad-church religious thinkers and writers in *Spectator* circles likewise defended the supernatural.[2] It is worth suspending any disquiet we feel in order to follow the movement of her thought and see why she takes this view.

For Wedgwood, scientific knowledge of nature is complete and comprehensive within its own terms and domain. But it is not the only domain. There is also a supernatural realm, where we find God, our selves, our freedom of will, and the moral qualities of our characters, relations, and actions. Our first-person experience attests directly to this realm. It is supernatural because it forms an order of relations distinct from the regularities of nature, obeying a different logic. Thus, we inhabit two sections of a sphere, the natural and supernatural, that do

1 Ellis, 'Naturalism, Supernaturalism, and the Question of God', *Topoi* 42 (2023), 711.
2 See, e.g., Anonymous, 'Natural and Supernatural Selection', *Spectator*, 3 October 1868, 1154–55; Hutton, 'Dr. Abbott on Natural and Supernatural', *Spectator*, 22 November 1879, 1470–71.

not completely join up into a whole.

As Wedgwood told Welby, Coleridge's concept of nature was foundational for her. She expounds his view in her 1871 article 'The Natural and the Supernatural':

> Nature, he says in effect, is literally Natura, that which is always 'about to be born.' It is the effect as latent in its cause, it is the chain of varying force by which all that we hear and see and touch is connected together. Whether we are to include in this natural world the will of Man depends wholly on the question whether we consider will to be a mere effect. It is for the very purpose of establishing this distinction that Coleridge gives his definition of Nature. Will, he says, is an exercise of creative force, a fresh start in time, a sequence which is not a mere consequence. Anyone who believes this must look upon all Will as supernatural […][3]

Will is the power to initiate an action independently of the antecedent chain along which force has been transmitted. Nature is the chain of force; the will can transcend the chain of force; therefore it is supernatural.

> Only so far as man partakes in the creative energy to which he owes his being, only so far […] he has the power of deciding that something shall begin to be, or shall cease to be – a decision wholly without parallel in any natural event.[4]

This brings us back to our problem from the previous chapter. If I can freely choose to initiate some action independent of the antecedent natural chain, then the supernatural seems to break natural law, interrupt it, and render the world chaotic and unintelligible. Freedom becomes an unpredictable factor that throws the world into disorder:

> Every time that we cross the barrier between things and persons we are reminded that it is only on the ground of things that we can make our reckoning with absolute security; our antithesis between the two is between the world of safe anticipation and the world of what we call accident.[5]

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3 Wedgwood, 'The Natural and the Supernatural', *Spectator*, 4 November 1871, 1341. See Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (1825), corrected edn. (London: Pickering, 1839), esp. p. 46. See her later account of Coleridge in *Teachers*, 26–27. See also J. W. to Welby, 15 March 1889, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file13.

4 Wedgwood, 'The Duke of Argyll on Nature and the Supernatural', *Spectator*, 8 January 1881, 54.

5 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 295.

But, Wedgwood insists, nature *is* intelligible – regular law-governed sequences are everywhere, and nature forms a comprehensive and self-contained order that brooks no exceptions. So, presumably, there can be no supernatural interruptions, and scientists legitimately deny the existence of any such realm.

The unusual thing about Wedgwood's defence of the supernatural, then, is that she pairs it with this insistence on regular law-governed nature. As we've seen, she has time for positivism, stressing on her positivist side that the natural universe is one. A continuous chain of force runs through it, without gaps or exceptions. For this reason, she rejects Max Müller's view that language is the 'Rubicon' dividing animals from humanity.[6] She objects that he inserts a supernatural break into nature, whereas really human language is the further development of behaviours found in other animal species. There can be 'no chasm in the progress of the race, no exceptional agency at work during any part of its existence'.[7] In this vein, she accepts her uncle's theory of evolution, grants it epochal importance, and says that evolution pushes back the chain of force immeasurably far into the past.[8]

In an 1887 letter to the *Spectator*, she states:

> That a logical mind, *rejecting all invasion of the natural by the supernatural*, should yet believe in the existence of a world above Nature, as much more important to each of us as our home is more important than an inn, – this seems to me a translation of the meaning of Christianity into a dialect in which, if in any, it may be received by the mind of our own day.[9]

That is, anyone sympathetic to science and logic must reject the 'invasion of the natural by the supernatural'. But allegedly, they can still believe in a supernatural world as long as it does no invading. The problem is that the denial of 'invasion' appears to contradict Wedgwood's view that we have a supernatural power to make interventions into nature

6 'Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will ever dare cross it. This is our matter-of-fact answer to those who speak of development, who think they discover the rudiments at least of all human faculties in apes'; Müller, *The Science of Language* [1861–63], 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1899), II, 367.

7 Wedgwood, 'Origin of Language', *Westminster Review* 30 (July 1866), 110. See also her later essay 'A Botanist on Evolution', *Spectator*, 22 April 1882, 536.

8 Wedgwood, 'Constitution and Course', 1525.

9 Wedgwood, 'The Supernatural and the Miraculous', *Spectator*, 26 March 1887, 146; my emphasis.

which would not otherwise have happened. How can she possibly hold both views?

One possibility is that she thinks our actions can be viewed from two perspectives. Viewed naturalistically, they come about within nature by regular and intelligible causal processes. We can completely explain their occurrence in scientific and, effectively, determinist terms. But our actions may also be viewed as being right or wrong, virtuous or vicious. That meaning is available from the first-person or subjective view, whereas natural sequences are visible to the third-person or objective view. This might tie in with her Kantian influence. Observed third-personally, human actions are determined by natural law, but first-personally, we must regard them as issuing from our free will.

However, the appeal to two perspectives is too weak for Wedgwood's purposes. She does not say only that in practical life we have to think of ourselves as free agents, but more strongly that there are moments when we are *certain* that we *really are* free agents, apprehending the part of us that transcends nature. Consider the following arguments she makes in an 1864 paper:

> All conviction of the reality of the spiritual world is inseparably wrought up with the belief not only that Time is divided into a 'has been' and a 'shall be', but that for every individual, side by side with the actual past and future, remain a 'might be' and a 'may be.' Take away this belief, you have entered on a path where every step of consistent thought [...] must carry you further and further from *all spiritual reality*.[10]

Science sees only unbroken force, but I also have a spiritual and supernatural side, such that I can react to the chain of force in more than one way (sometimes, at least). 'Might' or 'may' are not just synonyms for 'our knowledge of the chain of antecedents is limited':

> We say 'This man may recover from his illness' and we say 'This man may repent of his sin'; but do we mean the same thing by the repeated word? If we do, we cease to believe in the supernatural.[11]

If I repent of my sin, I exert a supernatural power to let go of the selfish course on which I was set. If I forgive you for wronging me, I again exert

10 Wedgwood, 'Büchner's "Matter and Force"', *The Reader*, 21 May 1864, 647; my emphasis.

11 Ibid.

a miraculous power to let go of my accumulated resentment. By this supernatural power I can alter the play of natural forces within my body and mind. The man who repents is not merely adopting a different, agent-centred view of the same events in his body and brain which can also be seen as determined by nature. He is making a spiritual choice that *changes* the direction in which the natural flow of events inside him is going. That much is already conveyed by Wedgwood's use of the word 'supernatural' rather than 'non-natural'. What is *super*natural has a *super*ior power to switch natural events along a fresh path.

These views tie in with the fact that Wedgwood reads Kant as believing not in two perspectives but two worlds. In her 1864 essay on free will, she says that Kant distinguishes the '*world* of phenomena' from the 'cogitable *world*'.[12] The Victorians invariably read Kant in this 'two-worlds' way. Two key influences here were Coleridge and Carlyle, to both of whom Wedgwood refers. She partially takes the two-worlds view from Coleridge, who saw freedom as the human spirit's metaphysical power to originate actions independent of the laws of nature. Similarly, Carlyle took Kant to believe in our ultimate 'spiritual being' which we apprehend with our higher faculty of reason (*Vernunft*).[13] Our bodies may be immured in mechanism, but our spirits belong to a higher, dynamic world of freedom. Wedgwood's two-worlds metaphysics is thus typical of her period.

Her version is original, however, in her view that nature and freedom are an imperfect antithesis. If they were a perfect antithesis, then we could only have either spiritual freedom or natural determination but not both. Instead, she holds, the antithesis is real and imperfect. Although freedom and nature genuinely are opposed, we still can and do have both. In practice that means that we can only exercise free will rarely, at intervals, and with great difficulty. This is because acting freely requires a break from the natural forces that determine our behaviour, a break it is very hard to make – so hard, in fact, as to count as miraculous.

As we have seen before, in terms of her wider philosophy of imperfect antithesis, these claims align with how praise and virtue are asymmetrical with blame and vice. When we freely choose to do what

12 Wedgwood, 'Books on Free-Will and Necessity', 132; my emphasis.

13 Carlyle, 'Novalis' (1829), in his *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Vol. 2* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 26–27.

is right, we achieve virtue and merit praise, but it doesn't follow that we are vicious or blameable when we merely follow the course of natural determination.

The problem remains: if supernatural forces can never interrupt the continuity of nature, then how can we ever exert this supernatural power to alter the direction of natural events? Wedgwood's claims seem in clear contradiction. Saying that we only manage to transcend nature occasionally does not help, because the problem is not how often we experience this transcendence in practice but how it is ever metaphysically possible at all.

7.3 Ethics and the Supernatural

We might be tempted to abandon the supernatural free will claim and adopt a softer, perhaps compatibilist, view of free will, but this is not open to Wedgwood. Her entire ethics is bound up with her stronger view. She goes as far as to say that any act of self-sacrifice is a miracle. 'The ideal of self-sacrifice is as much part of a supernatural world as any miracle is'.[14] In accomplishing an act of self-sacrifice I transcend the natural order and the selfishness it imbues me with, and this is no less miraculous than Christ's resurrection, the paradigm of all miracles.

> There can be no question that this is a supernatural standard. The natural impulse is to love safety, honour, ease. […] The Christian morality demands that if sacrifice there must be, I should wish it to be mine and not yours. The word 'supernatural' seems to lose all meaning, if this is not supernatural.[15]

Calling virtuous actions miraculous registers the difficulty of doing them against the weight of natural order, a difficulty that means we will usually fail. True self-sacrifice is rare. In view of the weight of nature within and upon us, our failures to do the right thing can mainly be excused. But when we do rarely and occasionally do what is right – namely sacrifice our own desires and happiness – we deserve praise.

Rare and occasional self-sacrifice may be, but Wedgwood still holds that it ought to be our highest ideal. Moreover, some people actually do

14 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–II', 1640.
15 Ibid.

make it their highest ideal – women especially – so there are elements of self-sacrifice, attempts at it, movements towards it, that manifest in our daily lives. These are moments of loving the neighbour, turning the other cheek, feeling remorse to have fallen short of one's ideal. Wedgwood therefore says that 'The laws of the Supernatural are exhibited as unquestionably as the laws of the Natural in the phenomena of every-day practical life'.[16]

She denies, then, that there can be any morality properly speaking without the supernatural. Morality requires free will and the transcendence of nature, which is only possible if we are beings partly of nature and partly of another spiritual realm in which moral distinctions have their home:

> So far as man is a mere product of Nature, he is incapable of sin. Of course, his acts, like the events of Nature itself, may be matter of regret. There is disaster in the course of Nature, and man, so long as he remains bound within that course, may be a channel of such disaster. But the world into which we enter when we speak of right and wrong does not exist, unless we look on man as being in some sense related to the Supernatural.[17]

Of course, these claims are contentious. One issue is whether her ethics actually undermines itself. If our nature is to be selfish and morality is supernatural, then acting rightly seems impossibly demanding and morality may be out of our reach. Doesn't she effectively concede as much by saying that self-sacrifice is rare and miraculous, and selfishness normal? Yet she would reply that morality only appears out of reach *if* we assume there is no supernatural realm or that any such realm is too remote to touch our lives. If instead there is a supernatural realm and it does touch our lives even sporadically, then self-sacrifice can be reached on occasion, demanding as it is.

This will not convince an ethical naturalist. Indeed, Wedgwood is acutely aware that her account will appear unintelligible from a naturalistic standpoint. Consider the examples she invokes repeatedly: turning the other cheek; giving the other person one's coat and one's cloak; loving the neighbour. For her, all these are actions done with

16 Ibid., 1341.
17 Wedgwood, 'Argyll on Nature and Supernatural', 54.

no expectation of reciprocity or advantage, out of the self-conscious commitment to an ideal that transcends all such considerations and surpasses the entire order of nature that inclines us to seek our advantage. She who turns the other cheek does so against instinct, in full awareness of loss, out of fidelity and aspiration to a transcendent ideal. Self-sacrifice is not prudential or strategic. Wedgwood's claim is that this only makes sense given a supernatural realm. Without the supernatural, it looks irrational; with it, everything falls into place.

It is worth pausing on the unusual structure of Wedgwood's moral thought – unusual by current standards, if not Victorian ones. Many anti-naturalists argue that moral normativity is irreducible: what we ought to do cannot be reduced or to wholly explained by natural facts about history, biology, psychology, etc. But we can distinguish normativity from nature without having to posit a supernatural realm to account for that normativity. Instead, we can treat normativity as arising from our rational agency or social practices, or as a distinct space of reasons or a distinct class of facts. Wedgwood, though, does move from normative irreducibility to supernatural metaphysics – holding that there are not only moral facts but also 'a spiritual *world* – […] a highly organised set of relations towards invisible beings and realities'.[18]

Wedgwood does not make this move by explicitly arguing that there must be supernatural realities to ground irreducible normativity. Rather, as we can see from her remarks quoted in this chapter so far, her line of argument is phenomenological. Our immediate experience attests to free will (albeit rarely exercised); to our pursuit of moral ideals and, at best, self-sacrifice; to the fact that we simply pursue these ideals, without calculating consequences or weighing experiences or pleasures; to the fact that we mostly act selfishly, these ideals notwithstanding; to the way we are mainly caught up and pushed along by the chain of natural force; and that when we do transcend our selfish impulses, we feel our participation in a realm that transfigures and transforms the everyday one.

For Wedgwood, only supernatural metaphysics gives a faithful transcript of these structures of lived experience. That might sound surprising. One might protest: 'Supernatural metaphysics is as far

18 J. W. to Welby, 9 January 1887, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box19-file12.

from my lived experience as you can get!' Not so for Wedgwood; for her, we are dislocated beings, troubled, torn in two. How can we make sense of that? Her answer is that we partake in two worlds. Humans are complicated, suffering, struggling beings, and this registers our metaphysical status with feet in two camps.

But can't we account for our troubles and strife without a two-world metaphysics? Wouldn't it be more parsimonious to do so? Wedgwood, however, thinks *her* view is parsimonious. It comprehends all the experiences just mentioned and it captures how we have free will yet are largely determined, accommodating both sides of this venerable antithesis. Her view makes sense of our dislocation, and it brings ethics, metaphysics, and religion into organic unity. That at least would be her defence. Without necessarily endorsing her views, I think they are understandable, and I appreciate their originality.

7.4 Force and the Supernatural Element in Nature

We remain with the major problem about the contradiction in Wedgwood's views. Despite herself, seemingly she does regard the supernatural as a power to break with the chain of force, to interrupt its momentum and set things on a new course, like switching the points on a train-track. Yet she says we may posit no supernatural breaks in the natural chain. Does she see the contradiction? Does she try to resolve it?

She does, and we can approach her answer through her response to the work of William Robert Grove, whose importance, she says, cannot be overstated.[19] Grove was one of the first people to formulate the law of energy conservation, even earlier than Helmholtz. In *On the Correlation of Physical Forces* from 1846, Grove proposes that heat, light, electricity, and magnetism can be converted into one another because they are not separate forces but manifestations of a single underlying energy-force. For instance, electricity can be used to produce light or heat, and heat can be converted into mechanical work, as with steam-engines.

Grove's concern is not with the metaphysical nature of energy-force but with observing, experimentally, how force could be converted across

19 On her enthusiasm for Grove, see *inter alia* Wedgwood, 'Unseen Universe', 1425; 'Origin of Language', 104; and 'Science and Faith', *Spectator*, 12 April 1879, 470.

domains. He maintains:

> Instead of regarding the proper object of physical science as a search after essential causes, I believe it ought to be, and must be, a search after facts and relations – that although the word Cause may be used in a secondary and concrete sense, as meaning antecedent forces, yet in an abstract sense it is totally inapplicable.[20]

The interchangeability of forces makes 'cause and effect' mere terms of convenience: for example, heat produces electricity, electricity produces heat, and each may equally be viewed as cause or effect. There are no invariable antecedents, he says; neither is there metaphysical causation, since – for example – water is not caused to move by gravitation, rather its movement embodies gravitation which is one manifestation of force.[21]

Amalgamating Grove's focus on observed 'affections of matter' with positivism, Wedgwood banishes the concept of cause from nature. As we have seen earlier, for her *cause* is the metaphysical idea of a mysterious power or hidden connection underlying perceptible sequences (a claim she partly also takes from Hume).[22] She claims to jettison metaphysical causation and stick to natural events being transformations of force.[23] We can observe these transformations and comprehend them under laws, without fixing any one manifestation of force as the cause of another. Whereas thinking in terms of *cause* sets up a hierarchy of priority-relations, thinking in terms of *force* establishes reciprocal interdependency.

As I have noted before, I don't think Wedgwood moves away from cause as emphatically as she claims. Since the chain of natural force determines events, she is still using the concept of *cause* without admitting it. Still, looking at Grove at least helps explain why she claims to reject causation, and it helps to motivate her view that nature is an uninterrupted and unbroken chain of force.

She puts this view together with her acceptance of evolution as follows:

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20 Grove, *On the Correlation of Physical Forces* (London: The London Institution, 1846), p. 5.
21 Ibid., pp. 6–8.
22 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', 435.
23 Wedgwood, 'Constitution and Course', 1525.

> The philosophy of Science to which our generation has given rise may be briefly described, if we may borrow the favourite expression of Comte, as a statical and dynamical version of the belief that Nature is one. The dynamic statement of the Unity of Nature, is, our readers will not need to be told, the great doctrine which would, we suppose, be cited by most physicists as the most important idea of our day, – the doctrine of Evolution. Shall we be thought presumptuous if we avow that we would keep that description for that which we have named its statical version, – the Correlation of Force?[24]

Thus, evolution is (allegedly) the dynamic version of the unity of force, embodying a sequential transmission of energy extending indefinitely far back in time and ongoing today. The static version is simply that force constantly circulates through the round of events that are its transformations.

We can now look at how Wedgwood believes this is consistent with her strong conception of free will. In the 1880 essay that I just quoted, she maintains that scientists do not really know what the force they appeal to is. All they know is that *something* holds phenomena together, but the word 'force' does not specify what that something is. Force is not directly perceived, but hypothesised. It is intangible, imperceptible, and yet contains the motive power to generate endless events; all told, force is 'nearly approaching our conception of a Spirit'.[25]

We have to push this question further than scientists do, she continues:

> The abstruse and arduous question – in what sense is the cause one? – does not immediately suggest itself. The only ultimate unity is that of which each of us is conscious when he says 'I'. There is no getting beyond this oneness; it is indeed the measure of every other. Scientific men are occupied with the endeavour to find unity in that world which is properly the sphere of diversity, and, fascinated by the marvellous result which the shadow of mind produces in this world, they forget that the unity which they discover is but the unity which they bring.[26]

Her claim here is that the unity of nature is only the outward projection of the unity of the self. The self is the principal unity I am acquainted with;

24 Wedgwood, 'The Duke of Argyll on the Unity of Nature', *Spectator*, 18 September 1880, 1185.
25 Wedgwood, 'Argyll on Unity', 1186.
26 Ibid.

across countless bodily and physical changes, I remain present.[27] To find a similarly constant factor in nature, we have to start with our immediate experience of our selves, then view nature in this reflected light.

Yet scientific naturalists deny that we have any selves over and above the order of nature; they see merely a play of natural force within the human body and brain. Here they contradict themselves. For they can only cast nature as a unified realm of force in the first place because they have unified selves with which they are immediately familiar, and whose unity they tacitly take as a template for understanding nature. They presuppose their immediate acquaintance with the unified spiritual reality of the self, even while they deny it theoretically.

She then takes another step:

> Our notion of force, Mr. Herbert Spencer tells us, is 'a generalisation of those muscular sensations which we have when we are ourselves the producers of change in outward things.' We are able to think of heat, sound, light, as events in the outer world separate from and unlike the sensations which we call by that name because we can express them in terms of force, but when we come to the very element of our physical notions this power quits us; we think of them as varied manifestations of force, while force itself we think of, and must so think, as the physical correlate of Will. The initial notion of physical science, therefore, is a mere loan from the world of spirit, and at every stage the obligation has to be renewed.[28]

Her previous claim was that the unity of nature derives from the immediately known unity of the self. Now she claims that the concept of (natural) force derives from that of (personal) will. We are familiar with the will because we exercise it, now and again, in our everyday lives, and we are immediately acquainted with how our decision to perform a certain action produces it. Will supplies our concept of the motive-power to produce effects. We then project this power onto nature and think that nature is pervaded by force, which does exactly what the will does, except it is an objective power. So just as the idea of a unified order of nature presupposes the unity of the self, the concept of the unity of

27 Wedgwood, 'Constitution and Course', 1524.

28 Wedgwood, 'Argyll on Nature and Supernatural', 53, quoting Spencer, *Principles of Psychology* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), p. 268. Spencer's broader line of argument was quite unlike hers. For him, our abstract ideas of force, space, time, etc., all derive from concrete physical sensations – the very opposite of her view.

force presupposes the experience of free will. But, again, scientists fall into a contradiction, because they deny free will on the grounds that it would interrupt the chain of transformations of force. The contradiction is that their concept of force presupposes their immediate acquaintance with the everyday reality of free will. They presuppose what they deny: determinism presupposes free will.

We might object that, on Wedgwood's own argument, determinism does not have to presuppose the *reality* of free will, only that we have the *idea* of free will. In that case, the idea might still be illusory. She considers this objection and replies:

> If we cannot intelligibly describe the phenomena of Nature except by assuming them to be the result of will, does it not seem more probable that they are the result of will? Can we suppose that we are driven, by the mere necessity of giving a simple account of things, to a view of them which is false?[29]

For her, our immediate experience of having the power to initiate actions at will suffices show that we really do have it. Otherwise, we would have to say that the immediate way we experience our lives is false. We would in turn be obliged to say that everyone's immediate experience of having a unified self is false. She thinks this kind of error theory would be cumbersome. People who

> insist on translating all assertions [...] into the dialect of purely physical conceptions, surrender all that is characteristic in the facts which they describe, and introduce abstractions which are intelligible to us only so far as we have independent knowledge of the realities to which they refer.[30]

We can laboriously translate lived experience into scientific terms. But we can still only make sense of the translation by hooking it, at places, onto the lived experience we continue to have. Lived experience remains primary and, in key respects, we cannot really doubt it, for it makes us who we are. 'The starting-point is always feeling, and feeling is the final goal and test'.[31]

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29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Wedgwood, 'Supernatural Religion', second notice, *Spectator*, 1 August 1874, 977. See Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind, Vol. 1* (London: Trübner, 1874), p. 101. She is taking this remark out of context, as Lewes's post-Comteian philosophy is very different from hers.

But is she saying that force is merely an illicit anthropomorphic projection? And ditto for nature's unity? Evidently not; in the passage quoted above, she says that the 'phenomena of Nature' '*are* the result of will' (my emphasis). And in her wider metaphysics, she upholds the reality of force and the continuity and unity of nature. The upshot of her arguments must instead be that, by extrapolating from our own mental unity and our free will, we grasp the real character of the natural world. There really is something in nature (force) that is like our own (real) power to initiate actions. And this power on our part is, as we know, supernatural. Therefore, there is something supernatural in nature, and that something is force; this is why she says that force 'nearly approaches' our concept of spirit. Force is the spiritual dimension of nature.

If there is this spiritual element in nature, then a route opens up by which our supernatural power of free will can make transformations in the natural sequence. Because force is the thread running through this sequence – and this thread is spiritual, and partakes in the same supernatural realm as our power of free will – our supernatural power of will can gain traction over the natural sequence of events. This sequence of events already has a spiritual current running through it, on which the human spirit can pull so as to change the direction in which the current is flowing. That is, if force is spiritual, then human free will – a spiritual power – can reroute and transfigure the natural order because it can act on what is the same as it. In doing this, the will does not *interrupt* or *invade* nature because nature is already, intrinsically, spiritual. This is how Wedgwood hopes to be able to say both that we have transcendent free will *and* that we can exercise this power and change the way nature is going *without* engineering any mysterious breaks in the natural chain.

This attempted solution is ingenious, but still has a problem. When Wedgwood emphasises the unity and continuity of nature, she says that it is self-contained, running on its own steam without any supernatural incursions. But she has found a way to avoid supernatural incursions only by effectively saying that nature is *not* self-contained after all, not in the sense she originally meant. On the contrary, nature contains a dimension of spirit, of the supernatural. This means that the supernatural pervades nature and percolates through it. That is the very opposite of nature's being self-contained. So, she has solved the contradiction of free will and natural order only by introducing a new contradiction

between the affirmation and denial that nature is self-contained. The root contradiction remains intractable.

7.5 Nature Points to Spirit, Spirit Overreaches Nature

Wedgwood's account of force is one of a family of her attempts to show that the scientific understanding of nature points beyond itself. Let me mention two others, to bring out more of the structure of her thought.

First, she engages with *The Unseen Universe: Physical Speculations on a Future State* by Balfour Stewart and P. G. Tait. This extraordinary book defends the afterlife on a physical basis. The authors posit a multiverse: surrounding the material universe is a concentric series of invisible universes, and the soul transfers into the next circle when the body dies. The authors also take up the law of entropy (the second law of thermodynamics). Given the transformation of force, with each transfer, a minute amount of energy dissipates (like a leak in the pipeline), which means the universe is gradually running down to nothing, and will eventually end in heat death. Or at least that is the standard view. Stewart and Tait re-deploy the law of energy conservation to get a totally different conclusion. Force is always transformed and never destroyed. Consequently, the dissipated amounts of force cannot really be draining away but must be being transformed into another spiritual force too subtle for us to detect. Energy is leaching from material to spiritual, and being transferred into the next concentric universe. This is the clue to what happens when we die: our energy completes the transition into the next circle. Therefore, although the whole material world will eventually come to an end, by then everyone will have transferred across into the next, more spiritual, ring in the concentric chain. In sum, what others see as entropy, Stewart and Tait see instead as a progressive transposition of material into spiritual force.[32]

Wedgwood does not endorse this metaphysical theory as such.[33] Instead, she argues that Stewart's and Tait's claims bring home the

32 See Stewart and Tait, *The Unseen Universe*, 3rd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1875) and, for discussion, Shalyn Rae Claggett and Lara Pauline Karpenko, *Strange Science: Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Era* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), ch. 13.

33 Wedgwood, '"Unseen Universe"', 1426.

chasm between spirit and the entropic movement of nature. In nature, nothing can happen without loss, but it is otherwise in spirit.

> There is no part of nature that is not a transformation of force; there is no transformation of force that is not a part of nature. The supernatural, alike for those who believe and disbelieve in its existence, is the region above this cycle of interchange, – the region where something may be achieved and nothing expended, something given and not lost. And the region where this is impossible [...] is nature.[34]

A gift offered freely, a moment of forgiveness, turning the other cheek – none of these contributes infinitesimally to some running-down of spirit into nothingness. Spirit does not undergo decay, which shows that it is the realm where we escape from natural deterioration:

> The idea of the destruction of the universe [...] will, we believe, ultimately shut in the instinct that seeks permanence to some non-physical region; it will make men ready to listen to every whisper that tells of an enduring world other than this which we know of through our eyes and ears.[35]

The Unseen Universe contributed to Wedgwood's idea of imperfect antithesis, first overtly formulated in her 1875 review-essay of this book. When heat becomes cold, and cold heat, she says, there is always a loss, a dissipation, however minute – leading to a fractional difference between the two halves of the antithesis. When we swap from heat to cold and back again, we don't end back where we started.

> Motion is convertible into heat. Heat is convertible into motion. Keep clear of modification, and you may make one statement the converse of the other, but bring in defining terms, and this is impossible, for *all* motion may be changed to heat, and *some* heat only be changed to motion.[36]

The second attempt of Wedgwood's to point to the limits of science which I will mention here comes out of her engagement with Darwinism. She maintains that on Darwin's own account, evolution is an *ascent*. It has produced species that are more and more advanced, and at the summit, human beings with their moral and spiritual powers.[37] This ascent

34 Wedgwood, '"Unseen Universe"', 1426.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 1425.
37 Wedgwood, 'Mr Darwin's *Descent of Man*' [second notice], *Spectator*, 18 March 1871, 320. This is questionable as an account of Darwin, but let's bracket that.

could not have happened unless it was intended. This does not mean God has had to keep intervening to steer evolution. On the contrary, he must have set things up from the outset to yield a progression. 'Is not intellect ingrained in the creative force from the first? Is not the love of beauty deeply enfolded in it?'[38] She concedes that Darwin appeals instead to accident and chance. In response, she asks: what *are* accident and chance? Like 'force', she says, these are words for what we can't understand.[39] 'Accident' and 'chance' suspiciously resemble the will, a motive power that cannot be explained in terms of natural sequence.[40] She is suggesting, then, that evolution draws on a loan-concept from the world of spirit ('accident'). Again, nature only makes sense if we presuppose experiences that attest to the reality of the spiritual and supernatural.

Wedgwood's overarching intention in making these arguments is that:

> Those who value science […] can be shown that they confess the presence of something invisible and mysterious – that what eye hath not seen, or ear heard, may yet be subject of knowledge.[41]

For instance, when we realise that 'force' is the extrapolation from our will-power, then we glimpse the supernatural as distinct from the natural. We don't know what 'accident' is unless it is something supernatural, akin to the mysterious originating power of the will. We don't know what the 'unity' of nature is except by analogy with the unity of the self. In all cases, the study of nature brings us up against a realm that goes beyond nature.

This brings us back to imperfect antithesis. Earlier, I suggested that Wedgwood sees nature and the supernatural as an imperfect antithesis in that the two are opposed yet both are real. Nature is fully determined, yet we can make free choices. The opposition manifests itself practically and experientially in that we can make these choices only occasionally and with hard struggle. However, a second, different sense of the imperfect antithesis emerges from her wider set of attempts to conjugate nature and supernatural. In this second sense, they form an imperfect

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.; and see Wedgwood, 'Natural and the Supernatural', 1341.
40 See Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 295.
41 Wedgwood, 'Preface' to Scott, *Discourses*, p. xiii.

antithesis because the supernatural *overreaches* nature. The two are asymmetrical: the supernatural is the bigger half of the sphere and runs through and into the opposite half, whereas nature does not run into the supernatural in the same way. One half of the sphere exceeds and ranks higher than the other.

Within this, the supernatural overreaches nature in several ways. First, we cannot make sense of nature without tacitly leaning on concepts and experiences drawn from the supernatural order. Second, there is a supernatural dimension within nature itself, according to one group of her arguments. Third, according to another (partly conflicting) group of her arguments, the supernatural has the power to interrupt nature and reroute the flow of natural force. A fourth kind of overreach comes out from her response to Stewart and Tait. The natural world won't be here forever, but even after it has dissipated away to nothing, the supernatural realm will remain. Spirit can exist without matter, but matter can't exist without spirit.

Her two overarching senses of imperfect antithesis here are in tension. In the second sense, nature and supernatural are asymmetrical because the supernatural is ultimately bigger and more powerful, and there is a supernatural current in nature which gives us the traction to freely alter the way the chain of natural events is going. This undercuts the first sense, under which natural determination is fully real such that we can only ever exercise free will with immense difficulty. For under the second sense, natural determination is *not*, after all, fully real, i.e., a self-enclosed sphere set apart from anything supernatural.

These conflicting senses of imperfect antithesis reflect insurmountable problems with Wedgwood's thinking on nature and the supernatural. These problems don't mean we shouldn't bother reading Wedgwood, though, for they arise precisely where her thinking is interesting and original. The interest and originality remain, along with the inescapable tensions.

7.6 Conclusion: Self-Sacrifice, the Supernatural, and the Trouble with Experience

To close this chapter, I want to come back to the problem with Wedgwood's ethics of self-sacrifice which I pointed out earlier. If I

sacrifice myself by undergoing some bodily pain which is infinitely outweighed by my concomitant gain in virtue, then I have lost nothing and am engaging after all in self-exaltation. Self-sacrifice has collapsed into self-aggrandisement.

Her conception of the supernatural explains how she can avoid this problem. For her, when I sacrifice myself for your sake, I become a bit more spiritual. For a moment at least, I transcend my natural impulses and strengthen the power of my supernatural side. I step a little deeper into the supernatural world where we most truly belong.

> We sojourn [...] in a world of fixed sequences, [...] laws, [...] dealing with a certain definite amount of force. [...] Also, [...] we inhabit another world in which we are in contact with an Infinite Will, the fountain of all law, in approach to which we may unseal new springs of creative energy, and find the irrevocable past subject to mysterious transformation [...] This eternal world [is] our home; [...] we inhabit it at this moment, and may at any moment enter into a vital experience of its most pregnant influences.[42]

In the spiritual world we still have distinct selves, but we are not sharply differentiated as in the finite world of embodiment. Community is more real in the spiritual world than the physical one. In spirit, our selves are distinct but yet connected, communing with one another transparently.

> What divides us is something individual, special, temporary, what we have as a meeting ground is the absolute. I find such great interest in metaphysics as bringing me back to this, which is the most practical truth we have.[43]

Thus when I strengthen my supernatural side, I am not strengthening this part of myself alone. I am strengthening the side of our existence where we form a community and meet on the ground of the absolute. By deepening this spiritual unity, I weaken the grip of the material impulses pitting us against one another. I am fashioning not my excellent individuality, but our web of relations.

Earlier, I said Wedgwood moves away from the relational ethics that she tries out in response to Sidgwick. Yet she retains that relational ethics to a degree, converting it from an ethics of social relations to one of spiritual relations. Self-sacrifice above all fosters our community

42 Wedgwood, 'The Supernatural and the Miraculous', 416.
43 J. W. to Mary Rich, Autumn 1866, WM 325.

as spiritual selves. In the real social world, the corporate unity of the Greeks has gone. But that unity has partially reappeared elsewhere – it comes into greater reality through our spiritual strivings, and we will enjoy it more fully in the afterlife when our bodies have fallen away and the material impulses that pull us apart have disappeared.

Now, an obvious objection is that this is just more of the hopelessly vague and metaphysical sermonising for which the Victorians are notorious. Yet Wedgwood has a reply. 'This sounds metaphysical', she concedes, 'but is, we believe, a simple statement of the commonest experience of the ordinary men and women in the world'.[44] In other words, she appeals again to phenomenology. We *feel* our participation in a spiritual world. At rare moments, we experience the transfiguring power of spiritual community.

However, while such claims may have stated the experience of Victorian-age men and women, steeped in Christianity, the modern reader may respond as follows. 'Well, I've taken another look at my experience, and I've found nothing like what Wedgwood describes. I'm certainly not looking forward to re-uniting with my loved ones on the ground of the absolute after death. The "ground of the absolute" is meaningless to me. These claims have no purchase on my lived experience'.

This important problem will shape the following chapters. To anticipate: Wedgwood sees the problem and realises that a phenomenological defence of supernaturalism is not sufficient. The idea of the supernatural realm depends on Christianity as a historical system of belief. Those who have moved away from Christianity are just not going to feel the presence of the supernatural.

As such, her defence of the supernatural has to be historical as well as phenomenological. She sets out to show that if we turn away from the supernatural then we are repudiating the entire cultural heritage that makes our lives what they are. The result is historical amnesia – not unvarnished insight into experience, but diminished access to its wealth and possibilities. This is the thrust of Wedgwood's turn to history, which will occupy Chapters 9 to 13. But before that, let's take stock of what we have learnt about imperfect antithesis by returning to the comparison with Hegel.

44 Wedgwood, 'Negative Stage', 1069.

8. Wedgwood and Hegel

8.1 Introduction

When leading into Wedgwood's conception of imperfect antithesis, I noted that Hegel was one of her influences. Having now examined how Wedgwood develops and applies imperfect antithesis across various domains, we can usefully return to her relations with Hegel. This helps to pull out the distinctive structure of her philosophy of imperfect antithesis, in contrast to Hegel's system.

To show this, I'll revisit her early review-essay on Hegel and the criticisms she makes of Hegel's excessive abstraction and systematicity (8.2). Then I ask whether, in fact, she puts forward a system herself. I submit that imperfect antithesis works differently, in an anti-systematic way that attends to lived experience and the heterogeneity of reality (8.3). From that perspective, I expand on Wedgwood's anti-Hegelianism. Despite sharing his preoccupation with antithesis, she ultimately goes in a different direction (8.4).

8.2 Wedgwood on Hegel Revisited

In her 1865 review-essay of Stirling and Hegel, Wedgwood objects that Stirling's translation of Hegel's *Science of Logic* unfortunately makes his concepts even more abstract than the German original:

> The faded Latin metaphors with which we are obliged to replace such distinct figures as Begriff, Vorstellung, Bestimmung, occupy to them the same relation as neutral tint to colour. Think over [...] the *grasp* in connexion with the Begriff, the placing before with Vorstellung, the voice with Bestimmung, and then say if it is no loss to have to replace these words

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> with such pallid abstractions as Notion, Representation, Destination.[1]

She finds the high level of abstraction a particular hurdle in Hegel's Logic, especially his opening treatment of being and nothingness. Being or *Sein* (both ontological principle and category) is the simplest and most inescapable principle, presupposed in any thought or existence: everything that is must in some sense participate in being.[2] But being has no further determination or specification, and is only a pure unity with no differences or qualities. Actually, therefore, it is nothingness, the total negation of anything specifiable.[3] Wedgwood remarks that it is painfully difficult to follow this movement of thought, and when we finally succeed, the outcome threatens to be a mere truism, as in a quip of William Hamilton's: 'Thinking is but an idle waste of thought, for naught is everything, and everything is naught'.[4]

Wedgwood may seem a typical British reader of Hegel, hostile to his perceived obscurantism and accusing the emperor of wearing no clothes. Indeed, the second part of her essay is called 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"'. A dead secret is one a person must keep absolutely concealed or it will ruin their reputation. Thus her title seems to imply that, if Hegel's secretly truistic nature were exposed, it would be evident that he is less profound than people think.

However, this is not actually the conclusion she wants to reach. She contends that paradoxes always appear to be truisms at first. Having laboriously followed Hegel and eventually grasped that being is nothingness, we forget that there was ever an antithesis, and so we mistakenly feel we are left with a bare identity, a tautology.[5] In reality we are not, since the antithesis remains as well as the unity. Being and nothingness have only proven to be identical because they were previously set up as antithetical, such that everything was being and there was no nothingness. It was this over-extension of being – and the implicit squeezing of nothingness out of the world – that made being become empty and collapse into nothingness. The identity depends on antithesis. So after all we have not tended up with a tautology. We have

1 Wedgwood, 'Secret of Hegel', 308.
2 Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §86, pp. 136–39.
3 Ibid., §87, p. 139.
4 Wedgwood, 'Secret of Hegel', 109.
5 Ibid.

learnt something about the necessity and inescapability of antithesis, and that antithesis gives real content to the things we are thinking about.[6]

At the same time, Wedgwood is not enamoured of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, nor of the systematic project of which it is the central manifestation. She is much more favourable to his philosophy of history and social and political philosophy. Yet even here, the systematic and logical dimension obtrudes. Hegel has a 'habit of looking at all facts as symbols', which 'gives a certain coldness' to his work.[7] Even when dealing with real-life and historical antitheses, Hegel tends to look through the real-life elements to the pure logical and rational structure which can be discerned in them. She stresses the dangers of this form of system-building: 'If we contemplate the system in itself [...] the dangers of it are very obvious. [...] These are the dangers of systems, not of methods'.[8]

8.3 Imperfect Antithesis Isn't a System

What are these dangers of systems? And isn't Wedgwood purveying a system herself? After all, the idea of imperfect antithesis orchestrates what she says on a spectrum of issues from ethics to metaphysics. Isn't that a system? More than that, several of her antitheses appear to have the same structure. We can have virtues without vices; gratitude can be a virtue without ingratitude being a vice; we can have free will and moral responsibility without being blameworthy every time we act from determining forces. Perhaps all these cases flow down from one central one: We can have the good without the bad. The good does not need the bad as its antagonist; good can exist independently. Do all her antitheses descend from this central one, thereby falling into a deductive system?

Possibly. Consider that the supernatural and the natural are an asymmetrical antithesis because the supernatural is ultimately larger and more real than the natural, and overreaches the natural, whereas this is not true in reverse. The natural is partly constituted by the supernatural, but the supernatural is not partly constituted by the natural. One half of the sphere is larger than the other. Perhaps this is another version of how the good can exist without the bad. If the supernatural lines

6 Wedgwood, 'Dead Secret', 675.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.

up with the good, then just as the good can exist without the bad, the supernatural can exist without the natural. Conversely, the natural needs the supernatural, just as the bad needs to make reference to the good it opposes.

However, sometimes imperfect antithesis goes in different ways. Wedgwood says that one cannot be generous without being a bit unjust. Here, one cannot have a certain virtue without some of a correlative vice; the asymmetry is only that the two halves are not exactly proportioned. Different people may be generous and unjust to different degrees and in different ways. Or consider remembering and forgetting. They are asymmetrical in that despite their opposing directions – holding-on and letting-go – *both* are desirable and they support one another.

When I introduced imperfect antithesis in Chapter 2, I suggested that every imperfect antithesis is imperfect in its own way; thus, the idea of imperfect antithesis does not impose homogeneity on phenomena but reveals their heterogeneity. Having explored some antitheses in more detail, however, it appears that only some of them are diverse while others parallel one another.

Or do they? At a high altitude, the supernatural/natural and good/bad contrasts look similar, but homing in closer we see differences. The supernatural may be able to exist without the natural, but the crux for Wedgwood is that the former overreaches the latter and subtends it. This is not what she says of good and bad. We can experience the good of love without ever having to undergo the bad of hatred, and if we have ever felt hatred then we can never again fully enjoy the unmixed good of love. That is quite different from saying that the good overreaches and subtends the bad – which is what she would stress if *good/bad* paralleled *supernatural/natural*.

Consider, too, free will and determination. She does not say that we have pure free will unadulterated with any determination, and that if we've ever acted under determining forces then we can never enjoy pure freedom again. That would be the parallel with *good/bad*, but instead she says the opposite: we only ever have intermittent flashes of free will in a sea of determination. The fact that we are not blameworthy for doing things under pressure of determining forces or, say, overwhelming pain, is what brings free will and determinism into an alignment with the way we can have virtues without vices. Yet the reason we are not

blameworthy here is *because* determination is a normal and prevalent side of life, which is why we can only have free will together with a large presence of determination. In that respect, free will and determinism do *not* parallel virtues and vices. We can have virtues without vices, but we cannot have free will without determination. The two cases only support each other and form an organic unity by not running along parallel lines.

Thus, Wedgwood is not deducing a system of antitheses from a supreme good/bad contrast. Instead, she tries to stay close to life as we experience it: our moral struggles, the irrecoverable loss involved in self-sacrifice, what it's like to be in pain, our immediate consciousness of having free will, the fact that we simply pursue moral ideals rather than engaging in a complicated theoretical quantification of pleasures and pains. Carefully observing these phenomena, Wedgwood finds that life does pervasively fall into antitheses (recoil/aspiration, ideals/reality, spirit/body, self/self-sacrifice) but asymmetrical ones. If we look for a system in her disparate reflections, we will only find a mess. But that is to use the wrong standard. Wedgwood is not trying to produce a system, but to give a faithful transcript of experience. The kind of rigour she aspires to is not that of logical validity, but patient, careful, and accurate mapping of the contours of real life.

This is not to say that imperfect antithesis is an empirical generalisation. It is more like an organising lens: phenomena suggest it, and once recognised it illuminates their textures, which when looked at further suggest more variations on the structure, which illuminate still further textures in phenomena, and so on. The project is not to derive these phenomena from one another. Instead we are to observe how they sit, leaning in different directions, some positioned closer together, and others seated further away. After all, a heterogeneous set of phenomena will not be evenly spaced apart from one another: some will cluster closer together than others.

We can now see why Wedgwood regards systematising as a danger. The logical intellect, faced with diverse phenomena, will desperately try to cram them into a tidy grid, to re-organise them so they are standing straight and evenly spaced in ordered rows. That is the danger into which she thinks Hegel, at worst, falls. Although, positively, he is drawn to real-life phenomena in their diversity, he also, negatively, endeavours

to reduce them to the incarnation of a logical structure.[9] In the process, he reduces heterogeneity to homogeneity.

8.4 Wedgwood against Hegel

We can push Wedgwood's critical perspective on Hegel a little further. He constructs his system by taking successive phenomena each presumed to be simply what it is (being is being, *A* is *A*), and teasing out how it is the opposite of what it was assumed to be (being is nothingness, *A* is *not-A*). This yields a contradiction, since *A* is both *A* and *not-A*, and reason requires that contradictions are resolved, powering the onward movement of the system. The contradiction in which being is both itself and nothingness is resolved just by seeing being and nothingness *as* a unity, namely as becoming (*Werden*), which has two aspects (being and nothingness) and is nothing more than the movement between them.[10]

Summing up this structure, Hegel says that any dialectical process begins with something 'posited' – affirmed to be what it is – followed by the properly dialectical moment of antithesis – what was posited proves the opposite of itself – and finally the speculative resolution of the two prior moments.[11] In short, Hegel takes phenomena and concepts that are regarded as self-contained units and shows that they invariably self-divide into an antithesis which must in turn be resolved. These divisions come about because of a pervasive error of thought: the grasping for a perfect thesis, separating reality into self-contained units, which is the mentality of the analytical understanding.

Wedgwood's law of imperfect antithesis goes in a different direction. She takes antithetical phenomena – praise and blame, truth and falsehood, pleasure and pain, nature and supernatural – and explores their asymmetries. Hegel moves from thesis to antithesis to the speculative; she moves from presumed perfect antitheses to imperfect ones. Whereas Hegel takes the intellect to be prone to the error of analysis, for Wedgwood it is truer to say that the intellect is prone to the error of *dialectic*, structuring phenomena into artificially schematic contrasts.

9 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.
10 Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §88, p. 141.
11 Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §§79–83, pp. 125–32.

As we see when he derives becoming from being and nothingness, for Hegel, successive contradictions power the onward movement of the system. In Wedgwood, antitheses do no such thing, partly because they are not pure contradictions but are messy and imperfect. The challenge, as she sees it, is not to iron out contradictions over and over again until we have amassed a comprehensive system of which, in retrospect, the contradictions are the buttresses. The challenge is instead to stay with real-life antitheses, and appreciate how they differ from pure contradictions and what they are like to live with. The delicacies of gratitude and apologies, the physical anguish of toothache and the mental torment of guilt, the recoil from pain and the ardent striving after ideals – it is these real-life emotional antitheses that concern her. Rather than constructing a diagram, she tries to paint from life.

Overall, she moves in a direction different from Hegel. She shares his preoccupation with antitheses, and this gives rise to significant resonances between their philosophies. Ultimately, though, her difference from Hegel tells us the most about her philosophy of imperfect antithesis. Imperfect antithesis is an organising lens, not a principle from which various antitheses can be deduced. The lens is intended to magnify the many variations within the real world, to guide close observation and be enriched by it. With its help, Wedgwood have us resist the simplifications of the logical intellect, which she believes Hegel ultimately fails to escape.

9. The Law of Recoil and the Ages of Woman

9.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the historical aspect of imperfect antithesis – namely the law of recoil, in which we repeatedly swing from one form of life or belief to its near-opposite (9.2). The chapter then examines how this law plays out in Wedgwood's account of women's changing social position.

After noting how her feminist thought evolved (9.3), I discuss Wedgwood's view that modern women lack an ideal to regulate their lives (9.4). The old ideal of the domestic hearth-angel has collapsed, but nothing yet has taken its place. Released into political life, women are allegedly becoming dangerously radical as they recoil against their former domestic subjugation – although the recoil ambiguously perpetuates aspects of that very subjugation. However, for Wedgwood women's politicisation offsets the even worse danger of class fragmentation, because women's sex identity is always stronger than their economic one.

She develops these ideas into the thesis that morality began in prehistoric times with mothers' devoted and selfless care of offspring (9.5). Women were the first moral agents. They enjoyed a natural authority over their offspring, leading to a prehistoric 'gynecocracy'. In a movement of recoil, the ancient Greeks repudiated this matriarchy and installed patriarchy. Although historically questionable, Wedgwood's account can still inspire and help us to think and imagine life beyond patriarchy (9.6). Her treatment of women applies the law of recoil and manifests her growing turn towards history (9.7).

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9.2 The Law of Recoil

As well as a lens for illuminating the varieties of lived everyday experience, Wedgwood also employs imperfect antithesis as a historical lens. Here she calls it the 'law of inversion' or the 'law of recoil', in which we swing from one form of life almost inevitably towards an antithetical one. She derives this swinging movement from human nature:

> There is a tendency in human nature to which, we think, sufficient attention has not been paid, and to which indeed it is not easy to call attention without seeming to advocate a paradox. We would call it the law of inversion. If we were to call it the closeness of all opposites, instead of the mind's tendency to pass from one to the other, we should, perhaps, seem to present to the reader a truism rather than a paradox, but under whichever aspect, we are sure that its practical bearing is insufficiently considered. It would be an interesting study to follow out this idea in the domain of language, and watch how readily a negative slips in or slips out, [...] so that the mere alteration of a letter, for instance, converts the *hospes* to a *hostis*, and twin groups of words preserve the duality in the germinal idea, and remind us that 'hospitality' and 'hostility' spring from one root. This, however, is not our present object. We would now call the reader's attention to another illustration of the law that 'extremes meet'.[1]

As this law plays out historically, we swing pendulum-like between modes of life:

> Truth must [...] be regarded rather as a process than a statement, rather a movement than a view from any single position. The swing of the pendulum symbolises the natural impulse of impatient thought, the pattern of spiritual discovery must be sought in the arduous and unceasing change of direction which leads to all the loftiest peaks of earth. [...] Truth is movement.[2]

She gives this pattern different names as well as the pendulum-swing: the negative stage in the life of thought, the zig-zag path up the mountain of truth, the necessary vibration of mental attention.[3]

Crucially, for Wedgwood, antithesis remains real: we tend to swing from one form of life to its antithesis because they truly are opposites,

1 Wedgwood, '"Grievances of Women"', *Spectator*, 8 May 1880, 588.
2 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 265.
3 Wedgwood, 'Negative Stage'; *Moral Ideal*, pp. 167 and 332.

like hostility and hospitality. But the swings are non-symmetrical, uneven, turbulent. We swing not from *A* to *not-A* but to *mostly-not-A*:

> The very legacy of earnest aspiration, when confronted with the vision of imperfect achievement, re-appears in the search for an opposite goal. But reaction rarely takes the form of simple recoil. What it retains may be transformed by the effort of severance from old association with other elements, and superficially unrecognisable; but we can see it if we look for it.[4]

The key point here is that the recoil is not simple. Instead, elements of *A* persist within *mostly-not-A* because we were previously attached to *A*, and a deep attachment cannot be severed cleanly. The attachment may endure in the very passion with which we repudiate *A* (the 'effort of severance'). We only need to fight passionately against something we still care about – like disappointed love that turns into hate and not indifference.

Thus, the pendulum-swings are asymmetrical because we are creatures not simply of logic but emotion too. Being emotional, and passionate, our movements of recoil cannot be even, perfect, or pure. We recoil from hostility to hospitality, or from affirmation to rejection. These are real antitheses, so we naturally bounce from one to the other, yet they do not relate as black to white. The hospitable host retains the degree of hostility that keeps his guest in a client status, dependent on his power. He expels his guest with hostility just because he remains the host who has the power to expel. Behind the appearance of pure antitheses lies a more ambivalent reality.

One historical manifestation of the law of inversion is women's changing place in society. The law of inversion infuses Wedgwood's account of prehistoric matriarchy, its overthrow by patriarchy in ancient Greece, and the modern counter-swing towards women's emancipation. These changes will occupy this chapter, illustrating the law of inversion in action.

9.3 Wedgwood's Feminism

Wedgwood wrote abundantly on feminism, and her thought changed considerably over time. Her earlier essays, such as her 1869 and 1872

4 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 203.

articles on female suffrage and her 1873 pamphlet 'The Political Claims of Women', put forward a cautious and qualified liberal feminism. She urged women's rights to enter the professions and public life, and obtain an education equivalent to men. She was wary of any claims about women's 'difference'.

By the later 1870s, as we have seen earlier, she was more concerned with women's distinctive moral experiences and virtues, and their special contribution to our collective pursuit of the good. She believed women were especially given to self-sacrifice, and while this entailed real losses for women, she wanted to honour the self-sacrificial values so many women held.

Further shifts followed over a series of essays from the 1880s to 1890s, including '"Grievances of Women"' (1880), 'The Political Characteristics of Woman' (1880), 'Men and Women' (1886), 'The Age of Woman' (1887), 'Woman and Democracy' (1888), and '"Male and Female Created He Them"' (1889). In modern terms, she moved ever further from equality feminism into difference feminism.

9.4 Woman: Ideal and Reality

The first of these later essays, '"Grievances of Women"', is prompted by an essay by Margaret Oliphant, a writer and thinker Wedgwood admired.[5] Taking up Oliphant's theme of 'grievance', Wedgwood asks: Why is it so hard to attain justice between men and women, and for women to feel that men are treating them justly? Her answer is that, historically, justice applied between citizens of the polity, which excluded the family. Stretching justice across the polity/family boundary must be troubled, for it is not a simple extension but a conceptual transformation.[6]

> For our own part, we do not regard that change in the position of women which is one of the most marked characteristics of our time as one of unmixed gain. And though we do regard it as one of great gain, that is not the point on which we are now insisting. It is gain counterbalanced by loss, like almost all other human improvement; and the loss, like all other loss, should be diminished by being recognised.[7]

5 Oliphant, 'Grievances of Women', *Fraser's Magazine* 101 (May 1880), 698–710.
6 Wedgwood, '"Grievances of Women"', 588.
7 Ibid., 589.

This statement, perhaps surprising from a feminist, reflects her belief in the law of inversion. When we recoil from one form of shared life to another, we neither reach the simple opposite of the earlier one, nor do we preserve everything that was good in the past. Things slip between the cracks when the tectonic plates of history shift.

In this case, something that has slipped away is an ideal to guide women's aspirations. In the past, there was the ideal of the wife and mother, the *Ewig-Weibliche*, the angel in the house, the princess in the castle.[8] These ideals have lapsed. The ensuing lack of ideals presents a problem for justice, since 'justice means, on the whole, a comparison of a person's actions and his standard'.[9] To judge someone justly is to ask whether they live up to the standard *they* believe in, whatever one thinks of the standard itself. One can condemn slavery, she explains, without blaming an individual for acting in accordance with it: one can rate someone an exemplary Athenian citizen even though he owned slaves.

Since women no longer have an ideal standard, there is no easy way to evaluate them justly. Men have many such ideals:

> A man, while struggling up any difficult path, may feel himself the member of an invisible army. 'Burns, Shelley, are with us; they fight from their graves.' A woman in his position struggles onward, in an important sense, alone. She must live on aspirations which find no echo in the ideal past, and till we have tried it, none can measure this loss.[10]

It won't help for women to model themselves on Burns and Shelley – women need their *own* ideals. Otherwise, women will always remain second-best, and then justice to women will certainly be impossible. Only when women have their own ideals can both sexes be recognised for their 'characteristic excellences'.[11] Justice requires not that women be treated the same as men, but that they are recognised to be different.

In 'The Political Characteristics of Woman', Wedgwood spells out that women's new ideal cannot be invented *ex nihilo* but must grow on the ruins of the older ideal, re-animating it and enlarging its 'circumference'. In the past, women's place was to care selflessly for others. This devotion has to be extended and widened – into care work in hospitals and

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.

welfare, educational work in schools and colleges, and reform work.[12]

In 'Men and Women', she reiterates that 'we should have two standards', and that something we should retain from the past is the ideal of women's purity. She insists 'that it shall be the special duty of the other half [of humanity] to keep that aim [purity] at its ideal height [...] All these profound and varied springs of will must be neglected if male and female purity are to be measured by one standard'.[13] Purity is the emblematic supernatural standard, and removing it will diminish the springs of aspiration and moral duty for everyone. But it is women's particular task to embody purity most completely and consistently, thus keeping the ideal alive and meaningful for men as well.

In a sense, Wedgwood is trying to capture a trend she saw emerging in her time: the visionary re-imagining of the feminine ideal in the life and work of crusading reformers such as Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler. We might have hoped for a more radical vision. But Wedgwood is no radical in politics, and she sets herself against more radical currents within the feminist movement.

This anti-radicalism plays out as follows. Analysing women's political propensities, she argues they tend to swing between a conservative attachment to order and custom (*Sitten*) and a radical, even revolutionary, fervour.[14] Both tendencies come out of women's traditional place in the family in different ways. But the revolutionary trend is more telling: 'the dread which associates the political influence of women with unreasoning gusts of feeling, is better justified than that which associates it with any timid clinging to the past'.[15] Why is that?

Wedgwood answers that for generations women have been excluded from the polity, and so by the law of recoil, when first liberated into public life, they repudiate order and tradition with a vengeance. Moreover, as family beings, women are used to forming narrow, partisan, and passionate attachments to their kin and to the people they prefer. These attachments run deep and defy reason.

> It will remain true in the future, as it has been in the past, that women carry into public life many of the temptations of domestic life, – that they

12 Wedgwood, 'Political Characteristics of Woman', *Spectator*, 9 October 1889, 1281.
13 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', *Spectator*, 17 July 1886, 951–53.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.

> should be keener partisans than men, their sympathies quicker, their sense of proportion far less exact; that they should be more ready to sacrifice themselves, and more ready to sacrifice everybody else, than men are.[16]

Thus women's (alleged) political radicalism and partisanship arise by recoil in two interwoven ways: the extreme repudiation of their earlier confinement to the family; and the covert continuation of the habits bred by that confinement, habits of forming passionate attachments and pressing them against reason and balance.

Her critical evaluation of women as political agents continues. She goes back to the constant interruptions women suffer, their every pursuit interrupted by the claims of family. No 'better arrangements' can possibly end the interruptions of children; 'the mother of a family [...] must consent to be interrupted at any moment'.[17] Transposing this fragmented mentality into politics, women tend to assess politicians personally and emotionally, judging and reacting to their character-traits and individual morality, which can be done much more quickly than wading through legislative proposals. Women are introducing into political life the deterioration into emotions that Wedgwood decries.[18] As we know, for her, the political sphere should be governed by law, rights, principles, and duties, *not* personal relations and emotions, kindness, favours, or generosity.

Similar worries about women's partisan and passionate nature drove others such as Mrs. Humphry Ward to oppose female suffrage. For Ward, 'Were women admitted to this [political] struggle, their natural eagerness and quickness of temper would probably make them hotter partisans than men. [...] The whole nation would suffer in consequence'.[19] Wedgwood did not rate Ward very highly; she saw her novels as an inferior version of the works of George Eliot.[20] Yet politically Ward and Wedgwood had some common ground.[21] Where Wedgwood

16 Ibid., 1280.
17 Wedgwood, 'Characteristics', 1280. Wedgwood is on to something in terms of lived experience; see Lisa Baraitser's maternal 'ethics of interruption' in *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2010).
18 Wedgwood, 'Characteristics', 1279.
19 Ward, 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage', *The Nineteenth Century* 25 (June 1889), 783.
20 Wedgwood, 'Fiction and Faith', 217–24.
21 On Wedgwood's increasingly conservative feminism, see also Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 274.

differs from Ward is that she holds that the political dangers posed by women result from their earlier subjugation, through the ambiguous recoil against it. Thus in 'Woman and Democracy', she contends that women retain 'the virtue of the slave, the passionate devotion, the self-obliterating interest in another life' – only throwing it into new causes, hoping at last to fulfil the dreams of generations of oppressed Joan of Arcs and Mary Wollstonecrafts, sympathising with the oppressed, throwing open the prisons and forgiving all wrongdoers.[22] Because this behaviour is reactive, recoiling against past subjugation, it follows that once women's subjugation is longer in the past and their public participation has become normalised, and they have new ideal standards to follow, this over-heated behaviour will settle down. So despite her fears and criticisms of women's political agency, Wedgwood does not want to turn back the clock; the only way past the danger is onward: 'The escape lies in the same quarter as the peril'.[23]

Moreover, she sees another even worse danger in the making: the overtaking of national loyalty by class loyalty. National identity is ennobling, she says, because one is embracing a corporate whole greater than the self, whereas class loyalty is materialistic and selfish, based in the pursuit of one's material well-being as an individual. Given this threat, women's dangerous entrance into politics serves a positive function: it mitigates the even worse danger of the nation fracturing into opposed classes. This is because the bond of sex between women is always stronger than their bonds or divisions of class. All women share maternal feelings, even non-mothers, and these feelings unite women at a deeper, more instinctual level than the economic.[24]

> It cannot be said that a woman ever belongs to a class in the same degree as a man does. Her sex is a class in a deeper sense than his, and does not, to the same extent, admit of cross-classification. A mill-girl and a duke's daughter [...] each feel the thrill that is older than humanity, they cannot but lose, to some extent, the full pressure of those severing instincts which are far younger.[25]

22 Wedgwood, 'Woman and Democracy', 338.
23 Ibid., 339.
24 Compare Shulamith Firestone's later argument that sex-class, being biological, is a deeper division than economic class; Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1971).
25 Wedgwood, 'Woman and Democracy', 339.

Women's political involvement weakens the ties of class and activates a more archaic stratum of feeling:

> By experiences [of maternity] such as these, transmitted through sexual heredity even to those who have not known them, is worked the daily miracle which removes the centre beyond the self [...] In [woman's] sense of incompleteness, in her craving for the presence of an opposite nature, in her continual yearning to exchange the *I* for the *We*, lies the true medicine for the ills of Democracy – a medicine not the less healing because it may become a poison. Women have opposed the interests of the family to the interests of the nation, and have taught men to sacrifice the large group to the small. The true woman will strengthen the antithesis – not of the family to the nation – but of the family and nation to the class. She represents all that is good in Democracy, for her sympathies must ever lie with the weak; but the central principle of the true Aristocracy is bound up in her very existence; for she can never lose the impulses and emotions originating in a moral life older than that of man.[26]

When Wedgwood provocatively mentions 'aristocracy' here, she means that every mother has a natural authority over her child.[27] This is a true aristocracy because it has nothing to do with wealth, property, or birthright – the mill-girl has authority over her children no less than the duchess. As such, the 'maternal aristocracy' can co-exist perfectly well with democracy as a form of political organisation. And the former tempers the dangers of the latter. Maternal aristocracy offsets the fragmentation into sectional classes pursuing their own interests, introducing a dimension of natural authority which offsets relations founded on self-interest, individualism, and equality.

Despite its danger, then, Wedgwood ultimately sees women's entrance into politics positively. The danger is that women who have been bred to sacrifice themselves for their families will transfer this attitude onto passionate, self-sacrificing partisanship for a cause. But ultimately that danger is outweighed by the more positive side of women's self-sacrificial maternal impulses, which provide a counterweight to the fragmenting, sectional forces of class interest.

26 Ibid., 340.

27 See Wedgwood, 'Obedience', *Spectator*, 21 August 1886, 1112–14.

9.5 Moral Life Before Man

Wedgwood's claims about women's archaic moral life and primordial bond of sex are developed further in the 1889 article 'Male and Female Created He Them'. The title may suggest a piece of feminist theology, but it is very different, a remarkable essay that could almost have been written in the radical feminist upsurge of the 1970s.[28] Because her arguments are complex, I'll explain them first and evaluate them afterwards.

Wedgwood begins with a point later rediscovered by Simone de Beauvoir: 'men have felt themselves the representatives of humanity, and held women to form, in some sense, a class apart'.[29] Men are normal; women are different (the other). Men are thought diverse, women homogeneous. We have *made* this homogeneity real, by arranging society to make 'personal feeling' the key-note of every woman's life. Restrict women's sphere and of course they will all look alike.

Wedgwood turns to Mill's *Subjection of Women*, and its claim that the subjugation of women has no place in the modern world. Originally this subjugation was based on differences of physical strength, but modernity has made strength irrelevant, and women's oppression persists merely from outdated custom, according to Mill.[30] Wedgwood brings in the objection made by both George Eliot and her uncle Darwin: that Mill fails to take account of biology, when we look beyond strength to the wider results of evolution.[31] Darwin has shown that some qualities are inherited along sexed lines:

> So that, while the progress of our latest civilization tends towards obliteration of the dividing line of male and female, a much older and wider set of influences are at work, tending to make every generation of women in some sense more feminine, every generation of men in some sense more masculine.[32]

28 For a résumé of the essay, see Brown, *Wedgwood*, pp. 262–64, and 'Julia Wedgwood, A Victorian Feminist', 254–55.

29 Wedgwood, 'Male and Female', 121. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1943), trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 15.

30 See Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1869).

31 Wedgwood, 'Male and Female', 122.

32 Ibid., 123.

Pace Mill, physiology is still with us; it is not a thing of the past.

Above all, from previous women, new generations of women inherit the experiences and dispositions of maternity, whether or not individual women have babies. And maternity – devoted, selfless care for others – is the germ of morality, so that morality begins on the female side. In contrast, primeval males did not bear babies, and no-one could know who anyone's father was or what role males played in the production of new life. Paternity is a creation of civilisation, maternity of nature.

> Woman inherits a longer tradition of moral relation than man does: she, in the very dawn of her existence, finds herself dowered with a heritage of instincts unknown to him; he passes through a long stage of his education before he knows himself to be a father, but she is, from the first, consciously a mother. He is not more surely the stronger in the realm of physical might than she is the elder in that of moral law.[33]

Paternity is a human construction, the work of thought, whereas maternity is animal and felt.[34] Thus *maternal* and *female* are older than *human*, she says. The ethical instinct of maternity was in place before we ever did anything to set ourselves apart from animals.

Inevitably, therefore, the first communities were matriarchal. Mother-rule flowed directly from the reality of being born and cared for by mothers, back when the concept of paternity was not even a dot on the horizon. Wedgwood is now claiming that women stand for a natural aristocracy in a more anthropological sense than before. She refers heavily to J. J. Bachofen, the anthropologist who theorised a primordial 'mother-right' (*Mutterrecht*), and to A.-L. Giraud-Teulon, who popularised Bachofen's concept under the term 'gynecocracy'.[35] Darwin had made notes on Giraud-Teulon's work on *La mère*, Wedgwood tells us, and these notes indicated his agreement.[36]

She moves on to the ancient Greeks. She finds extensive evidence that they suppressed and turned against an earlier matriarchy that had survived in places, such as among the Amazons. When Bellerophon and

33 Ibid., 125.

34 For a similar claim that paternity is a mental, ideal construction that recoils against female biology, see Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 186.

35 Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht* (Stuttgart: Kreis und Hoffmann, 1861); Giraud-Teulon, *La mère chez certains peuples d'Antiquité* (Paris: Thorin, 1867).

36 Wedgwood, 'Male and Female', 125.

Theseus defeated the Amazons, they were forcing women to submit to male rule and matriarchy to give way to Athenian 'democracy'. The massacre of the men of Lemnos by its women vindicated primeval mother-right, but this episode was denounced by the classical Greeks as the most horrific of incidents. Through these arduous struggles, the 'Right of the Father' was imposed.[37]

The battle is dramatised in the *Eumenides*, where the Erinnyes represent the ancient order, the right of the mother. Wedgwood objects to the 'jarring note' in which Orestes is acquitted of matricide on the grounds that life descends from the father, the proof being that Athena sprang from her father Zeus's head.

> The strife between male and female powers, which here takes a form so absurd and grotesque, is revealed as the beginning of the moral condition under which he [Aeschylus] was living, and we discern that the condition commonly supposed primitive was stamped with the character of a violent reaction. The ancient goddesses represent an elder law, defied by the new dynasty of Olympus. They are the embodiment of that moral life to which woman first awakened; they may be regarded as the shadow on mythology of the great truth that the moral life is older in woman than in man.[38]

Elsewhere, Wedgwood stresses how the Greeks repudiated the whole sphere of kin relations, placing it outside the *polis*. Greek citizenship *was* masculinity, essentially and not accidentally. This embodied the recoil against an earlier matriarchy. Yet the Greeks could not fully stamp out the truth ingrained in biology, and it survived in the worship of Demeter and returned in Christianity – in the maternal self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, in Mariolatry, in the celebration of feminine virtues of devotion, purity, and selflessness. 'This Divine female principle – the mother in the Divine' is inextinguishable.[39]

There is nothing saccharine about this feminine cult. Wedgwood disagrees with Darwin, who apparently made a marginal note on Giraud-Teulon's work musing on whether the ancient matriarchy was a gentler time. No, she says, the matriarchs were not gentle, they were

37 Ibid., 127–28.
38 Ibid., 129–30.
39 Ibid., 131.

powerful.[40] Women are not weak; they have an ancient, inextinguishable ferocity on behalf of those they love. The rise of the classical *polis* testifies not to women's weakness but their power, which had to be suppressed repeatedly and obsessively.

Finally and briefly, she returns to the implications for her late-Victorian present. The inheritance of maternity is double-edged. Women prefer their kin to strangers, even when the strangers have greater need; whereas men, who are citizens, spontaneously consider others apart from relations of kin and preference, approaching all members of the polity with a rough impartiality. To restate Wedgwood's distinction in later terms, women are oriented to care relationships, men to justice. Yet women have the emotional resources to look and reach beyond their narrow preferences, by finding resemblances to their nearest and dearest in unfamiliar others. Especially as women age, 'Others' become 'less *other*' to them.[41] They see the close and familial neighbour within the further-off neighbour and the stranger. At their best, then, women have something better than impartiality, for they continue to care and feel deeply, while extending this attitude into a widening sphere.

'We would ask of the past why woman, if she is not to sink below man, must keep a position in some sense above him'.[42] Women are more partial and biased than men, thus 'lower'. But if women's powerful and visceral feelings can be cultivated and extended, their circumference enlarged, then women can reach a higher standpoint, more emotional and alive with sympathy than men's more abstract ethic of justice.

9.6 Evaluating Wedgwood on Matriarchy

Wedgwood relies heavily on Bachofen, but in contemporary archaeology his matriarchy thesis is widely regarded as speculative and unsubstantiated. As an empirical, universal story of origins, prehistoric matriarchy is now generally rejected. For instance, David Graeber and David Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything* emphasise plurality and variability in human prehistory. They propose that early humans experimented with diverse forms of social organisation and

40 Ibid., 130–31.
41 Ibid., 133.
42 Ibid., 122.

didn't all move along a single linear path.[43] There was therefore no singular transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. Where does this leave Wedgwood's account?

By way of answer, we should begin by placing Wedgwood's essay back into her own time. She makes an important move by ingeniously navigating between Mill and Darwin. For Mill, we ought to treat women and men equally, and the time of natural difference is past. Darwin responds that we remain evolved, natural beings, and therefore we cannot help ourselves to gender equality as easily as Mill hopes.[44] Leveraging her intimate acquaintance with her uncle's thought and work, Wedgwood interjects that according to his own annotated reading on mother-right, biology makes not for patriarchy but matriarchy.

In other words, Mill and Darwin (before he encountered mother-right) both accept that biology disadvantages women, but one thinks biology is thankfully passé, the other that it remains inescapable and makes women inferior. The Darwinian side of this debate lives on when evolutionary theorists claim that since women produce eggs they will naturally invest in monogamy and childcare, while men produce sperm and so they will naturally want to disseminate their genetic material as widely as possible.[45] Using Darwin's subsequent reflections, Wedgwood turns the tables: evolved biology instead makes women morally *superior*. Biology is the source of a natural female moral authority over children and, in turn, over the community. This remains an important provocation and corrective to much evolutionary theorising, suggesting that there are other potentials in biology beside a tendency to vindicate patriarchy. This point stands even if we don't accept the empirical claim that there was ever a matriarchal stage in history.

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43 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2021).

44 On Darwin's critical reaction to Mill, and his insistence on innate sex differences, see Diane B. Paul and Benjamin Day, 'John Stuart Mill, Innate Differences, and the Regulation of Reproduction', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 39 (2008), 226–28. They suggest that parts of his *Descent of Man* might even be a rejoinder to Mill. As they discuss, Cobbe was the key mediator who aroused Darwin's interest in Mill's views. She wrote to a friend regarding *The Subjection of Women*: 'Charles Darwin […] is greatly excited about it, but says that Mill could learn some things from physical science'; Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe*, 2 vols. (London: Bentley, 1894), II, 124–25.

45 See, e.g., Robert Trivers, 'Parental Investment and Sexual Selection', in *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man*, ed. Bernard Campbell (New York: Routledge, 1972), pp. 136–79.

Moreover, ideas of an original matriarchy remain alive within contemporary feminist theory, continuing to provide inspiration. The view that the classical Greeks reacted against an earlier matriarchy, and that the *Eumenides* registers the struggle between mother- and father-right, has been taken up since the 1980s by radical feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Amber Jacobs.[46] They do not put forward ancient matriarchy as an empirical claim, more as a conceptual and critical resource. Even if in fact it never existed, imagining it helps us think beyond patriarchy and imagine alternative possibilities. Ancient matriarchy serves a similar critical function for Wedgwood, serving to expose patriarchy as a contingent social construction. When she stresses that ancient Greek patriarchy was reactive, it is above all this contingency that she is highlighting. Whatever its empirical status, the fact that an ancient 'gynecocracy' can be conceived and imagined shows that our lives do not have to be organised with men on top and citizenship defined by masculinity.

9.7 Conclusion

Having mobilised Darwin (against himself) to support natural maternal-female authority, Wedgwood is led to ask: if biology gives women advantages, why have they been generally subordinated? She concludes that there must have been a cultural and political recoil against a prior maternal power. In this way, the law of recoil infuses her account of history and her claim that patriarchy is not original but a reaction-formation. Moreover, the reaction preserved some of what it reacted against, for mother-worship never entirely went away. The vehemence with which the classical Greeks repudiated female-maternal power testifies to the unevenness of the pendulum-swing. Having had the male recoil against matriarchy, we now are in the throes of the female recoil against patriarchy; the pendulum-swings continue.

Wedgwood wants to imagine alternatives to patriarchy, and yet her view of these pendulum-swings assumes a single direction in history. We had ancient female authority, we had the Greek reaction, now we

46 Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987), trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

have women's counter-reaction. The historical path may zig-zag up the hill rather than forging a straight set of steps, but still she presumes that there is one path everyone must take to the top. The limitation of this picture is to leave no room for plural trajectories, diverse experiments with social life, or for there being several distinct paths up a variety of hills. Here, I simply have to concede that Wedgwood is closer to a nineteenth-century linear vision of history. Her zig-zag model, the idea of a pendulum oscillating wildly, is a variation on and complication of linear history, but not a radical departure.

Why does she remain committed to the idea that history progresses along one line, albeit by zigs and zags? I will try to answer this question in the following chapters, explaining why the commitment to progress and directional moral development is inherent in her historical project. This brings problems, but it also allows Wedgwood to solve other problems, as we will see.

Where does Wedgwood hope the historical zig-zag will end up, in terms of men and women? Men's task, she argues in *The Moral Ideal*, is to embrace the family, and to appreciate that family life and relationships are central to life, not a marginal adjunct. Women's task is to extend their inherent impulse of self-sacrifice into the public and social worlds, broaden out its application, and dilute the excessive partiality and partisanship of their attachments, converting some intensity into extensity. Even so, women's deeper maternal feelings will always remain, and so will men's greater impartiality. 'Man and woman, in all ages, stand opposite to each other as symbolising the great antitheses of all life and thought'.[47]

This is not a perfect antithesis. Women are not merely non-men, the diminished and shadowy 'Other' to which Greek patriarchy reduced them. Women's moral lives will always be older and deeper, both lower – more animal – and higher – more selfless. Women track better than men *and* worse. If the antithesis was symmetrical, one would be more virtuous and the other more vicious; but instead, women have the greater part of both extremes. Thus women's moral life is more troubled and ambiguous, but their best is better than men's best. Wedgwood wants us to value women on this account, rather than trying to eliminate sexual difference:

47 Wedgwood, 'Euripides at Cambridge', *Contemporary Review* 59 (January 1891), 92.

> Man and woman are two halves of one whole; the bond that makes them one lies deeper than our analysis can reach. […] To deny it is not to cut off an important branch of morality, but to destroy its root.[48]

As she reflected on women, Wedgwood's focus grew more and more deeply historical. First she wanted women to contribute to public life, ideas, and society. Then she asked what distinctive moral contribution women could make. Then she traced that moral contribution – women's self-sacrificial inclination – back to their traditional familial role. Then she went further back again, to biological origins preceding any organised societies, the nature against which culture arose in reaction. She concluded that the rise of Greek father-right had decisively shaped women's long exclusion from civic life and even from full humanity. Women's and men's moral lives in the present could not be understood from within the present, viewed on its own. Their lives were the deposit of successive earlier upheavals, which left an uneven and turbulent legacy.

Thus, imperfect antithesis gradually moved from a phenomenological lens on women's experience in the present to a historical lens for understanding successive movements of recoil. Wedgwood's analyses of women suggested that the historical lens was most crucial, since history made the present what it was. Women's partisan radicalism could not be made sense of without referring back to patriarchy, nor patriarchy without referring back to maternal authority, nor maternal authority without referring back to natural evolution. History, in Wedgwood's thought, was superseding phenomenology, as she came to view the present as a palimpsest of the past.

48 Wedgwood, 'Age of Woman', 1086.

10. Science and Faith

10.1 Introduction

This chapter asks why Wedgwood laid growing stress on imperfect antithesis in its historical aspect as the law of recoil. The key motivation was her anxiety about the spread of scientific naturalism, which embodied science's historical recoil against the faith that had formerly tried to strangle it. Like all recoil it was excessive, threatening our moral life (10.2).

Against naturalism, Wedgwood insists on the reality of supernatural phenomena, including heaven and the survival of the soul after death. For her there is an imperfect antithesis between heaven and hell: we can have eternal heaven and universal salvation without any correlative pole of eternal hell (10.3). But how are we supposed to know about these supernatural phenomena? Wedgwood holds that our first-person experience gives immediate certainty of some supernatural realities, such as the existence of the self and free will, while others such as God are the object of belief and doubt. This brings us to the imperfect antitheses she posits in the epistemic domain: belief and doubt, knowledge and denial, truth and falsehood (10.4). She contrasts them to the perfect antithesis fundamental to science: truth and ignorance. This brings us back to her wider worries about the rising naturalistic tide: that it is erasing our moral experience of pursuing supernatural ideals, making free choices, feeling guilt and remorse, falling short of our ideals and trying harder (10.5).

Wedgwood opposes naturalism from what seem two conflicting directions (10.6). Phenomenologically, she thinks that the pursuit of ideals, free will, etc., are inherent structures of human existence. Historically, she thinks these experiences are bound up with Christianity, so that understanding our moral life requires a historical turn to examine

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the origins and development of Christianity, in particular contrast to the ancient world. *Prima facie*, our form of moral life cannot be both a contingent product of Christianity *and* an inherent shape of human existence. Or can it? Subsequent chapters will examine this; this chapter lays out the apparent tension.

10.2 Wedgwood's Fears about Naturalism

Wedgwood became more critical of science over time. Back when she launched her non-fiction publishing career in 1860–61 with 'The Boundaries of Science', she was enthusiastic about evolutionary theory, defending it as warranted by evidence and compatible with Christianity. God initiated the evolutionary process, which ultimately fulfilled his plan. God originated the design; evolution handled the implementation.[1]

Readers today might wish Wedgwood had pushed harder on evolution's challenge to Christianity. But she meant to win over religious detractors of Darwinism, by showing that when rightly understood, neither evolutionism nor any other scientific theory threatened religious belief.[2] Science pertained only to nature, while the supernatural lay outside its purview. Some scientists did not realise this and were overstepping their rightful boundaries, but that was their mistake, not a problem with science as such.

By the 1870s, Wedgwood's views altered.[3] When she published 'Science and Faith' in 1879, she registered a momentous cultural change. Previously, science had been on the defensive vis-à-vis religion; now the power relations were reversed. The new orthodoxy was the philosophical stance corresponding to the tremendous growth in scientific knowledge. On this stance, the supernatural was a mere superstition – indeed 'supernatural' increasingly *meant* 'superstition'. 'The belief that when we have catalogued the data of the senses, we have completed the inventory of existence, has been hinted at or implied often and often', and now was being overtly stated.[4] Science was recoiling against religion, and like every historical recoil, it was going too far.

1 See Stone, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 136–43.
2 Ibid., p. 138.
3 On this alteration over time, see also Brown, *Wedgwood*, chs. 5 and 13.
4 Wedgwood, 'Science and Faith', 469.

In principle, one could still endorse evolution and remain a Christian. Yet practically, evolutionary theory had fuelled an outlook that denied the existence of anything not accessible to the senses. Thus, Wedgwood still said 'It is not *science* which opposes faith, it is the *philosophy* which is based on science' which was going too far.[5] Nonetheless, it was the success of science itself which had given credence to this standpoint. The problem was not science but the overextension of science, yet science intrinsically pushed towards its own overextension.

Wedgwood opposed this rising outlook, the naturalistic view that 'there is nothing more to the mental, biological and social realms than arrangements of physical entities'.[6] This is David Papineau's modern definition of naturalism, but Wedgwood had the same concept, for she deplored the fact that 'The intellectual activity that is characteristic of our time is opposed to all those who believe in a world of which the microscope, the balance, the thermometer, and all that marvellous apparatus for detecting the forces of nature [...] gives no indication'.[7]

Although Wedgwood objected to this reductive outlook, she knew it was winning out, and she saw no prospect of an imminent return to supernaturalism:

> He who has ceased to believe in an invisible world will soon find the visible one a satisfactory abode, and even come to regard all other feelings but satisfaction as unreasonable and wrong. [...] There are reasons peculiar to our own day which tend to shrivel up the faculty of veneration, and leave sympathy, affection, and pity, the only links by which man is bound to man. So rich may be the moral world thus left, that men forget how greatly it is impoverished.[8]

In sum, in the 1860s Wedgwood counselled that theists could safely accept evolution. This rested on her idea of the boundaries between science and religion. Then, seeing scientists overstepping these boundaries, she started trying to persuade them that nature and their accounts of nature had limits where they opened onto the supernatural realm, as we saw earlier in Chapter 7. Finding scientists not for turning, by the 1880s she

5 Ibid., 471; my emphasis.
6 David Papineau, 'Naturalism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/naturalism/
7 Wedgwood, 'What Is Christianity?', *Spectator*, 11 November 1876, 140.
8 Wedgwood, 'Science and Faith', 470–71.

was warning that they and their philosophical naturalist companions were discarding religion too hastily. They were in the grip of a historical recoil, rushing from one extreme (the religious rejection of science) to the other (the scientific rejection of religion). This threatened the entire fabric of moral life, even if it was not obvious yet.

10.3 Hope and Punishment, Life and Death

What makes the rise of naturalism so bad, in Wedgwood's eyes? We might consider, on the contrary, that the waning power of religion was weakening the old and pernicious beliefs in eternal hell and eternal punishment. That might look like an unmitigated positive aspect of the decline of faith. Indeed, Wedgwood denies eternal hell, following Thomas Erskine, for whom salvation is universal. Although everyone will ultimately get to heaven, he concedes that there will be finite punishment for some, to purify and ready them for their ultimate salvation. Nonetheless, this was a dramatic departure from Anglican orthodoxy at the time, which upheld the everlasting punishment of the wicked and that only the righteous would be saved.[9]

Surprisingly, though, Wedgwood says that real problems arise from denying eternal hell. Above all, we will struggle to hold on to eternal hope, the idea of a heaven that is good forever and absolutely. This is because we struggle to understand how there can be infinite and perfect goodness with no evil to fight against.[10] To our logical minds, good must be the struggle against evil and without its contrasting pole, goodness becomes inconceivable. The *good*/*evil* contrast, we take it, must be symmetrical. Then there can only be eternal hope and goodness in heaven if there is a correlative eternal hell for those who have turned from righteousness.

The Erskine view, instead, effectively upholds an imperfect antithesis. Good is infinite and absolute; evil is finite and temporary. Salvation is universal and heaven is eternal; hell is merely partial and limited. For Erskine it consists in the soul's absorption in its own despair, suffering, and resistance, until these very sufferings re-educate it to embrace God's

9 See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).
10 Wedgwood, 'Eternal Punishment and Eternal Hope', *Spectator*, 6 July 1878, 858.

love. God and the good are ultimately more powerful and real than evil, and can exist without it.[11]

We struggle to understand this, Wedgwood says, because we are finite. In this embodied life, we experience good merely as the struggle against evil. We aspire to the good, unselfishness, yet in a perpetual struggle against our selfishness. This predisposes us to think good requires evil, and our logical intellects reinforce this assumption. But it is hubris to assume that the limits of our understanding are the limits of reality.

> I doubt whether our '*inability to imagine* the evolution of active good without this factor' – i.e. evil – be not an unsafe basis for any reasoning as to the nature of things. May there not be possibilities in the universe of being which we are unable to imagine?[12]

So we should hold on to the idea that absolute goodness and universal salvation are real, even though this transcends our understanding.

Difficulties about good without evil are hardly the only impediment to belief in the afterlife. Immortality is paradigmatically supernatural: our senses give no evidence of it. So why believe in it? Wedgwood has an intriguing answer. She suggests in 'The Future Life' that we have experience of the next life already, though not sensory evidence. The older we get, the more of the people we have known and loved have died, and we live as much amidst relations with the dead as the living.[13] It may be said we are merely living in a fog of memories. But, she replies, when other people are alive, I don't think my relations with them are merely unfolding in my private mind. I believe in a real relation of two selves. So why assume the relation ceases when the other person dies? She asks rhetorically:

> As an old man turns backward to some loved playmate, snatched away in infancy, whose every existence is unknown now to any one but himself, does he turn towards some real inhabitant of the world of human affection, or to a mere image, void of all reality except that which he bestows upon it in the act of recollection? As some widow turns for awhile from the society of her children that she may revive the fading

11 Erskine, *The Spiritual Order*, esp. p. 70.

12 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 15 February 1885, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file12.

13 Wedgwood, 'The Future Life', *Spectator*, 28 July, 1883, 959.

> image of one towards whom her heart still goes out with a sense of unchanging need, is she turning from actual claimants on her affection to a mere phantom?[14]

If every relation between two selves is supernatural to the extent it connects their non-material selves, then the relation in its supernatural aspect can continue after one person has died. The loss of the material body need not affect the supernatural element of the bond. In that case, the living are already among the dead, and the worlds before and after death interpenetrate. This persistence of the dead may not be detectable to eyes or ears (séances notwithstanding). But it is arrogant to presume that existence runs out where our senses stop.

Similarly, it is arrogant to assume that all knowledge must come through the senses. Wedgwood calls Mill

> a thinker, whose great metaphysical achievement was almost avowedly the obliteration from our mental inventory of all those powers which are supposed to deal with the invisible, [but who made the] confession that the analysis which reduced every other source of apparently ultimate knowledge to a trick of association was checked when we came to that within us which bore witness to a real past; and the concession that in this case we do know what we cannot prove, seems to us a pregnant one.[15]

There are certain things we know not through our senses but immediately: that I am an 'I', that my self is a unity over time, abiding through endless changes of material conditions; that what I remember, I once experienced, and my self has persisted throughout; and that there are other selves with whom I am in relation. On these grounds Wedgwood rejects naturalism; for her, there are other sources of knowledge besides the senses, and our immediate experience attests to a distinct set of realities, including those that make up the supernatural dimension of existence.

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14 Ibid., 960.

15 Wedgwood, 'Relation of Memory to Will', 1122. She's referring to Mill's concession that the mind is 'a series of feelings which is aware of itself as past and future', 'gathered up, as it were, into a single present conception', something his associationist psychological theory could not account for and that remained an 'inexplicable fact'; Mill, *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1865), pp. 212–13. For discussion, see William Mander, 'J. S. Mill's "Psychological Theory" of the Mind', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2023), 513–27.

10.4 Belief and Doubt, Knowledge and Denial

To go further into Wedgwood's conception of knowledge and our non-sensory sources of knowledge, we may start with her long 1879 letter to the *Spectator*, 'Doubting Doubt'. This replies to a previous piece of the same name which in turn responded to William Gladstone, who had proposed subjecting doubt itself to doubt – be it religious doubt, Cartesian doubt, or any other kind of corrosive, excessive doubt. The anonymous author concurred with Gladstone that if the doubter's test of doubt is applied to itself – as it must be if we are to doubt everything – then doubt cancels itself out and we return to the reassuring ground of belief.[16]

It is not surprising that Wedgwood responds to this proposal, since it concerns a double negation that the author thinks leads straight back to a positive. That is not what double negations do, in her view. She denies that there can be such an easy solution to the problem of religious 'doubt', for strictly speaking scientific naturalists do not *doubt* religion, they *deny* its truth.[17] They are confident that religious claims are untrue, saying there is no sensory evidence to warrant making them. We cannot dissolve these people's objections by applying doubt to doubt, because their attitude is not doubt in the first place.

For Wedgwood, doubt is the counter-pole of belief – one may doubt God's existence, one may believe in him, one may do both (as she did at different times), but this polarity is different from *knowledge* and *denial*. 'Belief is the mental act by which we determine to deal with certain objects of thought as realities'; doubt is the mental act of questioning whether these objects are realities.[18] We believe in certain realities such as God in the absence of positive knowledge from the senses; we doubt them because of issues like the problem of evil, not due to a lack of sensory evidence.

Conversely, there are some things we know because our senses supply positive evidence of them (e.g. 'this is a laptop in front of me'); there are other things we deny because we are confident that they cannot exist since the senses supply no evidence of them. But that last is too big a step:

16 Anonymous, 'Doubting Doubt', *Spectator*, 13 December 1879, 1564–65.
17 Wedgwood, 'Doubting Doubt', letter to the *Spectator*, 20 December 1879, 1606.
18 Wedgwood, 'The Future Life', 960.

> 'I heard some one call' is evidence that some one did call. 'I heard no one call,' is evidence either that no one did call, or that his call fell on deaf ears or preoccupied attention. [...] What a man asserts himself to have seen, was there to be seen; [...] what he asserts himself not to have seen, may not have been there, or may have been overlooked by him. Every affirmation thus points towards one result, every negation towards a choice between two.[19]

Thus negation and affirmation are an asymmetrical antithesis. We can be justified in making a positive affirmation about existence on the basis of sensory evidence, but an absence of sensory evidence can never warrant a negation of existence in the same way, because it may instead reflect our limited perceptive or attentive powers.

Her antithesis *belief/doubt* as opposed to *knowledge/denial* looks as if it may map onto *supernatural/natural*. Since we cannot know the supernatural realm on the same perceptual basis as the natural one, the former calls for a different set of attitudes, namely belief and doubt. The fact that we can't sense God's existence with our ears or eyes may at most prove that he is not a part of nature, but it cannot show that he is not a part of supernatural reality (if 'part' is the right word here). The senses are silent about the realm beyond nature – a realm we may not be able to know, but in which we may still believe.

However, lining up the supernatural with belief in this way contradicts other things she says. Many times, she declares that there are supernatural realities that we *know* on a non-evidential basis – such as one's self, one's power of free will, and relations between selves. She does not say that anyone can either believe in or doubt the existence of their own self – to do the latter is to spiral into the madness of an unself. Instead, she says that some supernatural realities, including the self, are known with certainty:

> The most unquestionable realities of this present life [are] not the laws of physical science [... but] certainties which, covering the surface of thought as absolutely as any truth of physical science, penetrate into that world of moral experience [...][20]

19 Wedgwood, 'Doubting Doubt', 1607. See also her letter to her mother on the fallacy of believing that what one knows nothing about does not exist; J. W. to Frances Wedgwood, 3 April 1869, WM 252/15.

20 Wedgwood, 'John M'Leod Campbell', second notice, *Spectator*, 8 September 1877, 1124.

I suggest that we can make Wedgwood's claims consistent by distinguishing between different elements of the supernatural world. One element, my self, I know with immediate certainty just in having first-person experience. I am also certain of my freedom of will, though it is only manifest sporadically. Other elements of the supernatural are known less directly. I do not know the existence of other selves as immediately as my own, and I have to infer to their free will. My relation to God is even less direct.

This suggestion ties in with the following 1871 diary entry by Henrietta Darwin:

> I emboldened myself to discover more of Snow's [i.e., Wedgwood's] creed than I ever have done before. Her faith in God comes entirely from her inner nature – *Now* she can trace him in the character of others – but other than in herself she should be hopeless of finding him first.[21]

This suggests that first we know ourselves (our 'inner nature'), then, from our selves, we can reach to God and to other selves. Therefore we have different epistemic relations to different elements of the supernatural world, which reflect the fact that the self is fractional, part of a greater unity from which it is dislocated yet to which it belongs. This dislocation means that we know the fragments we each are more directly than the wider unity we belong to.

The supernatural realm, then, has elements that we know with certainty on a non-empirical basis, through introspection and first-person lived experience. It also has other elements in which we believe by reaching out from what we know most directly. Some of the supernatural order is known with certainty, other regions of it with belief and concomitantly also doubt. The belief incorporates and builds on the elements that are known with certainty and goes beyond them.

So far, this chapter has brought in several more imperfect antitheses. *Science and faith* are not a perfect antithesis, for faith is not a bare absence of scientific understanding. To see it that way, as being invoked only to fill in what we cannot yet explain scientifically, defines faith only by what

21 'Henrietta Darwin's Diary', 26 March 1871, *Darwin Correspondence Project*, https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/henrietta-darwins-diary. Henrietta continues: 'Free will she has to give up in many regions and would be prepared to give it up entirely'. This seems a misunderstanding, but registers Wedgwood's view that free will is 'often invisible' and that most of what we do is determined.

it is not. In reality, faith has its own contours that do not mirror those of science. *Heaven and hell*, divine hope and punishment, are another imperfect antithesis, for absolute good can exist without evil. In this world, good is a perpetual struggle against evil, but finite experience does not exhaust being. *Belief and doubt* are an imperfect antithesis, because belief incorporates and transcends doubt. *Knowledge* (*affirmation*) *and denial* (*negation*) are also an imperfect antithesis, because affirmation is univocal whereas negation always contains two possibilities.

Furthermore, the pair of antitheses *knowledge/denial* and *belief/doubt* are not symmetrical opposites. Belief stands higher than knowledge, because it incorporates some certain knowledge along with other less certain elements that we commit to treating as realities. This makes belief more complicated, nuanced, and personally intensive than knowledge alone. Doubt stands higher than flat denial too, for doubt is more intense, more alive to complexity and difficulty. Belief is not something negative, clung to for want of real knowledge, and neither is doubt is a mere waystation to full-blooded denial. Rather, belief and doubt register and respond to the fractured character of our existence, and they draw on more of our whole nature as emotional and rational beings. But this is not merely to flip the symmetry and say that knowledge and denial are an absence of belief and doubt. Knowledge and denial are perfectly appropriate as regards the natural perceptible world. There are just two irreducibly different sets of epistemic relations here, appropriate to different subject-matters and domains of existence.

Wedgwood fears that scientific naturalism is flattening out these complexities under a new binary, *truth/ignorance*. She distinguishes it from *truth/falsity*. The latter applies in our everyday social relations. We ought not to deceive or lie to one another; in everyday life, our principal duty in epistemic matters is to refrain from telling falsehoods.[22] Conversely, telling the truth is not always desirable; especially when talking about persons, there is much we should hold back. If we knew everything about one another, every flaw and mean word, every mistake and momentary lapse, social relations would fall apart.[23] We can hold back and maintain a respectful screen of reserve without positively lying. Thus, our primary duty here is not to lie, but there is no correlative

22 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–II', 1641.

23 For her application to the duties of the biographer, see *Teachers*, pp. 228–30.

equal duty to tell the truth. This is another imperfect antithesis, which clusters with the imperfect antithesis of pain and pleasure. We all recoil from pain; we all have a duty to refrain from saying what is false. What has primacy in real life is our orientation away from the bad. There is no equivalent reality, 'pleasure', to which we all gravitate. Neither is there an obligation to tell the truth on a par with the duty to eschew falsehood.

The picture changes in the scientific domain, where the subject matter is not persons but things, and there is a positive and primary duty to discover the truth and push back the frontier of ignorance. This ideal is built into the scientific project.

> So far as man is purely intellectual he desires truth, but it would be a very forced and unnatural way of expressing this to say that he dreads error or ignorance. Ignorance is to him a mere negation, and just so far as his mind becomes wholly intellectual he loses the sense of any difference between ignorance and error.[24]

The central scientific contrast then is *truth/ignorance*, but there is no definite duty to refrain from being ignorant. Rather, the drive to push back the frontier of ignorance arises from the principal duty of finding out the truth. So here ignorance is practically defined solely as the negation of truth, and the urge to eliminate ignorance is only the mirror-image of the overriding pursuit of truth. *Truth/ignorance* is a perfect antithesis, where truth is *A* and ignorance is merely *not-A*. In everyday life, *truth/falsity* is an imperfect antithesis, but in the scientific domain it becomes replaced by a perfect antithesis, *truth/ignorance*.[25]

This substitution is fine as long as it remains within science. The problem occurs when the scientific ideal – pursue the truth at all cost! – invades the rest of life, and then we get undesirable trends such as the impulse to reveal everything about everyone, however damaging to their reputation and however disastrous the impact on the fabric of social relationships.[26] Again, the problem stems from the overextension of science into a universal guide for life.

There is a pattern in Wedgwood's objections to the overextension of

24 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 42.

25 We might have thought that *knowledge*/ignorance was the natural contrast, but Wedgwood stresses *truth*/ignorance instead to bring out the contrast with the everyday antithesis of truth and falsehood.

26 Wedgwood, 'Reserve', *Spectator*, 20 November 1880, 1475–76.

science which, strangely, she never fully develops: that science and its overextension rely on perfect antitheses. *Truth/ignorance*; the reduction of the imperfect *science/faith* antithesis to a falsely perfect antithesis in which faith is seen merely as a lack of scientific knowledge; *pleasure/pain*, a false perfect antithesis imposed upon experience by utilitarian theorists in the endeavour to make moral theory scientific. In this regard, the emphasis on imperfect antithesis is a counter to science.

10.5 Naturalistic Flattening

The supersession of *truth/falsehood* by *truth/ignorance* is by no means Wedgwood's most pressing concern about scientific naturalism. Her wider fear is that a flattening of moral and spiritual experience is coming about in the contemporary social world, just because it is coming to be based on science instead of religion.

Here are some of her myriad worries. Shorn of the belief in free will, the legal and punitive system risks being left like 'artillery without gunpowder'.[27] The educational system, she laments, no longer selects, but only collects, gathering facts: '"One man, one vote" reproduces itself in the world of learning as "one fact, one link", and in a chain all links are or should be equal'.[28] There are no more categorical imperatives, only hypothetical ones: no commandments to do or refrain, only calculations of the consequences of action; no more obedience to a transcendent moral law, only considerations of prudence.[29] All three cases exhibit the same problem: with the abandonment of a supernatural order, key evaluative distinctions disappear – distinctions between behaviour and responsible action, between facts and value-judgements, and between prudential and normative obligations.

It might sound as if Wedgwood is insisting on harsh evaluative distinctions, but she also claims that the naturalistic world is eliminating mercy and forgiveness:

> Including within our moral ideal what we may call the supernatural half of virtue, we have attained a certain elevation in its natural portion which is, we believe, inaccessible to those who see no lofty mountain-peaks

27 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–II', 973.
28 Wedgwood, 'Woman and Democracy', 338.
29 Ibid., 338.

> beyond it. The wonderful difficulty of giving each man that which he deserves is overcome only when we bridge, by what it is no exaggeration to call a moral miracle, the gulf between his consciousness and our own, and read his struggles by the light of our large aims and our miserable achievements.[30]

If I see the gap between my strivings and my achievements, my supernatural ideal and my natural reality, then I can see the same dislocation in others and then I can judge another person to have acted wrongly *and* forgive them, mentally vibrating between justice and forgiveness. Without the supernatural element, we cannot judge – but we cannot forgive either, having no aspiration to relinquish grudges, to miraculously 'let go' of a wrong.

For Wedgwood, naturalistic flattening is a wide-ranging and potentially all-encompassing process. It is erasing the sense of living with the dead, and reducing faith, transfiguration, sin, and forgiveness to causal effects of illusory religious notions. It is eliminating the emotions of guilt, remorse, and conscience. As Wedgwood sees it, science's exaggerated recoil against faith is taking a steamroller to the complexities and possibilities of emotional and moral life.

10.6 Concluding Problems: Phenomenology *versus* History

Very well, we might reply, but what really is the status of these feelings of guilt, sin, remorse, etc.? It is not clear that they correspond to anything real, and perhaps we are better off without them. Life might be flatter without these feelings, but who needs highs and lows? Scientific naturalism may be producing change in our emotions and moral life, but why think it's a change for the worse and not the better?

Wedgwood has what seem initially to be two distinct answers to this question. The first answer is phenomenological, and we can extrapolate it from her foregoing explorations of our moral life. On this answer, the aspiration to moral ideals, and related phenomena like guilt when we have made a choice that falls short of our ideals, and the awareness of being free to make these choices, are inherent structures of our

30 Wedgwood, 'Justice', 1345.

existence as moral agents. Likewise, the supernatural realm is real, we have epistemic relations with it, and we know that we have one foot in the supernatural order and the other in nature. These are truths about the human condition to which ordinary experience bears immediate witness. On this view, naturalism is not erasing experiences that are merely contingent side-effects of living in Christian cultures. It is erasing experiences that are inherent in human existence and that reflect the ambiguity of our being. The erasure is undesirable, then, because people inhabiting a naturalistic culture will inevitably be living at odds with their own experience. They will be forced to make (partial) sense of their lives using a framework that distorts what they are undergoing. Their lives will be diminished as a result.

There is a problem, though, about how naturalism can ever erase experiences and structures that are inherent. Surely if they are inherent, they will come to the surface again, like a bulge in the carpet. In that case, naturalism cannot possibly present as much of a danger as Wedgwood thinks. I believe that this problem pushes her towards her second answer.

On this second answer, if scientific naturalism can erase the experiences of guilt, forgiveness, grace, etc., then that suggests (*contra* answer one) that these experiences are not inherent features of our dislocated existence but are completely embedded in a moral and metaphysical scheme. They presuppose Christianity and cannot continue without it. In that case, we cannot understand our moral life (ideals, self-sacrifice, guilt, aspiration, choice) only by mapping lived experience, as many of Wedgwood's imperfect antithesis essays do. What is needed instead is to examine the moral and metaphysical system that Christianity is (or was). In turn, that means demarcating it from its Roman and Greek antecedents and determining what makes it unique. The phenomenology of moral life needs to become its history.

For instance, Wedgwood says, the Greeks had no concept of forgiveness. 'The Greek at his best would reward the good man and punish the bad man, irrespective of any temptation to do otherwise. That was at least his ideal of life'.[31] There was no idea of rewarding the good and reclaiming the bad, as under Christianity (i.e., justice *and*

31 Wedgwood, 'Justice', 1345.

mercy). By the same token, the Greeks and Romans could not possibly feel remorse or guilt in the post-Christian sense. If a bad man could not be reclaimed, then he could not journey to moral regeneration having admitted his guilt. But what moral emotions did the ancients have instead of remorse and mercy? How did the structure of moral life change when Christianity arrived on the scene? Wedgwood felt increasingly drawn to answer these questions, and towards the second answer to naturalism. Correspondingly, she spent less time mapping imperfect antitheses in everyday moral experience, concentrating more on the antitheses between historical systems of belief. The law of recoil came to the fore.

The problem remains that, on the face of it, the historical response to naturalism conflicts with the phenomenological one. If the structures of moral life are contingent products of Christianity, then it seems they cannot be inherent, and if they are inherent, then it seems they cannot be merely contingent products of Christianity.

We encountered this tension before in regard to Wedgwood's treatment of the self (Chapter 4). Historically, she proposes that the individual self is a modern emergence; but phenomenologically, she takes the self to be a supernatural reality immediately disclosed in first-person experience. In Chapters 4 and 5, I suggested a solution: for Wedgwood, historical development has not been mere change but advancement. Over the course of history we have progressively realised the inherent features that the self always has, but which the ancients used to disavow and deal with in a distorted mode of denial and projection. Beyond the local case of the self, Wedgwood reconciles her phenomenological and historical answers along similar lines: over history, we have progressed towards a better grasp and a more authentic occupation of the real structures of our moral selves. Or so I aim to show in the following three chapters.

11. Romans and Christians

11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I look at Wedgwood's account of the transition from the Roman world to Christianity, which for her was the fundamental historical change revealing what is distinctive about the Christian worldview. In her account of the early anti-Christian author Celsus (11.2), she argues that the Greeks and Romans felt contempt for the lowly, whereas Christians feel sympathy for the lowly; and that the ancients recognised either spirit (Platonism) or matter (Epicureanism) but not our dislocation between spirit and matter, as Christianity does.

Writing about Virgil (11.3), she identifies further antitheses between the ancient and post-Christian worldviews: allegiance *versus* loyalty, regret *versus* remorse, submission *versus* rebellion, piety *versus* pity. In all cases, Christianity differs by recognising the dislocation between ideals and reality, whereas the Roman outlook collapses ideals and reality together. The antithesis is imperfect, because Christianity tracks an uneven moral course both lower *and* higher than the flatter Roman path, like woman compared with man.

For Wedgwood, Christianity is liberatory; it emancipates slaves and women and recognises the inviolable moral claim and worth of each individual (11.4). Yet this outlook is not the perfect antithesis of the Roman empire, but shares one of its key presuppositions, the separateness of the individual. Christianity incorporates part of the world it rejects. In this way, imperfect antithesis makes possible historical learning and progression. These concepts tie together the phenomenological and historical sides of Wedgwood's thought (11.5).

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11.2 The First Opponent of Christianity

In an 1881 essay on Plutarch in the *Contemporary Review*, Wedgwood announces:

> No period of history merits a more patient and earnest study than that which intervenes between the death of Christ and the final triumph of Christianity over heathenism. It is not on any concession to the truth of the triumphant faith that we would base the claim. Those who regard the victory as that of a hurtful superstition must agree with those who regard it as the daybreak, that History knows no change of greater importance. For unquestionably it has transformed that which is deepest in man, giving new goals to admiration and desire, new points of recoil to indignation and repentance, and like some mighty upheaval of the soil, sending the streams of Duty into new channels, and in some instances even inverting their direction.[1]

This statement explains her motivations for examining how moral ideals transformed in the Roman empire with the birth of Christianity. For her, this is the pivotal era of moral change. For Christians to understand their form of moral life and where it came from, this is the time and place to look.

One of her studies of this transition is 'The First Opponent of Christianity', an 1878 essay responding to James Anthony Froude's article 'Origen and Celsus'. Froude in turn was responding to the third-century work *Contra Celsum*, in which the Church father Origen countered objections to Christianity made by Celsus.[2] Celsus, whose *True Word* is known only via Origen's critique, was according to Froude (and Origen) 'an Epicurean in opinion and belief'. For Froude, Celsus therefore anticipated modern empiricism, materialism, and agnosticism.[3]

Wedgwood first tackles who Celsus was: *not* an Epicurean, she contends. Origen confused the Celsus he argued against with another Celsus who was an Epicurean.[4] The Celsus at issue was in fact a Platonist,

1 Wedgwood, 'Plutarch and the Unconscious Christianity of the First Two Centuries', *Contemporary Review* 39 (January 1881), 45.

2 Froude, 'Origen and Celsus', *Fraser's Magazine* 17 (February 1878), 142–67. See also Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953). English translations had existed since at least the seventeenth century.

3 Froude, 'Origen', 150.

4 Wedgwood, 'The First Opponent of Christianity', *Spectator*, 30 March 1878, 409.

Wedgwood says, against Froude, but in agreement with subsequent scholarship.[5] She concurs with Froude that Epicureanism anticipates modern materialism and agnosticism – but Celsus does not.

Nor should we assume that the second century A.D. was intellectually continuous with the modern world of scientific naturalism and religious denial. Far from it: the Roman empire was awash with piety, mysticism, and superstitious cults, a milieu remote from modern materialism. To an Epicurean, Christianity would have been of no great significance, not worth refuting, just one deluded cult among others. But for a Platonist, like Celsus, it was very different: Christianity looked like a worrisome distortion of the Platonic truth. Where Christianity was true, it was diluted Platonism; where it deviated from Platonism, it was false, and contaminated the studied pursuit of serene wisdom with thoughtlessness and imbecility. It was a dangerous admixture, 'divided between what was superfluous and what was supremely hurtful'.[6]

Celsus, she adds, felt like the elder brother of the prodigal son. A man of his time, he could not understand the Christian attitude of 'tenderness for the sinner, the fool, and the pauper'.[7]

> It needs a great effort of imagination to realise the astonishment with which the aristocratic spirit of the old world must have recoiled before a faith which would seem, and not altogether untruly, to take under its especial patronage the virtues of the slave.[8]

We can barely think ourselves back into the ancient 'contempt for lowliness', she says, for however much we reject Christianity, we remain its moral heirs on this key point.

Thus, Celsus attacked Christianity from a totally opposite viewpoint to modern scientific naturalists, and in two respects. First, he took the side of aristocratic contempt for the lowly, contrary to our modern 'low estimate of self'[9] – an estimate that scientists accept no less than theists, with their belief in slow, careful, patient intellectual labour, exemplified by Charles Darwin's research into evolution. Second, Celsus took the

5 See Harold Tarrant, 'Origen's "Celsus": Questions of Identity', *Religions* 15, no. 6 (2024), 715, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060715
6 Wedgwood, 'Opponent', 409.
7 Ibid., 410.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.

side of eternal spiritual reality, not materialism. As a Platonist, he held to the cleavage of eternal *versus* temporal, ideas *versus* matter, the intellect *versus* the senses. Unlike scientific naturalists, he absolutely believed in the supernatural.

However, she concludes, Platonism and Epicureanism agree on one thing – they cannot understand the 'antithesis of sin and righteousness which lies at the root of Christianity'.[10] Materialists, including Epicureans, believe in invariable sequences of force, which leave no room for deliverance from sin or aspirations to self-sacrifice. Instead 'the modern man of science' (the present-day version of an Epicurean) merely explains 'the influences which have affected character'.[11] There can be no breaks in the chain of force, on their view. For Platonists too, albeit from the opposite direction, 'the antithesis of a kingdom of Heaven and a kingdom which is opposed to it must seem a radical misconception of the true good'.[12] Christians treat hatred, envy, resentment – the 'opposed kingdom' – as real spiritual phenomena, just like love, pity, or forgiveness. They allow that the bad is real. Conversely, for a Platonist, reality lies beyond these transitory antitheses and emotional fluctuations, which are mere appearances that one must transcend to reach serene repose, on the far side of emotional turmoil.

'And thus the truths of the intellect once hid the truths of the spirit, just as the truths of the senses do in our day'.[13] Modern naturalism misses the dislocated character of the human spirit from *below* – it sees only physical sequences. Ancient supernaturalism (Platonism) misses the dislocation of spirit from *above* – it sees only eternal ideas. Both outlooks regard only one side of the matter/spirit antithesis as real. Christianity acknowledges both.

Overall, against Froude, Wedgwood insists how differently Celsus saw things from any modern scientific naturalist. This matters partly because we need to capture the specificity of the ancients to grasp what Christianity recoiled against and how that recoil has shaped Christianity and those who inherit it. What particularly comes to light here is that the ancients believed in a natural aristocracy and that treating people

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

according to the kind of person they are – slave, noble, artisan, etc. – was right and best for everyone. Christianity rejected these beliefs and affirmed the moral equality of all individuals. The moderns inherit this belief from Christianity; whether they profess to be theists or atheists, their basic moral assumptions remain a Christian inheritance.

11.3 Virgil Between Two Worlds

In her 1877 essay 'Virgil, as a Link between the Ancient and Modern World' (occasioned by a study by the classicist William Young Sellar), Wedgwood argues that Virgil anticipated Christianity in certain respects, while remaining a Roman in others.[14] Her account illuminates some further ways in which the Roman worldview was radically unlike the Christian one.

For Wedgwood, Virgil foreshadows Christianity above all with his sympathetic portrayal of Dido, which she sees as the first and only treatment of romantic love in ancient literature. We find no sentimental love in the *Iliad*, she says, and Orestes has none of Hamlet's turbulent romantic feelings. But Virgil is 'more than half a modern', a gentle, even feminine writer.[15] These claims might seem overstated: doesn't Medea feel romantic love for Jason? But arguably that is only doomed erotic obsession. Plausibly, the story of Dido and Aeneas *is* a turning point, because their feelings are mutual, intense, and conflicted. And, above all, their story is central to the *Aeneid*, revealing the fundamental shape of Roman power. This moving of love from margins to centre is fundamentally new.

Virgil's sympathy with Dido does not lead him to oppose or criticise Roman imperial power. He feels sorry for her, but he sees Aeneas's founding of Rome as inevitable, the outworking of fate. There is a grand scheme of things, an order, to which all must submit. 'His will is wholly with the conquerors, but his sympathy is with the vanquished'.[16] Virgil endorses Roman destiny – Aeneas must leave Dido to found Rome – but

14 Sellar, *The Roman Poets of the Augustan Age: Virgil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1877).

15 Wedgwood, 'Virgil, as a Link between the Ancient and Modern Worlds', *Contemporary Review* 30 (June 1877), 211, 199.

16 Ibid., 213. On Aeneas and Dido, see Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), book 4.

Virgil is not cold about it, and lingers poignantly over Dido's suicide. For Wedgwood, this sympathy with the victims differentiates Virgil from the ancients, while his acceptance that there is no alternative to Rome differentiates him from the moderns. He straddles two ethical worlds.

Modern loyalty, Wedgwood says, is fundamentally unlike Virgil's attitude to Rome. Today, one is loyal to a ruler or a dynasty, a friend or father, despite their faults, and only because of these faults is there a question of loyalty ('despite ...' is intrinsic). 'Our word *legal* comes straight from the Latin, its twin brother, *loyal*, through the French. Loyalty began to exist with the modern world', by way of medieval French romance.[17] Loyalty combines personal affection with reverence for law, but what further distinguishes it is an element of fragility. 'All modern loyalty [...] is a sad struggle with the sense of incompleteness'.[18] She compares loyalty to Gothic architecture with its endless striving. To be loyal to someone is to aspire through them to their ideal better self that they embody only imperfectly. Consider for example the loyalty of Royalists to Charles I: they were faithful to the ideal of kingship he represented, despite his actual political failings.

Despite seeing loyalty as modern – or, at least, post-Christian, coming out of the medieval world – Wedgwood says Virgil was loyal to his patron Augustus. Here Virgil was again adopting a modern attitude; he was a man partially out of his time. Yet this loyalty was only a fugitive note within an essentially different attitude: reverence for the emperor as the symbol of the 'universal dominion' to which everyone had to submit, and which was simply not a proper subject of moral judgement.[19] Like the gods, and fate, the emperor must just be obeyed: 'It is a real allegiance, but an allegiance which does not imply anything of the nature of moral approbation'.[20] There is no sense that Virgil holds on to a moral ideal that Augustus incompletely personifies. The emperor represents actual power, what is and must be, not what might or could be.

Much of Wedgwood's concern in this essay is to pin down this elusive attitude of reverent submission. A key factor is that Roman allegiance was to an empire both personal (personified in the emperor) and impersonal

17 Wedgwood, 'Virgil', 202.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 205.
20 Ibid., 207.

(the eternal glory of Rome). Fate was similarly ambiguous, combining something of a personal will and something of an impersonal order.

> The new ideal of Roman dominion, as a power binding the world in a framework of firm and coherent law, is indirectly manifest in another idea which in its fullest development belongs mainly to the modern world – the Order of Nature. There is the same hesitation between the ideas of personal and impersonal power, the same latent analogy – the irresistible, mysterious, inexorable imperium of Rome. 'Thus Nature at once imposed these laws, these eternal ordinances' [quoting Virgil's *Georgics*].[21]

This is perhaps the moment to point out that consistently, almost obsessively, Wedgwood links the 'order of nature' to Lucretius, whom she hails as the true ancient ancestor of evolutionary theorists and modern materialists, 'the only great speculative genius of Rome'.[22] He got there first with natural selection, saying (in her translation):

> We see that many conditions are necessary in order that a race should be perpetuated, and among all the animals which have existed [... some] have perished from being unprovided with any peculiar advantage in this struggle for existence.[23]

However, she observes, Lucretius advanced this idea on a speculative basis, very different from modern materialism which proceeds empirically. For Lucretius, the order of nature was a metaphysical construct, formed through the guiding analogy with the Roman empire. He was no empiricist, and instead his order of nature was an idea at once political and cosmological. So even he prefigured modern materialism only partially. Consequently, she tells us, when she showed Lucretius to Darwin he took no interest: he didn't see Lucretius as a co-worker.[24]

To return to Virgil, his imperial allegiance meant that his sympathy for Dido was blended with resignation. There could be no better outcome for her, but, at least, what befell her and Rome's other victims was part of an ordered scheme:

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21 Ibid., 208.

22 Wedgwood, 'Natural and Supernatural', 1341.

23 Ibid., 1341, translating Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* V.850-60. Compare Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), p. 160.

24 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 167–68.

> That blending of the idea of unconscious Law and conscious will which we find in the 'fate' of Virgil precludes any restless effort to change the will which frustrates man's aims and crushes his hopes.[25]

To Wedgwood, this resigned attitude is distinctly Roman and not Christian. We might object that it looks rather like the Christian view that we must endure the suffering ordained in God's plan. She disagrees. God's will is good, so suffering and evil are intractable problems, and to 'solve' them in thought (e.g., by attributing them to God's plan) is to acquiesce in what ought never to be accepted. She insists that at its core, Christianity protests against any suffering, especially that of the downtrodden, and holds that whenever a person makes someone else suffer, we must put up resistance. The Christian spirit, she says, sides with Prometheus, not with Zeus or his laws.[26] Because Christian sympathy *and* will are with the vanquished, the attitude is unequivocal, unlike Virgil.

At the same time, Virgil's equivocation distinguished him from a mainstream Roman; he was no champion of *Vae victis*. He was halfway towards Christianity, feeling pity for the weak and those below, but conjoined with reverent piety for powers above, a conjunction distilled in *pietas*. The word and its emotional meaning have since 'bifurcated in its romance stage', and the division has yielded *pity*, which feels downwards, whereas before Virgil the feeling was *piety* alone, reverence directed upwards towards political or cosmic power, as found in Homer and Plato.[27] Unlike them, Virgil hears 'the claim of weakness, of misfortune' as well – although not yet separate from reverential awe towards the fated power bearing everything down before it.[28]

Wedgwood has highlighted several antitheses separating the Romans from the Christians and their modern heirs: allegiance *versus* loyalty; regret *versus* remorse; resignation *versus* rebellion; piety *versus* pity; contempt for the lowly *versus* sympathy and will for the lowly. They are imperfect antitheses, as we can immediately see from the way the sets of terms are not pure opposites but also have a degree of emotional overlap (resignation, after all, harbours a note of 'this is rather unsatisfactory',

25 Wedgwood, 'Virgil', 214.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 215.
28 Ibid.

regret 'this is a shame', etc.).

But let's begin with the side of antithesis. Allegiance is non-moral, whereas loyalty involves a kind of fractured idealisation. Regret is similarly non-moral, whereas remorse involves reference to ideals one has failed. The same goes for resignation, which is non-moral, *versus* rebellion, which appeals to ideals that are being violated. Piety reveres power above, endorsing what is, while pity hears claims from below, pressing the demand of what ought to be but is not yet. The Christian and post-Christian worldview tracks a gap between ideals and reality which the Roman outlook does not admit.

Yet there is also overlap. Because the Roman outlook conflates ideal with reality, it imports an ideal dimension into reality, which is manifest as the reverent quality of submission, the sigh of regret, the belief that hierarchy is actively good. It is this ideal dimension that Christianity takes further and filters out from reality to serve as a standard for assessing it. Hence, Christianity does not totally repudiate everything about Rome, but learns from it and goes further. This overlap makes the antithesis imperfect, and it simultaneously makes Christianity an advancement upon the Roman worldview.

11.4 Liberation Christianity

Wedgwood maintains that the ancients before Virgil could not have understood the feeling of pity for the weak and downtrodden. Nowadays, we can scarcely understand their contempt, because compassion has penetrated our every fibre:

> For eighteen hundred years the lesson of compassion, of forgiveness, of consideration for the weak, has been a part of the ideal of civilization; it has penetrated every fibre of our moral being, and passed, by long inheritance, into a condition of life we can as little dispense with in imagination as we can with the atmosphere around us.[29]

The lesson is upheld even by naturalistic thinkers who repudiate Christianity. They may not notice that they are breathing its atmosphere, but only because they are too used to compassion to notice it. Any scientist who insists that studying nature will reduce human suffering by finding

29 Ibid., 217.

cures for disease and misery is still in Christianity's emotional grip.

For Wedgwood, then, Christianity is the religion of sympathy for the sufferings of the weak, the rejected, the oppressed. It is a slave morality, in a good way. It enjoins resistance to oppression; it extols romantic love. It sees the gap between ideals and achievements, and it refuses to give up on the ideals, and insists that reality needs to be remade, over and over, in pursuit of them.

Readers may find this an idealised account of Christianity as pro-resistance, anti-oppression, on the side of the weak. Hasn't the Church constantly sided with oppression? Wasn't the medieval Church a bastion of power and corruption to rival the Roman empire? Wedgwood agrees, and she criticises much of institutionalised Christendom. But she thinks that the criticisms themselves testify to the hold of Christian ideals, even if people don't notice it. When we criticise the Church for oppressing the marginalised, we are still committed to Christian ideals of sympathy with the oppressed. We have just forgotten that Christianity is the source of these ideals. We are criticising Christianity by its own standard without noticing it.

To motivate Wedgwood's view of Christianity a little more, let's look at some of her other claims about the transition from Rome to Christianity. In her Plutarch essay, she reiterates that the Roman ethos was 'reverential submission to superior and beneficent power'.[30] This differed from the patriotic devotion of the Greeks, which rested on individuals being nothing outside the corporate whole. For the Greeks, 'man had no inherent, indefeasible rightness, apart from his membership of a city'.[31] That view survived into the Roman Republic, but not the Empire. Now the individual was set free into independent existence for the first time. That changed their relation to the political unity, which was no longer membership in an organic whole but was now submission, subjection to an overarching and overpowering order. This might seem a change for the worse. But she argues that, though not unmixed, it was a gain on the whole, and crucially because of its transformative effects for slavery.

To understand ancient Greek slavery, Wedgwood always highlights a statement of Aristotle's:

30 Wedgwood, 'Plutarch', 48.
31 Ibid., 46.

> There is a sentence in his work on Politics which gathers up into a few words the whole mighty revolution that separates his nation from ours. 'The artisan,' he says, 'only partakes of virtue so far as he partakes of slavery.' It would not be difficult to fit that sentence for a modern work on Politics by simply inverting it. Say that the artisan only partakes of virtue so far as he is emancipated from any remains of slavery, and you put an unquestioned truth in an exaggerated form.[32]

For us, slavery is the epitome of evil, and anyone who is involved in it is either actively vicious (the slave-owner) or dragged down into vice (the slave). The only virtuous attitude is absolute resistance. For Aristotle, however, virtue meant political participation, so an artisan could share in virtue only to the extent that – like a slave – he served another person who was a free citizen.[33] This ideal of corporate unity was therefore inseparable from the acceptance of slavery, through the idea that everyone is defined by their organic place in the social whole, be it as citizen, slave, artisan, etc. Only after the ancient republics ended could the idea dawn that individuals are invested with 'sacred claims and inalienable rights' – and that we are *all* such individuals, just because we are fundamentally separate beings rather than being defined by our organic social roles.[34] The poorest and weakest could now attain virtue directly, in their own right, and with it they acquired an inviolable moral claim. That included the claim not to be enslaved but to be set free to lead a virtuous life.

How are such developments 'not wholly unmixed'?[35] For Wedgwood, the losses are that we can never again enjoy the unquestioned patriotism of the Greeks; and the Greek city-state was a complete whole, like the Greek temple. Christians aspire, and reality always falls short, whereas the Greek ideal was fully present in the world. This made the free Greek life joyful, unlike the earnest, arduous strivings of a Christian pilgrim. For a Christian, things can always be better; for the Greeks, they were as good as they could ever be. That was a source of celebration – but also a

32 Ibid., 45.

33 In modern translation: 'A slave shares his master's life, whereas a vulgar craftsman is at a greater remove, and virtue pertains to him to just the extent that slavery does'; Aristotle, *Politics* I.13.1260a-b, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), p. 24. Reeve clarifies: 'a vulgar craftsman [*banausos*] is a free man who shares in virtue to the extent that he is a limited slave still to some extent under the authority of a master' (p. 260).

34 Wedgwood, 'Plutarch', 46.

35 Ibid.

limitation, and the latter, for Wedgwood, is ultimately more important.

So for her, the same developments that brought imperial Rome into being, with its defining attitude of reverential submission, also created the conditions in which Christianity arose and turned against the same reverential submission. The Roman empire recoiled against the Greek *polis* and the Christian liberation ethos recoiled against Rome. But the recoil was not total, for there was a strand in the Roman world to which Christianity remained committed: the individual's independence of social ties. The very same individualistic element that Christianity shared with Rome underpinned its protest against Rome's oppression of independent individuals. In this respect, the recoil was ambivalent.

As we already know, Wedgwood further maintains that Christianity is the religion of woman. It upholds feminine virtues, and so it has ultimately led to women's emancipation:

> The liberation of the slave, the elevation of the degraded, the concession of rights to the lowly, are at once an expression of all that side of excellence which is truly womanly, and a portion of the very process which has resulted in the emancipation of woman herself.[36]

This might look like a symmetrical negation of the ancients. They valued heroic strength, military valour, patriotism, and manly courage; the Christians valued meekness, weakness, tenderness, and femininity. Even here, though, Wedgwood is actually pushing a different view. She holds that the ancients saw only one hemisphere of virtue, the masculine and warrior-citizenly side.[37] That doesn't mean that we, too, see only one hemisphere – the opposite side, the meek and feminine one. She thinks we are closer to seeing the whole of virtue, feminine virtues *and* masculine ones. She remarks in a letter:

> I have been reading Cicero on Friendship, and it strikes me afresh, what I have always thought – how completely the woman is the discovery of these later ages. I feel in reading that sort of thing as if I were going back to a mere man's world, and it seems to me less than half the world, as if the relation between the two more than doubled the world of each.[38]

36 Wedgwood, 'Age of Woman', 1085.

37 Ibid. 'Even to a sympathetic and humane citizen of old Rome […] one hemisphere of goodness was as much shrouded from his eyes as one hemisphere of the moon' (*Teachers*, p. 407).

38 J. W. to Emelia Gurney, 3 May 1876, in Gurney, ed., *Letters*, p. 171.

The implication is that we now recognise two sets of virtues and that the relations between them 'more than double' each set. Masculine citizenly virtues do not disappear altogether, but they are softened by their combination with feminine virtues and assume the new meaning of civic participation and co-operative concern for the public good. We lose something in this transition, but it is outweighed by what we gain. Once more, we are tracking a richer, more complex, more multi-faceted moral course than the ancients, who collapsed values into a single axis of warrior-citizenship.

However, feminine meekness and mildness sound quite unlike Promethean resistance, and yet Wedgwood puts feminine meekness together with upholding the claims of the lowly and demanding the liberation of slaves. I think we can understand this equation, though, and that it is not a contradiction. For her, we most completely resist oppressive power by not sinking to its level and instead defending the inviolable moral claim of every individual non-violently. Turning the other cheek does not express submission but the most complete resistance to the striker's violent way of life.

11.5 How Phenomenology and History Combine through Imperfect Antithesis

From Wedgwood's analyses of Rome and Christianity, we can see in outline how she solves the tension between her phenomenological and historical responses to naturalism. For her, there was not merely change from Rome to Christianity, but an advancement in which we have come to realise better the structures inherent in our moral condition. The imperfect antitheses between Rome and Christianity, in which the latter both rejects the former and yet contains and develops certain aspects of it, mean that Christianity contains more than Rome: more complexity, more development, a richer view of life. Things have been lost, but the overall gain is greater.

Christianity contains more than Rome partly because it takes over certain key presuppositions of the Roman worldview, namely the individual's detachment from corporate social membership. And, above all, Christianity separates out reality and ideal, which Rome compacted together. This is an advancement because ideals and reality truly are distinct dimensions of existence – the supernatural and the natural – and

they are distorted when compressed together. Indeed, their distinction was partially present, dimly foreshadowed, in the very fact that Roman submission to power was reverent. Yet the distinction was simultaneously denied, insofar as the reverence contained no moral judgement, only a conviction that there was no alternative to the imperium.

How does this solve the phenomenology/history tension? Recall that the tension is between the views that (i) certain structures of our moral life are inherent and (ii) these structures result from Christianity as a historically contingent metaphysical scheme. Wedgwood's solution is that Christianity has a history (of course), emerging in recoil from Rome; but Christianity also apprehends and realises the intrinsic structures of moral life better than previous outlooks. It better realises our dislocation between ideals and reality and the gap between these two dimensions of existence. It better grasps our fractured unity, the separateness of the self and the fragmented relations amongst *I*, *you*, and *we*. Christianity's deeper grasp of what our existence is truly like marks its progression beyond Rome.

Wedgwood's conception of how this advancement happens relies on imperfect antithesis. When Christianity recoils against Rome, it does not perfectly negate everything about Rome; instead it incorporates elements already present in Rome, while developing and transforming them by combining them with new ideas. Christianity also unfolds ideas that were compressed together in the Roman outlook. This uneven, conflicted, entangled recoil remains dependent on what it recoils from. This is precisely what enables Christianity to learn from Rome and go further. If history moved by perfect antithesis, Christianity would have wiped away everything about Rome, and then there would have been no moral learning process: no sifting true from false strands in the older outlook, no explicating what was implicit or unpacking what was compressed, no building-on and going further. Instead there would have been simple negation and a new historical stage that started from ground zero. But in fact: 'Antagonism is never a blank recoil. No stage of thought, in the progress of humanity, can be a mere unsaying of what has gone before'.[39] By virtue of imperfect antithesis, we learn from what went before, and thereby advance over time to better comprehend, realise, and live the structures that our existence has intrinsically.

39 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 461.

12. Ancients and Moderns

12.1 Introduction

This chapter continues to look at how Wedgwood traces the recoil of Christianity against the ancients. First, I examine her account of shame (12.2). She argues the ancients lacked this emotion, and that neither Greek *aidōs* nor Latin *verecundia* were identical to modern moral shame, which presupposes the Christian dislocation of ideals and reality. Against those who see shame as a harmful and wounding emotion, Wedgwood regards the acquisition of shame as a moral gain, corresponding to the inviolable moral dignity of each individual.

Then I return to slavery, purity, and universal humanity (12.3). Wedgwood maintains that ancient society was intrinsically hierarchical and based on slavery. It did not recognise purity, the key Christian and feminine virtue. When the Romans recognised a universal humanity, it was merely in a thin sense of shared civic membership, not the inherent worth of all individuals. She further stresses the difference between the ancient Greek corporate whole and the modern individual with their psychical depths and interior conflicts (12.4).

These contrasts between ancients and moderns can almost look like perfect antitheses, but on closer inspection they remain imperfect (12.5). This, again, is tied to how history has been a process of moral and metaphysical learning. I highlight Wedgwood's view on this using a brief contrast with Nietzsche's critique of Christianity (12.6).

12.2 Shame and Dignity

While helping Darwin with his *Expression of the Emotions*, Wedgwood became intrigued by whether the ancients felt shame. She argued not,

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and that shame was a later invention. She wrote to her uncle:

> A passage from Seneca's Letters, which seems to me to establish the fact that hiding the face, as a sign of shame, was not a classical gesture. (Translation) 'Players who imitate the effect of various passions, imitate shame in this manner— they hang their heads lower their words, fix their eyes on the ground & keep them lowered, but they are unable to blush— this can neither be prevented, nor done at will' Sen. Ep. 11. 5.[1]

Strangely, on the face of it the letter says the opposite of what she claims. Seneca describes how actors imitate shame, suggesting shame *was* known to the Romans. However, the key word is *verecundia* (Wedgwood gave the Latin – '*hoc indicio imitantur verecundiam*'). *Verecundia* does not map exactly onto modern shame. Its meaning falls somewhere between modesty, reserve, restraint, and knowing one's place. '*Verecundia*', explains Robert Kaster, 'was the art of knowing your proper place in every social transaction and basing your behaviour on that knowledge'.[2] It was socially situated propriety, rather than deep inward self-condemnation.

This is Wedgwood's point: ancient actors imitated the behaviour corresponding to a now-lost emotion, *verecundia*, which was public, external, and social. It was the visible restraint suitable for a person's social standing. This was not yet modern shame, the product of the self's inner struggle against its own forces. The Romans could not feel this (according to Wedgwood), as they did not yet believe in one's free will to aim for moral ideals and fall short, leading to the feeling of having let oneself down, betrayed one's ideals, and being ashamed about it. Having absorbed the heritage of Christianity and modern individualism, we cover our faces in shame to hide our inner struggles – because we *have* inner struggles, they are deeply private, and we want to keep them that way.

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1 J. W. to Charles Darwin, [1867-72], DCP-LETT-7062. The source is Seneca's letter 11 'On the Blush of Modesty': 'Actors in the theater, who imitate the emotions, [...] imitate bashfulness by hanging their heads, lowering their voices, and keeping their eyes fixed and rooted upon the ground. They cannot, however, muster a blush; for the blush cannot be prevented or acquired'; *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard Gummere, 3 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1925), I, 63.

2 Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 16. As he discusses, the Romans also had *pudor*, perhaps closer to shame, but still outward-oriented, 'the belief that I am being seen (or risk being seen) in terms that discredit me' (p. 32).

Wedgwood wrote to her cousin Henrietta Litchfield (née Darwin) with further intelligence for her uncle.

> I don't think a Greek or Roman would have known the feeling we meant by shame. The nearest approach to it I can remember is Paris's answer to Hector's reproach but that is a mere half confession that he is not so manly as might be and has not the faintest approach to emotion in it. Thersites weeps when Ulysses taunts him but he does not cover his face. I think the emotion of shame is wrapped up with our modern sense of personal dignity of which the ancients had no conception – the two things seem to me poles of the same magnet.[3]

In the *Iliad*, Hector reproaches Paris for hanging back from the battle. Paris accepts the criticism, admitting he had given way to sorrow, and proposing to get immediately back to fighting.[4] He shows no emotion: no blushing, no downcast eyes. There isn't the inner moral turmoil we would see if he was a George Eliot character. He simply swings into corrective action, not going through any haunting realisation that he has betrayed his own inner ideal of manhood.

Again in the *Iliad*, Thersites is a common soldier who dares to criticise the military leaders. Odysseus rebukes him and hits him across the back and shoulders. Thersites 'doubled over, and a round tear dropped from him [...] and he sat down again, frightened, in pain, and looking helplessly about wiped off the tear-drops'.[5] There is no sign he tried to *hide* his tearfulness or pain. He has been publicly humiliated, pushed back into his place, but he does not try to preserve any shreds of dignity, for no-one believes he has any inviolable personal dignity to begin with. His defeat is social, not personal; the horizon is one of honour and disgrace, commanders and followers, heroes and low-born.

This was not all bad. Thersites had no sense of his inherent worth and dignity, but therefore he could not feel his beating to be the deep personal violation and degradation it would be to a modern. He could not be cast down as low as a modern, because he could never aspire to be anything more than he is, a low-born outsider.[6]

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3 J. W. to H. E. Litchfield, [1867-72], DCP-LETT-7059.

4 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 161–62, lines 325–42.

5 Ibid., p. 83, lines 266–69.

6 'We must never think of the cruelties of antiquity as if those who inflicted them were as bad as we should be if we did anything of the kind. Napoleon's was a far

All the same, Wedgwood affirms the vast moral gain made by acquiring shame. Shame is a 'pole of the same magnet' as personal dignity, the inviolable sense of one's inherent worth. This might sound surprising in the twenty-first century, when we often consider shame harmful and destructive of self-worth. Some popular writers advocate getting rid of shame because it wounds our dignity.[7] Wedgwood would have thought this incoherent: shame is not the enemy of dignity but its correlative pole. If I believe in my inherent worth, and my capacity to act morally, then I cannot avoid feeling shame if I judge that I have fallen short, as I am often bound to do. The loss is that modern humiliation is infinitely more internally wounding than it was to Thersites. Yet the gain is greater, for our inner moral life is enriched and everyone now has value and dignity. A modern Thersites would suffer more, but grow more, and probably embark on a self-transforming journey leading him to surpass Odysseus and Agamemnon in self-sacrificing heroism, rather like Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones*.

Wedgwood's position may be disputed. *Aidōs* is usually translated as shame, and it had a place in Greek culture, including in Aristotle's ethics.[8] Martha Nussbaum, for one, has put forward a Greek and objective account of shame, as being rightly felt when an agent knows they are failing to realise recognised human excellences or have been engaging in degrading activities.[9] On this view, shame is a rational emotion grounded in an objective ethical standard. It is neither merely social, nor subjective, but objective.

I believe Wedgwood would still say this is not shame proper, and

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more cruel nature than Caesar's, but Napoleon could not have cut off the hands of a whole garrison and left them in that miserable condition, as Caesar did. He durst not have raised against himself the indignation of the civilized world, which such an action from Caesar did not raise. The whole moral standard of our day is formed under an attention to individual need that necessarily changes the very character of duty' (Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 296). She notes her rare moment of agreement with Mill on this point: see Mill, 'Civilization', *London and Westminster Review* 3 (April 1836), 12.

7 See, e.g., Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Avery, 2015).

8 *Aidōs* doesn't cover quite the same ground as *verecundia*. Like the latter, *aidōs* is tied to social decorum, but also has a wider religious and existential range; see '*Aidōs, n.*', *Oxford English Dictionary*. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 4, ch. 9, secs. 1128b, lines 10-30.

9 Nussbaum, 'Shame, Separateness, and Political Unity', in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), p. 403.

that the feeling of having fallen short of a public standard is closer to disgrace or dishonour. True shame is the inward-facing feeling that I have fallen short of what I aspired to be, my subjective personal ideal, even if nobody else knows it. And they should *not* really know about this level of my interior life, which rightly belongs behind a screen of reserve, protected by the hands that cover the face. This deeply private feeling co-exists with the transcendence of our moral ideals and our personal commitment to them. Shame belongs to a world where there is a dislocation between ideals and reality, not a world of impersonal and objective public standards. Wedgwood would hold apart *aidōs*, *verecundia*, and shame, and say that eliding them disguises the heritage of Christianity and its moral gains.

12.3 Slavery, Purity, and Humanity

Earlier, I noted the great weight Wedgwood places on Aristotle's statement 'The artisan only partakes of virtue so far as he partakes of slavery' (in her translation).[10] The claim is important because the attitude it expresses is remote. Today we can scarcely understand how slavery could be a source of virtue. And, indeed, for Aristotle and the Greeks, only the free-born citizens could exhibit virtue. But for that very reason, refracted virtue fell onto others just so far as they were organically linked with the citizens, by being their slaves, wives, or those whose manual and craft work supported the citizens.[11] Slavery went with virtue because there were necessarily and rightly masters and slaves, and emancipating slaves would have deprived them of the rightful direction and control that was their only way of achieving virtue indirectly.

> Ancient society was essentially unequal; liberty meant dominion. The relation of master and slave, separating the social world by a deep chasm which kindness may have bridged, but which it was never dreamt that justice would fill, was the type, at least in the Roman world, of almost all the relations which existed between human beings. All the important relations of life were unmutual. The duties involved were correlative, not common. Neither the son nor the wife had rights against the husband and father; their right attitude was submission, his was a just and temperate

10 Wedgwood, 'Plutarch', 45.
11 Ibid., 45–46.

> use of authority. Obedience was the right thing for the majority, and a man no sooner ceased to obey than he was at liberty to command.[12]

This made the ancient view of liberty very different from ours. She notes that according to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the free members of the household have the least liberty: 'as in a household, it is *the free who are least able* to do as they like, but most of their work is cut out for them, while slaves and domestic animals […] are a good deal left to their own fancy'.[13] She says it is tempting for us to correct what we see as a paradox and say the slaves had the least liberty, as Thomas Taylor does in his translation of Aristotle.[14] We should refrain. 'We think our readers will feel the paradox more in the spirit of a great teacher than the platitude'.[15] The meaning of the paradox, in any case, is that the Greeks did not think 'doing what one likes' was liberty worthy of the name, any more than one should aspire to rummage around like a stray dog. They did not think in terms of liberty from the demands of the state. To have liberty was to be a citizen, to exercise the responsibilities of participation and command. To modern eyes this looks onerous and burdensome, a deprivation of liberty. To the Greeks it *was* liberty.

Since only a citizen could display virtue proper, the Greek virtues were masculine, whereas the key virtue for Christians is purity,[16] which combines personal integrity, bodily sanctity, and holding fast to the highest ideals even in a corrupt world. It is dignity intensified, elevated, and enshrined. Purity is a feminine virtue. Men are not entirely expected to exhibit it, and not held to the same moral standard as women. Thus a feminine virtue has become central in the modern world, making women our moral protagonists.

> This moral standard, purity, did not exist for the Greeks and Romans: The great philosopher of Greece framed an ideal State in which purity

12 Wedgwood, 'Character and Position', 1266.

13 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942. She is amending the translation by Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, I, 285. Compare: 'It is as in a household, where the free people least of all do things at random'; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2016), Λ 10, 1075a, lines 18–22, p. 212.

14 Thomas Taylor, ed. and trans., *The Metaphysics of Aristotle* (London: White, 1801), book XII, ch. 10, p. 296: 'as, in a house, those who are free are permitted to do just as they please'.

15 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942.

16 Ibid.

> should be impossible. A typical hero of Rome lends his wife to a friend. The most profligate of moderns would not have imitated the impartiality practised by Cato, and advocated by the Platonic Socrates.[17]

Nor have we simply added purity to the panoply of classical virtues; rather, 'The whole structure is modified'.[18]

To unpack: Plato had no place for purity because private family relationships would have distracted the guardian class from their civic duty and watered down their loyalty to the *polis*.[19] Cato the younger, a Stoic, gave his wife Marcia in marriage to his friend Hortensius to cement their alliance, later remarrying Marcia himself. This exemplified Stoic detachment and virtue, putting friendship and civic duty above private possessiveness.

To a Victorian, Cato's behaviour seemed a horrifying violation of sacrosanct personal relationships and bodily boundaries. In Victorian eyes, Marcia must have suffered an extreme degradation, and perhaps Cato and Hortensius too. But, Wedgwood protests, the ancients did not feel that way. Cato did not think he was forcing himself, Hortensius, and Marcia into a degrading, compromising situation out of unhappy compliance with civic duty. The ancients' entire structure of feeling was civic, something a modern liberal finds hard to comprehend.[20]

She returns to this civic emotional structure when responding to Georg Ebers's 1878 novel *Homo Sum*:

> M. Ebers's paraphrase of 'Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto,' – 'I am a part of humanity, and I feel that I am this above everything' [...] loses the meaning of Terence [... There is a] wide chasm between the Latin words and the German, or indeed almost any modern rendering. We would not have our difference with M. Ebers thought to be a mere question of words. What he makes the sentence mean is, 'No other

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid. The word *purity* has a Latin root in *puritas*, but Wedgwood would say the same word straddles very different meanings.

19 See Plato, *Republic,* trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), book V.

20 Wedgwood knew Cato's story from Plutarch's *Lives, Vol. VIII*, trans. Bernadette Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), pp. 295, 362–63. Plutarch notes that Caesar accused Cato of marrying Marcia to Hortensius to get the money he left her on his death. Plutarch retorts that 'to charge Cato with a sordid love of gain is like reproaching Heracles with cowardice' (pp. 363–64). But notably, Caesar's objection was not about degradation or impurity – it remained a civic criticism, that Cato was looking out for himself and not the *res publica*.

> antithesis, Christian or infidel, German or Frenchman, aristocrat or plebeian, ought for a moment to throw into the shade the great fact of a common humanity.' No doubt that was a Stoical idea, and it is also a modern idea, but it is entirely unlike anything in the mind of an early Christian. To him, a common humanity would mean only a participation in a fallen nature.[21]

This is another puzzling passage. She starts by stressing the chasm between Romans and moderns, yet her ensuing explanation highlights the chasm separating the early Christians from *both* Romans and moderns.

Her point, though, is that the journey from early Christianity to modernity gives the modern idea of 'common humanity' a totally different meaning than it had for Terence and the Stoics. For the early Christians, everyone was fallen, the high-born and heroes as much as the lowest and poorest. One had to be or become a Christian to grasp this fallen condition and start to aspire to purity. From this perspective, non-Christian Romans and Jews were hopelessly lost in and blind to their own corruption. In contrast, Terence envisaged a commonality of all those living under Roman rule. Whatever their personal differences, civic unity was primary. His 'common humanity' was political and not personal, outer and not inner. It was a thin sense of the civic compared to the ancient Greeks, but unlike the Christian idea it remained political. Thus, for all their differences from modernity, the early Christians started the long journey in which 'common humanity' has come to encompass individual rights, the worth of each person, democracy, and even one person, one vote. These ideas *would*, in fact, have been alien to Terence, whose 'humanity' remained an outer bond and not an inner sanctum.

12.4 Aeschylus and Shakespeare

After sitting through a boring performance of the *Eumenides*, Wedgwood reflected that 'human nature changes its demand for particular kinds of interest with the progress of the ages'.[22] We see these changing

21 Wedgwood, 'A German Hypatia', *Spectator*, 17 August 1878, 1043.

22 Wedgwood, 'Aeschylus and Shakespeare: The "Eumenides" and "Hamlet"', *Contemporary Review* 49 (January 1886), 82. She compared them again in 'Ethics and Literature', *Contemporary Review* 71 (January 1897), 72–75.

demands clearly by comparing the *Eumenides* with *Hamlet*, as in her 1886 signed essay in the *Contemporary Review*. Their strikingly similar plots – murdering the mother to avenge the betrayed father – throw into relief their 'divergence of spirit'. She highlights the following points of divergence.

Hamlet is complete in itself, the *Eumenides* only a fragment of the *Oresteia*. Even the first play of the Oresteian trilogy, *Clytemnestra*, 'still implies and needs a past. [...] The vicissitudes of an individual conscience and will are too slender a theme to bear the stress of the poet's genius'.[23] The individual is only ever a fragment, and the ultimate object of attention is the group. 'Whereas we conceive the State as a collection of individuals, they conceived the individual as a fragment of the State'.[24]

Both Shakespeare and Aeschylus lived during an awakening national life. Shakespeare's *Henry V* bursts with national pride. So does Aeschylus's *Persae* – yet it mentions not a single named Greek, instead absorbed by a 'religious sense of the invisible bond which made his people one'.[25] The city alone was the subject of reverence.

The emotion that is 'almost the theme' of modern art, love between man and woman, is only at best secondary to the Greeks. 'In the guilty love of Clytemnestra for Aegisthus, there is indeed something pathetic and tender, but it is hardly allowed to appear at all'.[26] In contrast, *Hamlet* inherits residues of the chivalric ideal, which comes out in Hamlet's love for Ophelia – albeit after she is dead. 'We *do* so love what is gone out of reach'.[27] This conveys a deep grasp of human nature, of the heart's contrary ways. It also reflects the Christian heritage, the aspiration after what lies beyond the world: we value most what lies furthest from our grasp. In contrast, 'What Aeschylus was studying was not the heart of man, but the mind of God. What is the Power that rules the world? What is the law by which He rules it?'[28] He was fascinated not by the recesses of the psyche but by all-pervasive destiny, a power ambiguously beyond and within the events of unfolding history.

23 Ibid., 84.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 85.
26 Ibid., 86.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

'When the object of attention changed from the group to the individual [...] the will came into a new distinctness'.[29] In Aeschylus, events happen because of fate; in the modern drama, events happen because of the individual's will. Thus in Aeschylus there is no sense of sin, of voluntary evil; only fatality, the inheritance of guilt. 'The errors of life hover to the eyes of memory in some dim region between sin and calamity, and change with the parallax of life's movement from the one position to the other' – i.e., from calamity in Aeschylus to sin in Shakespeare.[30]

Indeed, there are no human characters properly speaking in Aeschylus, only an 'awful, sombre monotony' and an 'austere simplicity',[31] unlike Shakespeare's efflorescence of characters and individuals. His work thus corresponds artistically to the Reformation, in which the individual became the sole creature standing in relation to the divine. Shakespeare was of course no Protestant, but still 'his was the artistic expression of the same spirit that made Protestantism'.[32] *Hamlet*, his best play, is the most internally varied. Hamlet's self-scorn embodies a 'swerving' in the self, never found in Aeschylus, whose Orestes has no individuating qualities whatever. This is shown by the 'absurd' footprint test with which Electra assures herself the man before her is her brother – a test, Wedgwood observes, that would have worked for around a quarter of all men.[33] Whereas Hamlet feels torn between loyalties, and has a 'double consciousness', Orestes too is divided between powers, but this is not registered inside his psyche. It is only an abstract conflict between aspects of the divine pantheon outside him. Even that conflict gives way to the comprehensive power of the city-state into which the Furies are incorporated.

In sum, Aeschylus interested his contemporaries because they believed in fate, the city, the group, and the state. Shakespeare interests us because we share his beliefs in the individual, the will, the struggles and swerving inside the psyche, and romantic love. His world is still ours; the world of Aeschylus is remote.

29 Ibid., 87.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 81.
32 Ibid., 88.
33 Ibid., 89. See Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 100, lines 204–10.

12.5 Not Quite at the Antipodes

The antitheses Wedgwood has sketched seem so sharp that we might wonder whether, despite herself, they are perfect. At one point she appears to concede as much:

> We have reached the antipodes to the classic theory of morals. Our moral scale is that theory inverted. The actions we extrude from the scope of morality then occupied the centre of morals. When the things that were damnable become innocent, the things that were innocent become damnable. Private life, with Greece and Rome, was the sphere of the indifferent; Pericles might enthrone a mistress in the place of his repudiated wife, Cato might lend his wife to a friend, Cicero might repudiate his, after thirty years' wedlock, to marry an heiress, and we hear hardly a word of blame from any quarter. For an offence against the State, on the other hand, there was no pardon. Invert this code of the ancient world, and we have that of our own day.[34]

Where we have liberty from the state, they had liberty to belong to the state. Where we have purity (or, at least, the Victorians did), the ancients had courage. Where we see slavery as the worst evil, they judged it right and proper. Where we see the individual and their inner ideals as paramount, they saw the common life of the city as paramount. Where we have free will, they had fate. Where we have sin, they had calamity.

But on closer examination, imperfections and asymmetries remain. Take shame. We shouldn't infer that because the ancients did not have personal purity, they were licentious, or that not having inner-directed shame they were shameless. Some later Romans were licentious and brazen, but this was from the breakdown of their value system, not its fulfilment. When the system was working, they had *verecundia*, which was not the symmetrical negation of modern shame, not a bare lack of inhibition. Far from it: *verecundia* was studied reserve, restraint, visible casting down the eyes so as not to step above one's social station. Like the Greeks, the Romans were greatly concerned with how others saw them and how they stood in the eyes of the world. The difference (on Wedgwood's account) is that they were concerned about an *exterior* contrast, how they *looked* to the outside, whereas the direction of modern moral shame is internal: one has an inner sense of falling

34 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 299.

short of or having betrayed one's own most cherished ideals. There is a shared contrast between the judge and the one judged, but the judge has migrated from exterior to interior, making the feeling more intense and conflicted because the same self is occupying both roles. Hence we get the 'abysmal depths of personality'.[35] This phrase registers a loss – the abysmal element is an almost pathological turning aside from the daylight of social relations. But the gain is greater, for shame entails personal commitment to moral ideals, aspiration towards transcendent values that go beyond existing reality, and the dignity of the self that pursues these aspirations.

Now take slavery. Even here, where the antithesis might look stark – ancient slavery *versus* modern anti-slavery – again there was a common element. The ancients, like the moderns, opposed virtue and slavery in that they attributed virtue only to the free citizens. Yet for this very reason, they assigned indirect virtue to slaves just as long as they remained in their place. That last is the element of antithesis, bound up with their organic social structure. But because of the common element, the antithesis is not complete.

Again, the change from classical manly courage to Christian feminine virtue might look stark. But as we know already, Wedgwood actually thinks we have broadened our conception of virtue; we now have masculine *and* feminine virtues, although the latter stand higher. The masculine virtues have changed by becoming merely one-half of the whole, but there are continuities insofar as they still turn around citizenship. Moreover, there is another common element just in that the ancients linked virtue with gender, like the Christians and their modern heirs. Neither society regards virtue as being gender-neutral.

As for common humanity, its modern sense that each individual has inherent value is unlike the thin civic sense of living within Rome, but as we saw in Chapter 11 the two are connected. Only once organic corporate unity broke down into thin civic unity could the individual emerge in their own right, making it possible to claim their inherent value.

Wedgwood's opposition of Aeschylus and Shakespeare perhaps seems closest to perfect antithesis of all. Yet her whole point is that

35 Ibid., p. 366. The phrase comes from Tennyson's 1832 poem *The Palace of Art and Other Poems* (New York: Maynard, 1898), p. 22, line 223.

although Aeschylus may bore audiences today, he interested his contemporaries because they shared his mode of life. Aeschylus is not actually *not-A* to Shakespeare's *A*, even if it feels that way today. To us, he seems only to be lacking – no separate individuals, no choice, no romance, no inner struggles. But from the ancient Greek perspective he lacked nothing: his plays expressed corporate social membership, fate, the attachment to the city, the vital struggles of the nation. He and his compatriots inhabited not *not-A* but *B*, a positive social and emotional world of its own. From their perspective, *we* are the ones lacking genuine civic virtue, who can never know the joy of belonging to a city with a truly shared mission, and who reduce freedom to something like a dog's right to rummage in the trash.

12.6 Implications for the Modern World

Solitary and alienated we might look to an ancient Greek, lost in the 'abysmal depths of personality', but Wedgwood still holds that the Christian and modern world advances on the ancients. The Greek world was a positive reality in its own right to *them*, but to *us* it is lacking and to a considerable extent we are right, for we inhabit a richer world and comprehend better the dislocation of human existence. We have purity as well as citizenship, we recognise each individual's innate value, we have personal dignity and shame, we have free will and the swerve in the self. This makes for a more interesting, complex, and aspiring form of life.

Do such claims return Wedgwood despite herself to seeing the ancients and moderns in terms of a *not-A versus A* binary? Is that perhaps why she talks of the 'antipodes' of ancients and moderns? It can seem this way, but overall this is not the structure of Wedgwood's progressivism, and for her a binary division cannot capture how progress builds on and learns from the past. We cannot ascend the mountain of truth in a leap, but have to take the zig-zag path, with each zag necessarily beginning where the preceding zig left off.

But *are* the Christian-modern values that Wedgwood highlights an advance? Wouldn't it be good to wash our hands of asceticism, life-denial, punitive ideals that inflict shame and guilt, beliefs in eternal punishment, and the abysmal depths of personality? Wedgwood has no problem with people objecting to strands of Christian tradition. She

denies eternal punishment, holds up forgiveness and mercy, and criticises the Augustinian emphasis on original sin for misogynistically treating women as the vehicle of sin.[36] All the same, she opposes throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The core Christian ideals, for her, capture the structure of moral life. Putting others first, giving them the cloak and the coat, loving the neighbour; forgiving wrongs and letting grudges go; holding people legally accountable for crime, and assuming guilt when one has done wrong – for her, these depend on belief in free will and the supernatural. As we have seen earlier, she believes that self-sacrifice, the supreme value, is only possible if there is something supernatural in us which enables us to transcend our natural impulses and our inevitable selfishness. Through the concept of the supernatural, morality *needs* religion, and Christianity explicitly grasps how morality needs religion, because it recognises the supreme value of self-sacrifice, encapsulated in Christ laying down his life for his friends (John 15: 13).

Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether Christian values really are as positive as Wedgwood believes. Here we might wonder what she would make of Nietzsche's radically anti-religious claim that the core Christian heritage is bad and best overthrown – and not because Christendom has been oppressive but because Christianity has been *egalitarian*. This is a more radical challenge, since Wedgwood cannot reply that it presupposes Christian values while applying them against institutionalised churches.

Wedgwood did, very late in life, encounter Nietzsche's ideas through her agnostic friend Alfred William Benn. In 1908, Benn sent her his essay on Nietzsche, 'The Morals of an Immoralist – Friedrich Nietzsche'.[37] This prompted Wedgwood to read Nietzsche. She told Benn: 'It is always pleasant to find oneself less in antagonism to a thinker than one fancied'.[38] She said there were many sentences from Nietzsche's pen with which she agreed. I suspect that she had in mind Benn's claim that for Nietzsche 'there can be no moral law binding on all mankind unless we can prove that there is some universal end of action; and such an end does not exist. Pleasure will not supply it, for [...] happiness is pursued

36 Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal*, p. 370.
37 Benn, 'The Morals of an Immoralist – Friedrich Nietzsche', parts I and II, *International Journal of Ethics* 19, no. 1 (1908), 1–23 and 19, no. 2 (1908), 192–211.
38 J. W. to Benn, 26 September 1908, WM 627.

by opposite paths'.[39] As we know, Wedgwood denies that pleasure is a universal pole of orientation, and maintains that we all pursue disparate ideals, so she would have agreed with much of this claim.

But fundamental differences remain, and indeed she told Benn that she disagreed 'profoundly' with Nietzsche's 'initial and fundamental belief'.[40] She meant his rejection of traditional Christian morality, which Benn stressed was his fundamental belief.[41] Nietzsche argues in his 1887 *Genealogy of Morality* and other works that granting value to even the lowliest individual embodies resentment and veiled will-to-power. It drags down those who could achieve more, forcing them to restrain themselves out of the duty not to harm the weak.[42] He therefore wants to restore and rejuvenate a version of the hierarchy that existed in ancient societies – to bring in a new aristocracy. This would support the flourishing of life, by recognising the genuine inequalities of capacity and power that we have by nature. Equality stunts; inequality empowers.[43]

In contrast, Wedgwood endorses the worth of each individual as a vital moral innovation on which we should not go back. Having left behind her flirtation with the Greek corporate ethos, she has no desire to return to the master morality of the Greeks – warrior virtues, liberty as dominion, indifference to the fates of the low-born, the exclusion of women, beating Thersites back into his place. Yes, the end of the Greek world brought losses, but the gains were greater. She declares:

> The abolition of perhaps the most unmixed evil known to history, Slavery, is but the first step of this process, a great revolution, which it is idle to arraign or to deplore. It would be wishing to change the whole progress of society, as it is known to history.[44]

In speaking of 'abolition' Wedgwood wants us to hear the modern-day abolition of racial slavery as well as the earlier ending of ancient slavery; they are two phases of the same historical process. She ties this revolutionary process, which also encompasses the emancipation

39 Benn, 'Morals', part I, 21.
40 J. W. to Benn, [autumn 1912?], WM 627.
41 Benn, 'Morals', part I, 3.
42 See Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. Essay I.
43 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), sec. 257, p. 151.
44 Wedgwood, 'Character', 1267.

of women and the recognition of the dignity of each individual, to Christianity. That is, ironically, her point of consensus with Nietzsche. He agrees that the same developments are intrinsically linked to Christianity, but his evaluation is the opposite: so much the worse for both the religion and its political ramifications. On this political point, I am in much more sympathy with Wedgwood and her support for abolitionism, feminism, and individual worth.

However, another problem that I mentioned previously is that Wedgwood sees history as moving in a single direction. We are all ascending the mountain of truth – *one* mountain, and we're all ascending it. This is different from the non-linear history Nietzsche tells, where modern values have arisen not in a progressive journey but through chaotic and violent power-struggles. The outcomes of these struggles have been affected by accident: the cunning rancour, the 'sublime vengefulness', of a single individual – namely Jesus Christ – has changed the entire course of events.[45] Thus the way things have gone embodies contingencies, and with only slight variations we might have been scaling a different mountain altogether.

In Wedgwood's partial defence, the linearity of her view of history is qualified. She admits that there have been irrecoverable losses along the ascent, for which no gains can ever compensate, and that we have ascended the mountain by zigs and zags, not a straight line. These zigs and zags reflect our emotional reactions as well as logic, and our emotions impart a degree of contingency and variation into how we bounce from one outlook to another. The historical swings of the pendulum are never perfectly logical or symmetrical. In this way, Wedgwood seeks to accommodate heterogeneity within her progressive view of history.

Moreover, an advantage of her view is that it presents feminism, the abolition of slavery, and the idea of each individual's inherent worth as genuine progressive gains, not arbitrary or undesirable shifts in dominance. She links progress in the sense of historical directionality with progress in the political and emancipatory sense. Linearity is not unproblematic, but it allows us to see the end of slavery, the rise of democracy, and the liberation of women as milestones of moral evolution, and this is no small thing.

45 Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, sec. 8, p. 18.

13. The Emergence and Structure of *The Moral Ideal*

13.1 Introduction

This chapter returns to Wedgwood's two-part 1879 essay 'The Moral Ideal' and shows how it wavered between phenomenological and historical objections to naturalism (13.2). Drawing on the preceding chapters, I sum up why she became more focused on the historical angle and on tracing a historical progression that has culminated in the ethics of Christianity. In that light, her worry was that naturalists were repudiating not simply lived experience, but their entire cultural inheritance.

I then explain how her historical studies crystallised into *The Moral Ideal* and how imperfect antithesis structured her account of historical change in that book (13.3). Wedgwood remained fairly close to Hegel on the structure of historical movement, but she moved further away from the idea that history exhibits a pure logical structure.

The chapter then puts together how Wedgwood understood progress (13.4). Although she needed progress to unite history and phenomenology, her progressivism made her historical narrative essentially and problematically Eurocentric, especially when she overtly defended the British empire.

For Wedgwood, the necessary next stage in history was to reconcile naturalism and Christianity, which she thought required greater reciprocity between the sexes, since the heterosexual bond embodies an ambiguous unity of nature and transcendence (13.5). Positively here, she integrated feminist concerns into the heart of historical movement. Negatively, she did this in a way that marginalised those who are

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not heterosexual, and she neglected the exploitative structure of the patriarchal family. These mixed considerations lead into my final overall assessment of Wedgwood's philosophy of imperfect antithesis, and its strengths and limitations (13.6).

13.2 'The Moral Ideal' and its Ambiguities

Chapters 9 to 12 showed how Wedgwood became increasingly focused on imperfect antithesis in its historical sense as the law of recoil. This became her main focus, I proposed, because she feared that the rise of naturalism was undermining our moral life, and over time she came to rest the case against naturalism on historical considerations above all. To draw this together, let's return to her two-part 1879 essay 'The Moral Ideal'.

Here she takes issue with those who think naturalism poses no threat to morality. 'Kindness will always be kindness', they say. She retorts:

> It appears to us absolutely certain that no element of moral excellence will remain in common to those who believe the important fact about themselves to be their relation to a seen and unseen world respectively, except one which we allow to be of great importance, – the desire to promote the physical welfare of every human being. This will remain the common section of the two spheres, no doubt. But we believe, as the metaphor implies, that they can have nothing else in common.[1]

She has nothing against promoting everyone's physical welfare, but she believes that if morality is reduced to this, much of its structure and fabric will be lost. Shorn of any transcendent dimension, kindness will be different. To be kind in the name of maximising welfare and because one is pursuing a supernatural ideal of self-sacrifice are totally different things.

But is she appealing here to lived experience or to history? This is ambiguous; consider the following passage.

> To suppose that Christian morality has a value which the enemies of Christianity can appropriate, – that the ethical lessons it has taught mankind remain unaffected by the removal of its main assumptions, this seems to us strange delusion. Every year, if the present movement of thought continues, will, we believe, make it more clear to impartial minds

1 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal', 1605.

> that Christians and Materialists, so far as they are consistent, confront each other, not as persons who differ about one important subject, and setting that on one side have the rest of their aims and views in common, but as inhabitants of different spiritual continents.[2]

On the one hand, Wedgwood appeals to what it feels like to pursue supernatural ideals, what it is like to inhabit this particular spiritual continent. On the other hand, she roots the pursuit of supernatural ideals in Christianity as a historical system that has taught us 'ethical lessons' over the centuries.

The same ambiguity runs through the essay. She objects that the utilitarian attempt to base morality on desires falls foul of the asymmetry of pleasure and pain (a phenomenological point). She also stresses that utilitarianism diverges more drastically from Christian ethics than its advocates realise (a historical point). It diverges by replacing the pursuit of supernatural ideals with the pursuit of pleasure, thereby treating pleasure and pain as symmetrical, making true self-sacrifice impossible, and denying that virtue is an end in itself. Part of the (alleged) problem is that utilitarianism is going against the lived structure of moral experience, e.g., regarding pleasure and pain. But another part of the problem is that utilitarianism is wreaking a dramatic transformation in what morality is taken to be, swerving away from the lessons of history.

In the second half of her essay, Wedgwood reiterates that self-sacrifice is a supernatural moral standard. 'The ideal of self-sacrifice is as much part of a supernatural world as any miracle is'.[3] We have seen why she thinks this earlier: to sacrifice part of what I desire, and subject myself to pain, requires me to transcend my nature and selfish inclinations, which in turn requires me to have one foot in a supernatural realm. Thus:

> The natural morality bids me beware that my love for my own ease and safety should not interfere with yours. The Christian morality demands that if sacrifice there must be, I should wish it to be mine and not yours.[4]

On the one hand, it seems that self-sacrifice inherently requires reference to the supernatural world, which is not a historical invention but a permanent dimension of reality. On the other hand, 'the Christian

2 Ibid., 1606.
3 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–II', 1640.
4 Ibid.

morality' implies a definite historical formation, a culturally specific system of belief.

Wedgwood contends that ethical naturalists cannot recognise the value of self-sacrifice. At most they admit that we should sacrifice a small amount of happiness to achieve a bigger amount (she refers to Herbert Spencer),[5] but not that we should ever sacrifice happiness to achieve something of a higher order than happiness. She disagrees, and introduces her imaginary scenario about rescuing a person who has deliberately thrown themselves into the sea to drown. Suppose the person saved remains miserable for their whole life. Maybe they are totally isolated, and no-one else gains any happiness from their survival, yet it was still right to save them. Here Wedgwood is appealing to what actually does make certain actions morally right, as is revealed when we reflect on experience (or, at least, imagined experience). This is the phenomenological register again.

The same phenomenology/history ambiguity persists in *The Moral Ideal*. First, she says:

> The antithesis which we have been endeavouring to set forth *is no mere contrast of the past. It is what we see and feel every day.* We blame ourselves, it may be, in the eyes of others even with an excessive blame; we lose for the moment every thought of what was inevitable in our wrongdoings; we see nothing but their wrong. Then some one else speaks of them – it may be in the gentlest of accents, it is conceivable that it should even be in tones of excuse […][6]

But then she says:

> Far below the stratum of consciousness in each one of us lie *the unsounded depths of a heritage* we can as little abjure as discern. In some mysterious thrill, in some strange unintelligible foreboding, in some vague unexplained ecstasy of hope, the struggles of our fathers make themselves felt in our hearts. And what for a thousand years men believed leaves its record for centuries.[7]

5 See Spencer, 'Ethics has to recognize the truth […] that egoism comes before altruism'; *The Data of Ethics* (New York: Burt, 1879), p. 221. He concedes that self-sacrifice was needed in earlier stages of society, but only because these societies relied on constant military conflict.

6 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 97; my emphasis.

7 Ibid., p. 386; my emphasis.

As I have suggested previously, I believe she wavers between these two lines of argument because she recognises a limitation of the appeal to lived experience. Faced with that appeal, someone can reply: 'My experience isn't like that. I don't have any acquaintance with the pursuit of supernatural ideals'. The rise of naturalism in her time meant that growing numbers of people were saying exactly that. For them, utilitarianism or other naturalistic ethical theories articulated their experience perfectly well. The structures of moral life that Wedgwood sees as inherent were, in their view, merely part of a historically contingent Christian form of life that was best superseded.

This problem pushes Wedgwood to grapple with the history of Christianity and trace how it arose in recoil against Rome, and in turn how Rome recoiled against Greece, and Greece against prehistoric matriarchy. The point of these studies is not to confirm that Christianity is, indeed, historically contingent, just one moral outlook amongst a range of alternatives. Instead, using imperfect antithesis, she seeks to present the history leading to Christianity as one where our moral outlooks have improved and expanded over time. For example, regarding the transition from Roman allegiance to Christian loyalty, there is more in loyalty because it acknowledges that (some) leaders deserve attachment and yet are imperfect and fallible.

To be sure, the historical process has seen many losses; under her law of recoil, there can be no historical gain without loss, because movements of recoil are uneven and messy. But the gain remains greater. Loss and gain are not symmetrical, not a perfect antithesis, but the balance tilts more towards gain even alongside loss. The nature of the gain is that, over time, we have better grasped and realised the structures inherent in moral life. For example, Christian moral shame advances beyond *aidōs* and *verecundia* because it is more complex and difficult and corresponds to the inner dignity of each individual. This is part of a deeper realisation of what is inherent in moral life, because acting virtuously is difficult, it is complex, and individuals do have an intrinsic dignity that ought to be recognised.

Wedgwood's historical analyses, then, pull in a different direction from her appeal to lived moral experience in the contemporary world, although these analyses are ultimately meant to vindicate the shape of that experience, and its reference to supernatural ideals, by a historical

route. But the historical studies also supply a further strand to her critique of naturalism. In their light, the risk of naturalism is that of turning our backs on the entire heritage of the past – which is a problem because it is a progressive heritage, a valuable learning process, whose lessons we ought to absorb. The threat of naturalism is not simply that we are shutting our eyes and ears to our own lived experience, nor that we are neglecting history as a bare set of facts, but that we are repudiating a vast process of cultural-historical learning and directional moral development of which we today are the heirs. Naturalism ignores progressive-history-as-sedimented-in-phenomenology.

Thus, to those people who say 'I have no experience of these supposed supernatural ideals', Wedgwood's final reply is: 'If that's true, what you have is not moral insight but historical amnesia'. And historical amnesia is not a sound basis for action. We need to embrace our history and with it lean into the many moral experiences of which we are capable, and the possibilities passed on through our cultural inheritance.

13.3 Historical Recoil and Hegelian Parallels in *The Moral Ideal*

Wedgwood's examinations of historical recoil culminate in *The Moral Ideal*, her large and ambitious history of world civilisations (to use a rather questionable concept). The book follows the travels of 'the moral ideal', beginning in ancient India, bifurcating into Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, then migrating from Persia into Greece, Rome, Judaism, early and medieval Christianity, and finally the rise of modern science and naturalism. Evidently, Wedgwood has significantly enlarged her range, now treating Greece as a recoil against Persia, and Persia – specifically Zoroastrianism – as a recoil against ancient Indian metaphysics, from which Buddhism also recoiled. She also newly highlights the role of Judaism.

The law of recoil pervades *The Moral Ideal*. For example:

> The religion which confuses God and man sets up lines of ineffaceable distinction between man and man. This harsh separateness of the Hindu system of caste is not so much an exception to this unifying tendency as a natural recoil from it. Truth neglected in one direction must be

> exaggerated in another [...][8]
>
> The faith of Persia is manifestly a recoil from the ripened and developed faith of the Veda; it is distinctly a Protestant religion. [...] The beliefs thus contrasted are the most antithetic of all beliefs. The dividing question of all thought is – In this universe of life and sense and feeling have we to do with a unity or with a dualism?[9]
>
> The [Roman] worshipper of the outward Unity recoiled from the worshipper of the inward [Judaism] as from a mere opponent to the Gods.[10]
>
> We understand best the [Jewish] theory that finds the origin of Evil in a choice that may vary at any moment when we compare it with the [Greek] view against which it was a recoil — that Evil was a definite tangible reality, a thing of a certain fixed compass and amount, which might be shut in within its own limits, and disentangled from its opposite, but which even by Omnipotence could not be destroyed.[11]

The Greece/Judaism recoil is instructive. The Greeks, Wedgwood says, had a core belief in a plastic unity of opposites. Accordingly, they saw evil as an inevitable part of the world, but bounded and surrounded by good, like the Eumenides who end up being incorporated into the Athenian pantheon. The Jews reversed this position to say that evil came into existence only when we chose to set our wills against God's law. By denying that evil was built into the furniture of the world, Judaism reversed the Greek view and held that evil was not inevitable and natural but freely chosen.

> No two theories are nearer being antithetic than that Greek belief in the Evil resident in matter – the symbol of necessity, the type of all Evil to the liberty-loving race – and the belief evolved in the acceptance by the world of the Hebrew account of Creation and the Hebrew horror of sin, that the only evil was the choice of Evil.[12]

This was as near perfect an antithesis as we can find anywhere in history, but even here the antithesis was not perfect.[13] One reason is that Judaism incorporated a recoil against Rome as well as Greece:

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8 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 31.
9 Ibid., p. 50.
10 Ibid., p. 247.
11 Ibid., p. 332.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

> It is the change from the idea of Law to that of a Lawgiver which constitutes the transition from Rome to Judaea. All Law was for the Jew the Will of a Holy God; and the Holy Man was this Law set forth in action and endurance. For Divine Will lay at the root of all being [...] Deeply penetrating, widely reaching, was the influence that poured upon the world through this Hebrew belief in Creation. We may to some extent measure the positive effect of this belief by the extent of change in the moral aspect of the world taking place at its eclipse.[14]

On the Jewish view, evil is disobedience, and divine law is good – this view elevates God's law to the centre of the world. This law is his word and command, the legislation of a divine person, unlike Roman law which was ambiguous between the causal order of the world and an imperious power. The Jewish view of law recoiled against the Roman one, disambiguating its senses of order and power, and radicalising its non-natural and volitional side, making law personal rather than impersonal.

Thus, recoil and inversion shape belief-systems, but not in binary ways. Judaism took some ideas from Greece and Rome, reacted against others, and transformed the ones it took up. Even in this limit-case the antithesis remained imperfect:

> The antithesis is never complete. What one man or one party asserts is not exactly what the other denies; men are divided not by accepting different answers to the same questions, but by asking different questions.[15]

We are barely scratching the surface of *The Moral Ideal* here, but still we can see that imperfect antithesis continued to organise it. We also see that the historical side of Wedgwood's thought has by now almost totally drowned out the phenomenological one.

Her focus on historical antitheses once more brings Hegel to mind. Earlier, I suggested that her law of imperfect antithesis moves in a direction different from Hegel's dialectic. Yet her account of conflict and antithesis in history looks very Hegelian, and we know she appreciated Hegel's philosophy of history. In her view, this was where he grappled with real-life antitheses and descended from the excesses of logical abstraction. So has she now come closer to Hegel?

14 Ibid., p. 263.
15 Ibid., p. 332.

There is one obvious difference from the structure of Hegel's narrative of world history. He identifies three main historical stages: the Oriental, Classical, and Germanic civilisations.[16] Wedgwood's history does not follow this triadic pattern. The more crucial issue, though, is the motor of historical change. Here another difference is that Hegel relies more purely on contradiction than Wedgwood. For him, the Oriental civilisations only recognise that 'One is free' (one emperor, one caste), setting up a contradiction because everyone else is denied the freedom that the 'One' possesses – yet freedom, as freedom, cannot be limited.[17] So the necessary next stage is to solve the contradiction by more people and groups of people claiming freedom, a step that initiates the Greek and Roman societies where 'some are free', namely all the native-born male slave-owners. This limitation on the scope of freedom remains self-contradictory,[18] and so the necessary movement to resolve this contradiction brings us to the 'Germanic' stage – albeit actually pioneered by Christ – where everyone is recognised to be free, in principle at least. Hegel's explanation of historical movement relies on antithesis – *pure* antithesis, logical contradiction between the inherently universal concept of freedom and the practice of taking only limited groups of people to possess that same freedom.

On details, Hegel and Wedgwood sometimes converge. They agree that the Greeks had no concept of separate individuality outside the civic whole, and that corporate unity shaped every facet of ancient Greek civilisation, including tragedy.[19] They share an idea of 'Rome as the reign of law'.[20] Wedgwood incorporates India and Persia into *The Moral Ideal*, paralleling Hegel's 'Oriental' stage. On the other hand, she puts considerably more weight on Judaism, which Hegel reduces to an offshoot of Persia.

The two thinkers both approach history wanting to do justice to its enormous complexity and to treat antithesis as a basic structuring

16 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 54–55.

17 Ibid., p. 54.

18 Ibid., pp. 202–3.

19 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Sibree, p. 263.

20 'The *Roman world*, [was] chosen for the very purpose of casting the moral units into bonds, as also of collecting all Deities and all Spirits into the Pantheon of universal dominion, in order to make out of them an abstract universality of power', Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 289. This view is very similar to Wedgwood's.

mechanism. However, because Hegel gravitates more towards pure logical antithesis, his philosophy of history breaks apart somewhat into a pure logical structure *versus* a profusion of contingent historical detail. He defends this division, arguing that it is necessary to the nature of history that it should fall apart into contingent detail and necessary logical structure.[21] Wedgwood avoids this division into structure and contingency because there is no pure logical structure of antithesis running through her historical narrative. Her antitheses consist entirely in the recoil of each civilisation against another, and these movements of recoil always concern specifics, such as the Jewish reaction against the Greek belief that evil is natural and necessary. In the 1860s, Wedgwood had objected that Hegel looks through empirical phenomena to a logical structure. In *The Moral Ideal*, she continues implicitly to stand by this objection and to try, instead, to discern the movements of recoil that are always immanent within historical phenomena.

13.4 Progressive History

Overarching these differences, Wedgwood shares with Hegel a commitment to seeing history as progressive. Her progressivism enables her to tie together the historical and phenomenological sides of her anti-naturalism, and the particular way she discerns progress relies on imperfect antithesis.

Her conception of progress has several elements. First, the overall movement is one where we gain more than we lose, although we do lose things when history shifts. Second, because the gain is greater than the loss, our outlooks have over time grown richer, deeper, bigger. Later outlooks have taken much that has lasting value from what went before them, and improved it further.

Third, she sees naturalism as rejecting this entire past history, discarding accumulated wisdom as mere pre-scientific ignorance in a short-sighted way. She objects to 'the narrowness of a judgment which fails to discern the springs of all that is greatest in the thoughts and beliefs of the ages that lie behind us'.[22] Rejecting our inheritance is

21 See John Burbidge, *Hegel's Systematic Contingency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

22 Wedgwood, 'John M'Leod Campbell', second notice, 1125.

arrogant and prevents us from learning historical lessons that need to be retained. In her eyes, the most acute danger is that we will reject the lessons of Christianity. Christianity is the latest historical stage prior to scientific modernity, and so it inherits lessons from all civilisations preceding it. It is the conduit by which modern Europeans receive the prior cultural inheritance of the entire world. But it is also the immediate antagonist of scientific naturalists, that which they most reject, and so this is where the danger of historical amnesia is most concentrated.

A fourth element of progress is newly articulated in *The Moral Ideal*. Throughout history, she says, we have struggled with the boundary between the natural and the supernatural:

> We see, when we pursue any moral belief through the course of the ages, that it crosses and recrosses the boundary separating the Divine and human worlds, or rather that it is seen now on this side, now on that, according to the Position of the mind that reflects it.[23]

The idea of the supernatural was always there, in some form or other, and gradually it has become more and more distinctly worked out, bringing us to Christianity and its supernatural moral standard.

More than that, in retrospect we can see that *aspiration* has powered the entire historical process. We have kept wanting to understand ourselves and the world better, to achieve a higher level of virtue, to remake flawed outlooks, to rethink life. Without this aspirational striving, no historical movement or progression would ever have taken place. She considered calling *The Moral Ideal* a *History of Human Aspiration*, and her prefatory remarks stress the vital role of aspiration.[24] Now aspiration, for Wedgwood, is tied up with the supernatural and with the ideal of self-sacrifice. To aspire is to reach beyond what is already empirically present towards a higher ideal that does not yet have worldly existence. In doing this, we sacrifice something of what already exists in the pursuit of a superior ideal. This sacrificial structure is why we lose things when history changes, despite the gain being greater. Similarly, when we occasionally manage to perform an act of self-sacrifice, the gain in virtue and spiritual community is greater than the pain and loss, but does not take the latter away or diminish them (otherwise self-sacrifice would

23 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 302.
24 Ibid., pp. vii–viii.

have collapsed into self-realisation).

For Wedgwood, this aspirational striving that powers historical movement is the very structure that Christianity grasps explicitly as the shape of moral life: striving for transcendent ideals, at the cost of a sacrifice of some of what one currently desires. This shows why she called the book *The Moral Ideal* in the end, a title that might seem misplaced for a wide-ranging history of civilisations. History is driven by aspiration, and aspiration is ultimately the same as the pursuit of the highest moral ideal, self-sacrifice. Our historical reaching-forward has thus led to Christianity because Christianity *is* reaching-forward, aspiring, sacrificing what is for what ought to be, when this movement is explicitly comprehended and elevated into an ethics. Christianity is aspiration knowing itself. This is the most fundamental sense in which Wedgwood's history is teleological and the direction towards Christianity is intrinsic.

Wedgwood's insistence on aspiration is, in part, a critical response to Harriet Martineau's *Eastern Life: Present and Past*, which significantly influenced Wedgwood's historical project – she described Martineau's book as 'first rank'.[25] Martineau offers a naturalistic account of the progression of world religions, but she also believes that we have made moral progress through this sequence of religions. We have come ever closer to grasping a pure morality that centres on principles, not mere rule-following.[26] It is not obvious, though, how Martineau combines her naturalism with this commitment to moral progress. Wedgwood offers an answer to this problem: moral progress powers the entire historical sequence. What Martineau saw naturalistically in terms of increasing knowledge, Wedgwood recasts non-naturalistically in terms of aspiration.

More negatively, a major problem with Wedgwood's progressive vision is its Eurocentrism. In her view, the historical progression has led to Christianity as the most advanced system of belief, before which the Romans were more advanced than the Greeks, the Greeks than the Persians, the Persians than the Indians. She has expanded her orbit to accommodate non-Western civilisations, only to position them structurally as being less advanced than the West. Moreover, she does

25 See Stone, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 210–12.

26 See Martineau, *Eastern Life: Present and Past* [1848], one-volume edn. (London: Moxon, 1875), esp. p. 488.

not include Africa at all, because she sees its peoples as 'pre-historical' (just as Hegel did).[27] And she posits a partial break between Persia and Greece, such that Greece initiates the history of Europe properly speaking, which stands somewhat apart from the history of the surrounding world.

> Classical Greece is modern Europe on a tiny scale [...] It presents that platform of culture above barbarism which Europe, and that greater England which forms a vast appendix to Europe, present in contrast to the African and Asian populations.[28]

With this statement, she explicitly binds her Eurocentric history to an endorsement of the British empire. In particular, she maintains that British rule is needed in India because the latter has a stagnant culture due to its core outlook: a metaphysical monism that denies the real existence of evil. Since there is no admission of any adversity or trouble in life to overcome, there is no native spirit of hard work.[29]

These objectionable claims should not be brushed aside on the grounds that Wedgwood is simply falling in with the prejudices of her time. She is perfectly capable of diverging from those prejudices when she wants to. In this case, she does not want to, because her core conception of historical progress entails that modern Europe is the most advanced civilisation, the 'platform of culture above barbarism'.

The Eurocentrism of Wedgwood's *Moral Ideal* is a big limitation. Yet the book remains worth reading, for she has many insights that endure independent of the Eurocentric framework. These insights particularly come about when she treats other forms of life and belief as *a*symmetrical antitheses of Christian Europe – not simply *not-A* to Christian Europe's *A*, but different and positive forms in their own right. Examples are how *verecundia* is not simply not-shame, how Virgil straddles two worlds, the ambiguities of Roman reverential submission, how Lucretius does and doesn't anticipate evolutionism, and how Greek corporate unity is not a mere lack of independent individuality. Imperfect antithesis is the source both of the conception of progress that leads to Wedgwood's

27 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. viii. She revises this in the second edition which begins with Egypt, but that is outside my scope.
28 Ibid., p. 118.
29 Ibid., p. 61.

problematic Eurocentrism *and* of her many insights that escape this overarching framework.

13.5 The Female Future

Anti-naturalism propels Wedgwood's turn to history and its consummation in *The Moral Ideal*, but her narrative in that book presents a further complicating twist. The narrative includes modern scientific inquiry into nature and the naturalistic outlook, which have themselves become a central part of European history. Scientific naturalists may be threatening to turn their backs on history, but still, to be faithful to history and learn its lessons, *we* cannot turn *our* backs on naturalism. We have to see what to retain and learn even from the naturalists. Otherwise, after all, Wedgwood would be guilty of the same historical amnesia for which she faults her opponents.

Accordingly, she argues that our progressive aspiration forward has even powered science and its joyful, life-embracing recoil against the life-denying asceticism of the medieval Church.

> The release from one cramped, unnatural attitude set free the spirit of man to enter for the first time into the study of nature, in all its aspects – nature in man, and nature in the world.[30]

Accepting nature, studying it empirically in wonder and open-mindedness, tracing the evolution of life, are important achievements and values that we ought to preserve. She spends much time spelling out these achievements, especially the revaluation of the natural world and the healthy acceptance of our natural inclinations and dispositions.

Evidently, though, she wants to combine these achievements with the legacy of the rest of history as deposited in Christianity. There is a positive aspect to the recoil of naturalism against asceticism, but this recoil must not go too far and should not result in a wholesale repudiation of Christianity. Wedgwood thus concludes the book with a sketch of how the acceptance of nature and natural inclinations can be reconciled with Christianity and its striving for supernatural ideals.

Her proposed reconciliation takes a surprising turn – to the sexual

30 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 380.

relations between man and woman. Here I relate to someone who is other than me, who transcends my natural and embodied life insofar as they belong to a different sex and have a different nature and set of bodily impulses. But my relationship with this person is itself natural, arising out of my natural sexual impulses. Thus, the sexual relation provides a node where nature tries to transcend and reach beyond itself, an ambiguous entanglement of nature and transcendence which models the possibility of reconciling the two without losing sight of their difference.

> Man is the member of a society to which he is joined by the principle of resemblance, and of a union [the family] by which he is joined by the principle of difference. […] The mutual love of man and woman […] contains something which is not mutual, something which […] supplies self with a complement and teaches men concession to needs they do not feel. […] It is the relations of family life which make up the focus of rightness. […] It is the non-mutual relations which call out the larger part of man's moral nature, and give the Conscience and the Will their fullest exercise. […] All that is moral in human nature finds its focus in the relation of man and woman.[31]

Each man–woman couple, Wedgwood believes, rests on a natural attraction, and the end of medieval asceticism saw a welcome rehabilitation of family life.[32] But because of the natural sexual difference, the relation is 'non-mutual' and each person must learn to make concessions to needs they do *not* feel – that is, they must sacrifice ('concede') a part of their natural life for the sake of someone who lies outside their nature. In particular, having become a couple, husband and wife need constantly to transcend the selfish impulses that draw them towards new partners outside the relationship. Their naturally arising bond becomes a spiritual ideal, to which the spouses try to adhere against their natural urges.

> The distortion of Love, which we know as Lust, is not only one of the greatest evils in the human world, but the very focal centre of evil. […] All that is evil in human relation is at its height when man and woman seek the closest intimacy apart from the resolve, with all its latent self-sacrifice, to make this an exclusive bond.[33]

31 Ibid., pp. 374–79.
32 Ibid., p. 383.
33 Ibid., p. 372.

These claims build feminism into the heart of Wedgwood's philosophy of history, casting the entire sweep of civilisations as leading necessarily to the revaluation of women and the family. This is impressive. However, less appealingly, her feminism is of a rather conservative and pro-family character. In her subsequent book *The Message of Israel* continuing these themes, for example, she states:

> The ideal presented on the first page of our Bible [is] that one man should have one wife. The Old Testament is such a picture of the wretchedness of polygamy as we meet nowhere else in consecutive history. The myth standing at its opening, by which the unity of a married pair is the unity of a single body, and either alone is but a fragment, is a warning against all that is to follow from deserting this unity.[34]

Thus, she puts great weight on the sacrosanct nature of the marriage bond. Unlike more recent feminists – and unlike some of her feminist contemporaries who denounced marriage as an irredeemably patriarchal institution[35] – Wedgwood insists that monogamous marriage does not oppress women but recognises, respects, and values them.

There is a residue here of the earlier relational ethic she adopted in reply to Sidgwick. The primacy of relational aims has now metamorphosed into a primacy of family-relational aims. Here Wedgwood clearly diverges from liberal individualist feminism as well as from Marxist feminism, affirming the family as a site of moral recognition and value, not a mechanism of oppression. For her, recognising women as moral agents must go together with valuing their role within the family and recognising the moral importance of the monogamous heterosexual family. This is a relational feminism, taking the side of women's difference rather than individualism and equality. We see this, as well, when Wedgwood champions values of purity and self-sacrifice which she deems intrinsically feminine, against the masculine values of courage and warrior-citizenship which were central to the classical civilisations.

However, she overlooks problematic features of the family which were the focus of much first-wave feminist campaigning. What about domestic violence and abuse, and the financial inequalities between husbands and wives?[36] What about the exploitation of women's

34 Ibid., p. 92.

35 See for example Mona Caird, 'Marriage', *Westminster Review* 130 (1888), 186–201.

36 This was one place where Wedgwood diverged from Cobbe, whose hard-hitting and graphic 1878 article 'Wife-Torture in England' expedited the passage of

domestic labour or, in the case of upper-class women, their affective and psychological labour in maintaining family networks? Previously, Wedgwood had partially addressed this by stressing the mental fragmentation that endless family claims impose on women. But now she seems unconcerned about this harm.

Another problem with her pro-family feminism is to marginalise people who are not heterosexual or do not conform to the binary gender division. Once more, this exclusion is not simply Wedgwood deferring to the prejudices of her time, for her own networks contained people who rejected these prejudices and lived outside the heterosexual norm. Cobbe lived publicly in a relationship with another woman, Mary Lloyd, and Wedgwood regularly socialised with them as a couple.[37] She was also acquainted with Vernon Lee, who had relationships with women and whose gender presentation was ambiguous. Indeed, Wedgwood's own life did not conform to her family-based ideal. She never married, never had children, and was far more passionate and uninhibited with her friend Emelia Gurney than with any men, even her romantic friend of the 1860s, Robert Browning.[38]

Even though it goes against her own experience, Wedgwood adopts an idealised view of the heterosexual monogamous family because she wants to articulate and voice the experience of most women. Women have been confined to the family across history, Wedgwood thinks, and this family role has shaped women's interests and preferences. Most women value the family, and they choose to sacrifice themselves to serve their men and children. Out of a feminist commitment to honouring these women and the sacrifices they had made, Wedgwood endorses the heterosexual family. She believes that hearing and respecting women means respecting and valuing the family, and *vice versa*.

This remains problematic, but it is understandable, and reflects a real tension that feminists face. This is the tension between the desire to articulate women's experience, shaped as it is by patriarchal conditions, and the desire to change both the conditions and the experience. In articulating women's actually-existing experience we risk vindicating

legislation against domestic violence soon after. See Cobbe, 'Wife-Torture in England', *Contemporary Review* 32 (1878), 55–87.

37 See, for example, a letter to her mother clearly describing Cobbe and Lloyd as a couple; J. W. to Fanny Wedgwood, 3 March 1875, WM 252/27.

38 See her letters to Gurney, WM 584. On their uninhibited tone, see Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 123.

patriarchy; but trying to change the conditions altogether risks neglecting women's actually existing perspectives. Ultimately, Wedgwood opts for the risk of vindicating patriarchy; her concern for women's experience trumps the need to critique social structures.

Where does this leave our assessment of her philosophy of world history? It is problematically Eurocentric, yet many of her insights outstrip this framework. Her inclusion of feminist concerns at the heart of world history is inspiring, yet it idealises the heterosexual family in troubling ways. *The Moral Ideal* is an impressive achievement, but has fundamental flaws.

13.6 Wedgwood: Concluding Evaluation

This concluding section offers an overall evaluation of Wedgwood's philosophy of imperfect antithesis, bringing together critical issues and positive insights from across the book.

First, I believe that imperfect antithesis is a powerful idea. It provides an integrated way of approaching many issues, not reducing their heterogeneity, but viewing them as an organic unity. For instance, we can deserve praise when we achieve virtue without meriting blame when we fall short of it, and this is linked with the fact that we intermittently exercise free will while mostly being determined. Imperfect antithesis gives Wedgwood much of the unifying power of Hegel's dialectic, but with greater flexibility and openness to heterogeneous phenomena.

She makes a strong case that pain and pleasure do not play equivalent roles in our lives. Her phenomenology of pain is insightful, and so is her claim that we strive for goals higher than pleasure. Her view that we can have virtues without vices, praise without blame, the good without the bad, is another positive. It allows her to retain the strong Victorian concern with moral ideals without the harsh condemnation of other people for which the period has become infamous.

The merits of her ethics of self-sacrifice are less clear-cut. There is a problem about whether self-sacrifice falls back into veiled self-stylisation and self-aggrandisement. I have suggested that she can solve this problem only by appealing to the supernatural status of selves and moral ideals, a contentious claim in itself. Her view that self-sacrifice is a distinctly feminine value is also mixed. Positively, she wants to vindicate women as moral agents and articulate their experience. Negatively, her ethic can

slide into praise of women's moral exploitation. Overarching this mix of considerations, though, it is certainly interesting that she foregrounds self-sacrifice and not self-realisation, and does so as a feminist. She challenges us to ask whether we can fully confront the difficulties of ethical life without recognising an irrecoverable element of self-sacrifice.

As regards Wedgwood's metaphysics, there is much interest in her attempt to combine voluntarism and determination, accommodating two phenomena to which our experience attests. Theorists often do this with varieties of compatibilism, but her less-travelled route is to pair a strong conception of transcendent free will with an equally strong insistence on the unbroken continuity of nature. Ultimately, though, there is a contradiction here. To exercise free will either we have to interrupt the chain of natural necessity, or nature must already contain a spiritual element such that we can redirect it without interrupting it. But if nature already contains spirit, then it is not the self-contained domain she says it is. The problem is that this contradiction arises precisely where her metaphysics of free will is most interesting and distinctive. We are left with an inextricable tangle of promise and problems.

Wedgwood's metaphysics and ethics converge in her critique of naturalism. For her, the highest moral ideal is self-sacrifice, for which we can only aim because we are supernatural as well as natural existents, able – on rare occasions – to transcend our natural selfishness by virtue of our supernatural freedom of will. Naturalism, for her, cannot accommodate the most fundamental part of morality. Wedgwood's frank affirmation of a supernatural order is unusual and refreshing, even if we don't accept it.

As we have seen, one of her primary defences of this metaphysics is that we cannot accommodate lived moral experience without recognising supernatural ideals. But not everyone will agree with her picture of lived experience, and this returns us to the historical strand of her anti-naturalism – her argument that naturalism turns its back on the entire progressive sweep of moral consciousness from prehistory to the present. Throughout this heritage, she holds, the idea of the supernatural has been in play, and the aspiration beyond nature and the given has powered the entire progression. Consequently, the progression has culminated in Christianity, which *is* supernatural aspiration made explicit and lived in full. Can we possibly learn from this huge cultural heritage while rejecting the supernatural? Wedgwood would say not, and she makes a serious and substantial case, marshalling a large weight

of historical material and interpretation in her support.

Even setting aside her overarching historical framework, she says many illuminating things about the Greeks, Romans, and Christians – for example, on the place from which Celsus opposed Christianity; the distinctions amongst *aidōs*, *verecundia*, and shame; or how Virgil thinks with the conquerors and feels with their victims. Her account of prehistoric matriarchy, while doubtful as a historical claim, retains critical and imaginative value in showing that patriarchy is not inevitable. In weaving these analyses into a large historical canvas, a comprehensive story of historical movement, Wedgwood has vast ambition and synthesising power. Yet her account is fundamentally Eurocentric – ironically, even more so once she includes Indian, Persian, and Buddhist thought and paints them as less advanced than European Christianity.

On the more positive side again, she brings feminism to the centre when she proposes that the necessary next historical stage is to integrate nature and the supernatural by revaluing the heterosexual bond between man and woman. More negatively, this leads into her idealisation of the heterosexual family, marginalising many people – and, sadly, even her own self. Yet this problem, too, arises from her desire to articulate the moral perspective of the majority of women who, across history, have identified with and embraced their family role.

Throughout Wedgwood's philosophy of imperfect antithesis, we find insights and strengths bound up with problems and weaknesses. I have tried in this book to trace them both, and follow out their connections, rather than reconstructing a minimally acceptable version of Wedgwood. As I see it, a Wedgwood without Eurocentrism, self-sacrifice, and the supernatural would be deracinated and scarcely worth reading. Her problems are real and should not be denied, but they are the concomitant of her achievement and originality.

That achievement, I suggest, stems largely from the central idea of imperfect antithesis itself. This idea enables her to think ethics, metaphysics, religion, and history in an organic unity, and to try to give a 'faithful transcript' of our experiences in many domains which preserves their complexity and heterogeneity. Without accepting everything she says, we can still learn from her insights, admire her breadth of vision, and relish the challenge she presents to frameworks and preconceptions that we now often take for granted.

14. New Attributions to Wedgwood

14.1 Introduction

Many Wedgwood essays discussed here are attributed to her for the first time in this book.[1] Without these attributions, we could not identify her idea of imperfect antithesis or how it organises her thought in the 1870s and 1880s. This final chapter provides my grounds for these attributions, which are archival, textual, and digital, forming a cumulative case. I treat evidence from archival records and correspondence as decisive when it is available (14.2). When it is not, my grounds for attribution come from: (i) her use of initials (14.3); (ii) duplication of sentences and substantial philosophical claims across already-known and newly-attributed essays, informed by contextual knowledge about her publication activity (14.4); (iii) characteristic words and phrases identified using digital concordance software (14.5); and (iv) digital stylometry, which presents a clear clustering of essays we can attribute to Wedgwood (14.6). In cases where my main evidence is (ii), there is always corroboration from (iv) as well; thus, the case never rests solely on one method. Not all attributions have equal certainty, for other methods will never be as conclusive as archives and correspondence. But I aim to provide a high enough degree of probability for us to accept the attributions.

I then note some further uses of digital stylometry (14.7), list all my new attributions (14.8), and then provide textual analyses and

1 My sincere thanks to Sue Brown for carefully considering many of these attributions and discussing them with me.

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stylometric dendrograms regarding further attributions not already discussed (14.9).

Beyond Wedgwood's case, I hope that this chapter will show, more widely, some ways to use digitisation to uncover women's periodical writing and thought. Archival methods will never lose their importance, but digitisation offers new ways forward when archival records are lost or incomplete. Since women's work has been archived much more patchily than men's, we need to be open to non-archival methods in order to include women fully in intellectual history.

14.2 Archival Evidence

Biographers Barbara Wedgwood and Sue Brown both point out that Wedgwood published many anonymous essays in the *Spectator* in the 1870s and 1880s.[2] Robert Tener confirms that she published almost seventy articles there from 1874 onwards, when the records he used began.[3] So the total number, going back to 1871, must exceed seventy.

We know ten of these articles because Wedgwood later included them in *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*: 'Life of Charles Kingsley' (1877), 'The Majority' (1881), 'Biography' (1882), 'The Relation of Memory to Will' (1878), 'The Vanity of Men of Letters' (1878), 'Invalids' (1878), 'Apologies' (1878), 'Henry Thomas Buckle' (1875), 'De Senectute' (1881), and 'The Drawbacks of the Intellectual Life' (1878). Frustratingly, though, she filled most of *Teachers* with pieces commemorating famous men: Carlyle, Ruskin, Coleridge, and the like. She pruned out her essays on free will and determinism, virtues and vices, the moral ideal, pleasure and pain, law and morality, the supernatural and the natural, early Christianity and ancient philosophy, positivism, David Hume, utilitarianism, and philosophy of language. Had she assembled these, her status as a significant philosopher would have been harder to miss.

Unfortunately Tener left most of Wedgwood's titles unrecorded: despite acknowledging her 'formidable range', he seemed content for 'most of the *Spectator* writings of the bluestocking friend of Robert

2 B. Wedgwood, *Critical Study*, p. 301; Brown, *Wedgwood,* pp. 3, 157, 164.

3 Tener, 'The *Spectator* Records, 1874–1897', *Victorians* 17 (1960), 34. My thanks to Patrick Leary for sharing this piece by Tener.

Browning [to] lie buried in the pages that once gave them life'.[4] However, he did record fourteen titles: 'Mr Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics' (1875); 'More Biographies of Carlyle' (1881) – which incidentally also cross-references her 'The Hero as Man of Letters' (1881); 'A Botanist on Evolution' (1882); 'Charles Darwin [third notice]' (1887); 'Twelve Years' Trial of the Vivisection Act' (1889); 'Reserve' (1880); 'Moral Purpose in Fiction' (1882); 'The Relation of History to Politics' (1882); 'The Misleading Character of Law as an Index to Morals' (1883); 'Shakespeare as a Historian' (1892); 'The Church in Danger' (1892); 'Democracy and Justice' (1890); 'Women and Politics' (1890); and 'Experimental Legislation' (1892). Incidentally, 'Moral Purpose in Fiction' can also be attributed based on a cross-reference. The essay replies to the charge of having slandered contemporary fiction in 'Youth and Age' (1881),[5] a piece Wedgwood included in *Teachers* under the new title 'De Senectute'. Since she authored 'Youth and Age', she must have authored 'Moral Purpose'.

Recently, using Wedgwood family correspondence, Sue Brown has identified 'Mr Darwin's Descent of Man [second notice]' (1871), 'Christianity and Positivism' (1871), 'The Natural and the Supernatural' (1871), 'Christianity as a System' (1872), 'The First Opponent of Christianity' (1878), and (independently of Tener) 'Charles Darwin [third notice]' (1887).[6]

I have found further references in correspondence to 'The Constitution and Course of Nature' (1872), 'The Fair Haven' (1873), 'Supernatural Religion' (two parts) (1874), 'John M'Leod Campbell' (1877), 'Science and Faith' (1879), two essays on the Duke of Argyll (1880 and 1881), (as already mentioned) 'A Botanist on Evolution' (1882), 'The Treatment of the Insane' (1884), and 'The Age of Woman' (1887).[7]

This still was only halfway to seventy articles. And where was the 'series of essays on ethical topics for the *Spectator*' that Barbara

4 Tener, '*Spectator* Records', 34.

5 Wedgwood, 'Moral Purpose in Fiction', 388.

6 Brown, *Wedgwood*, 170, 331, 227, 245. The evidential letters are, respectively, Charles and Emma Darwin to J. W., after 11 March 1871, DCP-LETT-8127; J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 26 August 1871, WM 401 ('My paper in the *Spec.* was Xtianity and Positivism'); William Erasmus Darwin to Charles Darwin, 22 November 1871, DCP-LETT-8080F; J. W. to Mary Rich, August 1872, WM 325; J. W. to Jane Gourlay, 12 April 1878, WM 447; and Emma Darwin to Henrietta Litchfield, December 1887, Cambridge University Library Darwin Archive 219.9.634.

7 For the evidential letters, see 14.8 below.

Wedgwood said she published around 1876?[8] I decided to investigate.

I foresaw a difficult task. Richard Holt Hutton edited the *Spectator* from 1861 to 1897, and Wedgwood's research assistant in her last years, E. M. Forster (the Bloomsbury novelist), found her and Hutton's writing styles indistinguishable.[9] Indeed, she was an avid reader and admirer of Hutton's *Spectator* writings.[10] The pair first became directly acquainted in February 1871 – when she first published in the journal – and he discussed some of her contributions closely, as their correspondence reveals.[11] Since Hutton not only edited the journal but also authored hundreds of anonymous pieces in it, I feared that prising apart their offerings would be tough.

14.3 'J. W.'

Despite my apprehensions, it transpired that Wedgwood published a few writings initialled 'J. W.': 'Eternal Punishment and Eternal Hope' (1878) and the two-part 'Dialogue on Fate and Free-Will' (1879), plus some letters. Of course, there could be many 'J. W.'s. Yet the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* reveals only one other author who went by 'J. W.', William Jerdan, and he had passed away in 1869.[12] Furthermore, one letter signed 'J. W.', 'In Memoriam' (1881), was a personal reminiscence of Erasmus Darwin (Charles's elder brother) – a clear sign that Wedgwood was 'J. W.', as was the fact that another letter defended 'Mr Browning's Dramatic Idyls' (1879), a subject close to her heart. And the conclusive evidence is that 'In Memoriam' is mentioned, as being by Wedgwood, in family letters.[13]

The 'Dialogue on Fate and Free-Will' contains further authorial clues. It duplicates the format and style of her earlier two-part dialogue 'The Boundaries of Science'. In both dialogues, the interlocutors have Greek names that reflect their views (modelled on George Berkeley's *Three*

8 B. Wedgwood, *Critical Study*, pp. 219–20.
9 E. M. Forster, *Marianne Thornton* (London: Edward Arnold, 1956), p. 223.
10 J. W. to Mary Rich, 1 May 1866, 3 June 1866, WM 325.
11 J. W. to Jane Gourlay, 12 February 1871, WM 447; J. W. and Richard Holt Hutton, April 1879, WM E59, 37232–37234.
12 Houghton et al., *Wellesley Index*, V, 888.
13 Henrietta Emma Litchfield, ed., *Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1915), II, 147. See also WM 308/4.

Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous).[14] In both dialogues, Wedgwood's mouthpieces go a long way to accommodate the antagonist's perspective. She was clearly re-using the structure of her earlier dialogue.

Some more letters were initialled 'J. W. F'. No-one in *Wellesley* used these initials, which re-arrange Wedgwood's full initials, F. J. W. (her official first name was Frances, never used). One 'J. W. F.' letter was on Thomas Erskine's theology, a key influence on her, and her correspondence with Emelia Gurney confirms that she published a letter on this topic in the *Spectator* at this time, October 1871.[15] This was shortly after her 1870 anonymous piece on Erskine in the *Contemporary Review* (known because she included it in *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*). 'J. W. F.', then, was also Wedgwood.

14.4 Textual Analysis

Let us turn to the two-part essay from December 1879 which we have considered extensively as a philosophical text, 'The Moral Ideal'. This contains first statements of many claims later restated in Wedgwood's *Moral Ideal*:

> That men have at all times meant much the same thing by goodness is what no one—not even one who thinks they always will mean the same thing by it—will assert. The moral ideal of the classical world is unquestionably different from the ideal of Christianity. [...] The very word 'virtue' embodies the change which that ideal has undergone. How rarely do we use the expression 'a virtuous man.' How unnatural would it have appeared to a Roman to speak of a woman as distinguished by 'virtus.'[16]

And in *The Moral Ideal*:

> When we turn from human desire to human admiration, this change of feeling becomes yet more evident. [...] What speaks most of the change is the fact that virtue has even altered its sex; the Roman would have found

14 The free-will dialogue is subtitled 'After Berkeley'; see Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (London: G. James, 1713). She also refers to these dialogues in her 1897 essay 'Ethics and Science', in *Teachers*, p. 320; see Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*, p. 166.

15 Emelia Gurney to J. W., late 1871, in Gurney, ed., *Letters*, p. 117.

16 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.

> it difficult to associate *virtus* with any possible feminine excellence; the Englishman rarely uses the word except with reference to women. […] In the case of Virtue, modern association has changed manliness to womanliness.[17]

This is not mere overlap of sentences; it is the reproduction of a substantial philosophical claim, particular to Wedgwood, about the rise of Christian feminine virtue against classical masculine virtue.

'The Moral Ideal' continues:

> That the new sacredness of the individual had some connection with the endless future then opened to the individual, and previously belonging alone to that ideal being—the State—which absorbed all absolute and unfaltering loyalty,—this, we suppose, will be disputed by very few.[18]

And in *The Moral Ideal*:

> This newly discerned sacredness in individual life […] How completely is the ideal of antiquity left behind! The city could not have allowed that anything was sacred in an individual life […][19]

Further, 'The Moral Ideal' says:

> Another source of confusion is to be found in the fact that the antithesis we imagine between pleasure and pain is a fiction of the logical intellect. There is no equivalence between our recoil from evil and our attraction towards good. We have one absolutely common point of recoil, – every sentient being dreads physical pain. But this pole of repulsion has no corresponding pole of attraction.[20]

Compare her known 1881 essay on Carlyle (included in *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*):

> No source of error is commoner than the fallacy of antithesis. […] Though no one can love good who does not hate evil, we should greatly err if we endeavoured to measure the love of good, in our own hearts or in those of others, by our hatred of evil.[21]

Compare also this statement from a signed 1896 essay:

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17 Wedgwood, *The Moral Ideal*, p. 134.
18 Wedgwood, 'The Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
19 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 220.
20 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
21 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 189.

> The great terrible reality of physical pain in all its gradations [...] is a common point of recoil to every human being, but unless you can call immunity from physical ill a common goal, there is none that can deserve the name.[22]

These are restatements of a fundamental philosophical position which, as we have seen, is Wedgwood's own. The claim that we recoil from pain and that there is no equivalent pole of attraction runs through all her work. See too, for example, the second edition of *The Moral Ideal*:

> We desire that all shall share the good; but what is the good that all may share? To find the evening add to the morning's store of ascertained truth – of discovered beauty – of purposed achievement? To feel the circle of the heart expand, its glow increase, its atmosphere grow clear? None of these aims are universal; the promise of any would leave the desires of a large number of human beings unsatisfied. We all want to escape pain, but when we come to positive desire, the proverb that one man's meat is another man's poison gives the experience of mankind.[23]

'The Moral Ideal' continues:

> It has always seemed to us a strange delusion which has led ethical writers to suppose they have carried analysis a step further, when they have resolved virtue into a regard for the general welfare. They have only exchanged one complex idea for another. We should say, indeed, that they have exchanged a less complex idea for a more complex one; duty seems to us a simpler reality than welfare. [Yet] Mr. J. S. Mill seems to have thought it possible to keep the idea of pleasure as a simple and ultimate reality [...][24]

And in *The Moral Ideal*:

> Those thinkers who have imagined themselves to simplify the problems of life by explaining Virtue as a means of Pleasure, have surely too readily taken for granted that people are any more agreed as to what Pleasure is than they are as to what Virtue is. If you mean by pleasure the end of pain, you do indeed point out by the word a goal of common human desire, indeed the goal of common sentient desire [...] If we want general consent, we must ask not what men desire, but what they fear [...][25]

22 Wedgwood, 'Maternal Self-Sacrifice: True and False', part II, *Parents' Review* 7 (1896), 114.
23 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., pp. 459–60.
24 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605.
25 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 277.

In both places – in her article and then in the book – she illustrates the claim with the very same example: two travellers who want to go somewhere very different, but share the fear of an accident *en route*.

The textual overlap is so substantial, and concerns such core philosophical claims, that I propose that we can be confident of her authorship here. This is somewhat controversial, I admit. Traditionally, archival records have been the gold standard for attributing anonymous work. Textual analysis has been more suspect, because even when multiple sentences are duplicated across already-known and unknown works, this could indicate plagiarism, or at least textual borrowing, rather than identical authorship.

However, the textual comparisons I have provided accord with our contextual knowledge. We know that Wedgwood published heavily in the *Spectator* on ethical topics in the later 1870s and was one of Hutton's lead authors. We also know from her collaborator Charles Harold Herford that while working on *The Moral Ideal* over the course of twenty years, she published regular 'chips from her workshop' in the *Spectator*.[26] 'The Moral Ideal' is clearly a 'chip' – it even shares the title of her book. In addition, we know from an 1880 letter that she was publishing especially heavily in the journal at this time.[27] Finally, the attribution is corroborated by digital stylometry, as I will explain presently.

There are gender-related reasons to allow other methods of attribution besides archives, given that women's work has been archived more unevenly than men's. Tener's failure to record all Wedgwood's articles is a case in point. Or consider, for example, the partial archiving of Emilia Pattison/Dilke's work *within* the archives of her husbands Mark Pattison and Charles Dilke.[28] Given our structural loss of archival sources in many women's cases, confining ourselves to archival evidence risks baking in the gender bias already built into the archives. This problem is compounded for Wedgwood by the accidental loss of the *Spectator* records. In such imperfect epistemic conditions, textual analysis may be the best evidence we have, although we must be careful to corroborate it

26 Charles Herford, 'Frances Julia Wedgwood: A Memoir', p. xviii.

27 J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 2 October 1880, WM 401. Thanks to Sue Brown for drawing my attention to this letter.

28 Gregory, Jessica, 'What's In a Name? The Archival Legacy of Emilia Francis Strong/Pattison/Dilke'. British Library, English and Drama Blog, 16 December 2020.

with contextual knowledge and digital stylometry.

If we accept the attribution of 'The Moral Ideal', we can also accept the attribution of 'Pleasure and Pain' (1882), because the two essays overlap heavily at sentence level and in philosophical substance. Both pieces argue that: (i) pleasure and pain are not symmetrical opposites, but pain is a positive reality from which we recoil, whereas there is no single object of all aspirations corresponding to the term 'pleasure'; (ii) the direct antithesis between pleasure and pain is a logical fiction, stemming from the logical fallacy of arranging ethical phenomena into symmetrical antitheses, the 'fallacy of antithesis';[29] and incidentally (iii) both use the same quotation from John Henry Newman on 'entering into the joy of the Lord'.[30]

The 'Moral Ideal' overlaps, too, with 'The Misleading Character of Law as an Index to Morals', already identified by Tener. The latter essay again protests against the logical mind's tendency to line up antitheses like rows of dominoes, when really 'The antithesis between what is right and wrong is quite unlike the antithesis between what is legal and illegal'.[31] In the same vein, 'Misleading' holds that the antithesis of praise is not blame, nor *vice versa*; and that telling truth and telling lies are not antitheses either, also argued in 'The Moral Ideal–II'.[32]

'Misleading' immediately leads to 'The Future Life', for it opens by proposing to continue responding to the new work *Natural Religion* to which the author has 'recently adverted'.[33] John Robert Seeley's 1882 book *Natural Religion* had been discussed by Hutton in the *Spectator* a year earlier,[34] but on *Spectator* timescales, with 52 issues a year, that did

29 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

30 Wedgwood, 'Moral Ideal–I', 1605–6; Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1196. In the later revised edition of the *Moral Ideal*, Wedgwood added: 'Pain is the most definite sensation there is; ease, to one who has not known health, is no sensation at all. The healthy know not of their health, only the sick of their sickness; and for the moment Evil always seems more real than Good'; *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 108. This is identical to 'Pleasure and Pain', 1195.

31 Wedgwood, 'The Misleading Character of Law as an Index to Morals', *Spectator*, 29 September, 1883, 1248, 1249.

32 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1249; Wedgwood, 'The Moral Ideal–II', 1641.

33 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1247.

34 Hutton, 'What is "Natural Religion"?', and 'The Author of "Ecce Homo" on Natural Religion', *Spectator*, 1 July, 1882, 857–59, and 865–57. See Seeley, *Natural Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1882). Wedgwood had read Seeley's earlier book *Ecce Homo*; see J. W. to Mary Rich, 31 July 1867, WM 325.

not count as a 'recent' adversion. Conversely, just two months before 'Misleading' (which appeared in September 1883), a *Spectator* essay had picked up on a letter by Seeley from the preceding month.[35] That essay was 'The Future Life' – so this was the 'recent adversion', which can be attributed to her as well, based on the cross-reference.

Let me offer a further example in support of my claim that comparative textual analyses, when used carefully, can be reliable. This concerns Wedgwood's 'Mr Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics' from 1875, identified by Tener. Initially, before discovering Tener's evidence, I had attributed this piece to her based on the following textual analysis.

First, the piece uses the image of the *stereoscope*: 'according as the agent concerned is the first person or the third. Whether any stereoscope can combine these views [...]'[36] The same appears in her Aristotle essay: 'We will put the double point of view [...] without attempting to supply any stereoscope which shall convert it to the solid unity',[37] and a letter to Browning: 'You give a stereoscopic view'.[38]

Second, the Sidgwick essay says: 'But all desire is not of this nature, as we see clearly by looking at desire on its negative side; each one of us is quite sure that it is an object to every one else, whoever he may be, to get rid of the toothache'.[39] Likewise in 'Pleasure and Pain', toothache is the central example of pain and how we all wish to escape from it.

Third, and perhaps most tellingly, her Sidgwick essay quotes Germaine de Staël: conscience is 'impossible à méconnaître, facile à étouffer'.[40] This statement is quoted again in 'Christianity as a System', known to be Wedgwood's from correspondence.[41] Or rather – and this is most telling – Staël is *mis*quoted identically in the two places. The full quote is 'La voix de la conscience est si délicate qu'il est facile de l'étouffer; mais elle est si pure, qu'il est impossible de la méconnaître'.[42]

Having worked out these textual grounds for attributing the Sidgwick essay to Wedgwood, I subsequently found confirmation in Robert Tener's

35 '"Natural Religion", and its Drift', letter from 'a correspondent', i.e. Seeley, *Spectator*, 16 June, 1883, 767.
36 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', first notice, 342.
37 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 941.
38 J. W. to Robert Browning, 15 November 1868, in Curle, *Broken Friendship*, p. 136.
39 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', first notice, 343.
40 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', second notice, 375.
41 Wedgwood, 'Christianity as a System', *Spectator*, 24 August 1872, 1077.
42 Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 2 vols. (Paris: Nicolle, 1813), I, 481.

records. Indeed, sixteen other articles that I had attributed based on textual analysis and stylometry were subsequently confirmed in other ways: seven by correspondence, one by a family scrapbook, one by a cross-reference, and seven by Tener's records.[43] This suggests that we can have reasonable confidence in textual analysis as a basis for attribution, as long as certain conditions are met. The textual overlap with already-known writings needs either to be extensive or to concern core philosophical claims, and it should be corroborated by contextual knowledge and, if possible, digital stylometry (on which I will say more below).

14.5 Digital Searching and Concordance

Another method of looking for Wedgwood's contributions is to search the digitised full-text of old *Spectator* issues for items containing her characteristic metaphors and expressions. For example, the image of ascending the mountain of truth by a zig-zag path occurs in both *The Moral Ideal* and the earlier 1866 *Westminster Review* essay 'The Origin of Language'. This is the sort of unique metaphor-cum-concept one would find in no other author, so it provides a strong basis for attribution. Characteristic Wedgwood words for which I searched the archives included: *misconception; recollection; arduous; oscillation; antithesis; confute; watershed; recoil from*; *epithet*; *nomenclature*; *dialect*; *refraction*; and *parallax*.

Inevitably these searches bring up pieces one can discount, like reportage of British foreign policy and parliamentary wrangles, topics on which Wedgwood never wrote. Interestingly, the searches do not throw up too many of these items, as Wedgwood's signature vocabulary is quite distinctive. For example, 'recoil from' is surprisingly rare. Only sixty items including this phrase come up, starting from 1828 when the Victorian-age *Spectator* was founded, before we come to the first piece that is plausibly Wedgwood's – and, remember, this journal appeared weekly, year on year, with up to fifty items per issue. 'Watershed' is even

43 Specifically: correspondence: the two-part Hegel essay, 'Constitution and Course of Nature', 'Supernatural Religion', 'John M'Leod Campbell', the two Duke of Argyll essays, and 'The Age of Woman'; scrapbook: 'The Origin of Language' (in the *Westminster Review*); cross-reference: 'Amberley's "Analysis of Religious Belief"'; Tener: 'Sidgwick', 'Reserve', 'Moral Purpose in Fiction', 'The Relation of History to Politics', 'Misleading Character of Law', 'Democracy and Justice', and 'Women and Politics'.

rarer: a Wedgwood essay using it appears after only thirty items in the search, again beginning from 1828. Plus, almost all those predecessors are travel writings that mention literal watersheds.

But, of course, the pieces thrown up by these searches are not necessarily by Wedgwood, even when they are philosophical. The next step must always be to check in case Hutton wrote them. Robert Tener has meticulously catalogued his contributions, which allows us to eliminate 'Auguste Comte's Aspiration', 'Two Views of Annihilation', and numerous others.[44] These eliminations leave a fairly small pool of candidates for Wedgwood authorship.

Let's look at one image Wedgwood uses repeatedly, *refraction*. She writes to Welby:

> The experience of the individual or of the race seems [...] a prism breaking the white ray of light and showing it as colour, [...] so that, according to his position, each man sees a different portion of that which in its own nature is truly one.[45]

And in *The Moral Ideal*:

> The scientific interpretation of Light gives a clue to the meaning of Truth, as it is mirrored in human minds. [...] The history of thought is a continual exhibition of the incapacity of the human intellect to express in any single statement more than half of a truth.[46]

Searching the *Spectator* archive from 1870 through 1890 for *refraction* brings up 'Self and Unself':

> The very warmth and colour of disinterestedness spring from the diffraction of the various interests, as they break and blend into each other. If you have no life of your own to sacrifice, you have nothing to give. If you go aside from nothing of your own to serve another, the service is vapid and colourless. It is the breaking of the ray of light which creates colour. It is the breaking of one interest against another in life, which gives the moral colour to true service and the affections which that service fosters. Without the self, there is no not-self.[47]

44 See R. L. Tener, 'Hutton's Identified Writings', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 17, no. 5 (1972), 1–183.

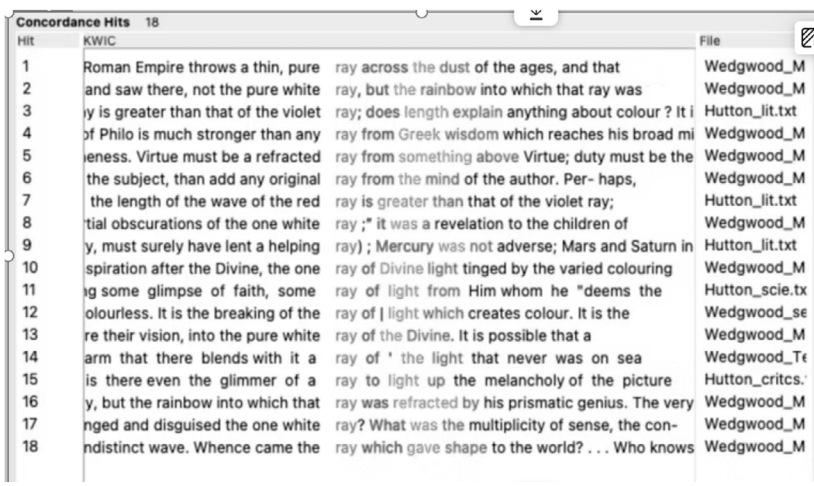
45 J. W. to Victoria Welby, c. 1886–88, in Welby, *Echoes of Larger Life*, p. 178.

46 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 330.

47 Wedgwood, 'Self and Unself', 630.

But how much of an authorial clue is the refraction metaphor? To investigate this, we can use the digital concordance programme AntConc to check Wedgwood's corpus for the frequency of the words 'ray' and 'refraction' compared to other writers. To do this I assembled a large corpus of texts from over forty Victorian authors, totalling around 250 items (including many Wedgwood writings and new attributions to her). The texts are listed in Part II of the Bibliography. The corpus includes women such as Cobbe, Emilia Dilke, and Vernon Lee, and men such as Hutton, James Martineau, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Leslie Stephen, to name just a few. I selected these authors because they authored periodical articles in the same period as Wedgwood, in similar venues, with similar intellectual interests. The corpus also contains some books by the same authors, mostly collections of their journal articles. I obtained digital PDFs of the texts and used optical character recognition software to convert them into plain text files that can be searched digitally.

To analyse the case of *refraction*, I then narrowed the corpus down to compare Wedgwood's corpus exclusively with Hutton's. See Figure 2:



Concordance Hits 18

Hit	KWIC		File
1	Roman Empire throws a thin, pure	ray across the dust of the ages, and that	Wedgwood_M
2	and saw there, not the pure white	ray, but the rainbow into which that ray was	Wedgwood_M
3	y is greater than that of the violet	ray; does length explain anything about colour ? It i	Hutton_lit.txt
4	of Philo is much stronger than any	ray from Greek wisdom which reaches his broad mi	Wedgwood_M
5	eness. Virtue must be a refracted	ray from something above Virtue; duty must be the	Wedgwood_M
6	the subject, than add any original	ray from the mind of the author. Per- haps,	Wedgwood_M
7	the length of the wave of the red	ray is greater than that of the violet ray;	Hutton_lit.txt
8	tial obscurations of the one white	ray ;" it was a revelation to the children of	Wedgwood_M
9	y, must surely have lent a helping	ray) ; Mercury was not adverse; Mars and Saturn in	Hutton_lit.txt
10	spiration after the Divine, the one	ray of Divine light tinged by the varied colouring	Wedgwood_M
11	g some glimpse of faith, some	ray of light from Him whom he "deems the	Hutton_scie.tx
12	olourless. It is the breaking of the	ray of | light which creates colour. It is the	Wedgwood_se
13	re their vision, into the pure white	ray of the Divine. It is possible that a	Wedgwood_M
14	arm that there blends with it a	ray of ' the light that never was on sea	Wedgwood_Te
15	is there even the glimmer of a	ray to light up the melancholy of the picture	Hutton_critcs.
16	y, but the rainbow into which that	ray was refracted by his prismatic genius. The very	Wedgwood_M
17	nged and disguised the one white	ray? What was the multiplicity of sense, the con-	Wedgwood_M
18	ndistinct wave. Whence came the	ray which gave shape to the world? . . . Who knows	Wedgwood_M

Fig. 2 AntConc table comparing Wedgwood's and Hutton's uses of *ray*. Image created by the author (2026).

This table shows a clear difference in how Hutton uses *ray* compared to Wedgwood. He mentions the lengths of different coloured rays, literally, and he uses 'ray of light' to mean a glimpse of understanding and a hopeful note. Wedgwood speaks of the pure white ray being refracted

into the colours of the rainbow; virtue as a refracted ray from something above virtue; and, twice, the white ray transmuted into different colours. Her consistent pattern of metaphors links the white ray with spiritual community and refraction into colours with separate individuality. That gives a strong signal that she wrote 'Self and Unself'.

Furthermore, 'Self and Unself' is linked to 'Altruism and Selfishness'; the latter appeared first and drew a reply from Caroline Hadden, to which 'Self and Unself' was the counter-reply. Thus if Wedgwood wrote either piece, she wrote both, and 'Altruism and Selfishness' bears indications of her hand. As we saw in Chapter 4, the piece points out that the ideal of altruism is not new. Women have been expected to be unselfish for a long time, with their intellectual work constantly interrupted by other people's claims:

> The occupation of half the mind with any pursuit is apt to associate it with a sense of baffled weariness and disgust, and any one who has to carry on his own life subject to constant demands from another must lose something of his own individual nature.[48]

Compare her 1869 book chapter on suffrage:

> I wish I could adequately present the incompatibility of any intellectual work with the doubts and scruples which are born of circumstances like these [continual social claims] [...] They keep the attention concentrated on minute and shifting objects, from which, even when released, it cannot return to the large and remote region of intellectual work.[49]

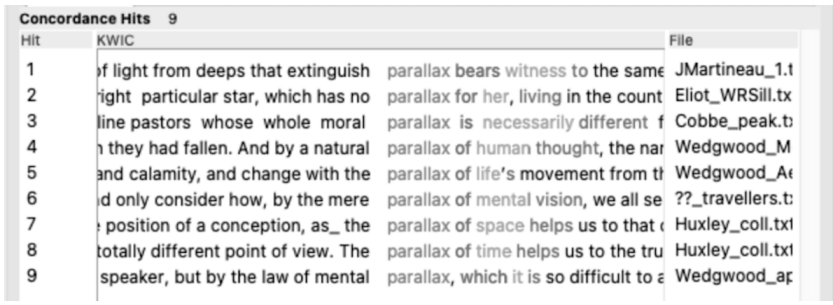
Meanwhile, men may pursue the path of genius, but though perfectly legitimate, it remains selfish. The (non-vicious) selfishness of the intellectual life is also a theme in her already-known essay 'The Drawbacks of the Intellectual Life'.[50] 'Altruism' continues: 'Insufficient sympathy is given to the difficulties of the intellectual life'.[51] Compare 'Drawbacks':

> While the advantages of intellectual pursuits have been set forth so often that any attempt to enumerate them must pass over trite ground, [...] the drawbacks of these pursuits seem to us inadequately recognised.[52]

48 Wedgwood, 'Altruism and Selfishness', 596.
49 Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage, Considered Chiefly', 252.
50 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 418.
51 Wedgwood, 'Altruism', 597.
52 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 413.

'Altruism' also invokes Goethe as an exponent of female self-sacrifice.[53] Wedgwood consistently mentions Goethe in this connection, especially on the *Ewig-Weibliche*, including in signed writings such as 'Male and Female Created He Them' and 'Woman and Democracy'.[54] She often pairs Goethe with Tennyson's *Princess* ('Man for the sword and for the needle she, all else confusion'),[55] seeing them as the two key poets of the traditional feminine ideal. Altogether, the textual evidence yields a strong case that she authored 'Altruism', and therefore also 'Self and Unself'.

Let us take another example of a Wedgwood signature word, *parallax.* Searching for this leads to the interesting case of the 1887 piece 'Fellow-Travellers'. See Figure 3:



Concordance Hits 9

Hit	KWIC		File
1	of light from deeps that extinguish	parallax bears witness to the same	JMartineau_1.t
2	right particular star, which has no	parallax for her, living in the count	Eliot_WRSill.tx
3	line pastors whose whole moral	parallax is necessarily different f	Cobbe_peak.t
4	they had fallen. And by a natural	parallax of human thought, the nar	Wedgwood_M
5	and calamity, and change with the	parallax of life's movement from th	Wedgwood_Ae
6	d only consider how, by the mere	parallax of mental vision, we all se	??_travellers.t
7	position of a conception, as_ the	parallax of space helps us to that	Huxley_coll.txt
8	totally different point of view. The	parallax of time helps us to the tru	Huxley_coll.txt
9	speaker, but by the law of mental	parallax, which it is so difficult to a	Wedgwood_ap

Fig. 3 AntConc table comparing uses of *parallax*. Image created by the author (2026).

'Fellow-Travellers' talks of the 'parallax of mental vision'.[56] This recalls *The Moral Ideal*'s 'natural parallax of human thought'; 'Apologies' on 'the law of mental parallax'; and her Aeschylus essay on 'the parallax of life's movement'.[57] Yet some other authors use 'parallax'. In Figure 3, AntConc shows George Eliot (Eliot_WRSIII) reviewing a novel. She describes the female character falling in love at a distance with the Prime Minister, who 'shines upon her imagination as a bright particular star, which has no parallax for her' – i.e., her view of him is idealised and distant, like

53 Wedgwood, 'Altruism', 596.
54 Wedgwood, 'Male and Female', 120; 'Woman and Democracy', 338. See also *Moral Ideal*, p. 187.
55 Tennyson, *The Princess* (London: Moxon, 1847), p. 116.
56 Wedgwood, 'Fellow-Travellers', *Spectator*, 20 August 1887, 1115.
57 Ibid.; *Moral Ideal*, p. 358; *Teachers*, p. 359; 'Aeschylus and Shakespeare', 87.

a star so remote as to have no parallax.[58] Also, we see Cobbe (Cobbe_peak) complaining that since women could not be ordained ministers, they had to receive religious instruction from 'masculine pastors whose whole moral parallax is necessarily different from that of a woman'.[59] And Thomas Henry Huxley (Huxley_coll) says that: 'The parallax of time helps us to the true position of a conception, as the parallax of space helps us to that of a star'.[60] But they are clearly not using the notion in the same way as Wedgwood, for whom 'parallax' is a law regulating how thought changes over time.

Nonetheless, on a first read, 'Fellow-Travellers' is not in her usual line. Describing how hard it is to get on with other people when travelling, it seems light-hearted, almost inconsequential. On the other hand again, it invokes Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*. Johnson was a frequent reference point for Victorians, but no-one else in my corpus mentions *Rasselas*. And the other occasion when Wedgwood mentions it is the preceding month, July 1887.[61] That is quite a revealing signal.

Moreover, another essay, 'Men and Women' (1886), can be attributed to Wedgwood with high confidence (as detailed later), and it has significant overlap with 'Fellow-Travellers'. Both describe how we discover someone's faults the moment we travel with them, and 'Men and Women' explains why this *matters*. Travelling dramatises what happens to social relations when hierarchical distinctions are levelled, no-one is host or guest, and we confront everyone on a flat plane of equality.[62] This considerably reinforces the case that she authored 'Fellow-Travellers'.

To move on, searching the archive for *antithesis* brings up 'The Gnostics of the First Two Centuries' (1876), which overlaps with *The Moral Ideal*:

58 Eliot, 'Silly Novels By Lady Novelists', *Westminster Review* 66 (1856), 447.
59 Cobbe, *The Peak in Darien* (Boston: Ellis, 1882), p. 222.
60 Huxley, *Method and Results: Collected Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 202.
61 Wedgwood, 'Fellow-Travellers', 1115; 'Count Leo Tolstoi' (July 1887), in *Teachers*, p. 274. See Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia: A Tale* [1759] (New York: Appleton, 1870).
62 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', 952.

Spectator, 'Gnostics'	*The Moral Ideal*
'Known to us only from the scattered fragments preserved by orthodox refutation'.[63]	'Of their teaching we possess only such fragments as their opponents have left in tearing it to pieces'.[64]
'From the infinite abyss of Deity arises a long series of emanations (St. Paul's "endless genealogies")'.[65]	[... Gnosticism's] 'endless genealogies'.[66]
'The Demiurgus to whose blundering workmanship this world is due'.[67]	'[...] An ignorant and blundering creator'.[68]
'It has been called "la dernière apparition du monde ancien, venant combattre son successeur, avant de lui ceder le monde humain'.[69]	'It has been called "La dernière apparition du monde ancien, venant combattre son successeur, avant de lui ceder le genre humain"'.[70]
'"Basilides," says Baron von Bunsen, [...] "was the first [...] to regard the creation of this world in the light of a progressive evolution." The whole conception of the origin of the Universe apparent in these speculations is one to which the last word, modern as is its sound, is much more applicable than is that of Creation'.[71]	'In them, as they confronted their orthodox opponents, we may discern the first collision of those ideas which we know as Evolution and Creation'.[72]

Table 1 Comparison between 'Gnostics' and *The Moral Ideal*.

Knowing she published 'chips from her workshop' in the *Spectator*, we can say that 'Gnostics' was another such chip.

63 Wedgwood, 'Gnostics of the First Two Centuries', *Spectator*, 5 February 1876, 180.
64 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 306.
65 Wedgwood, 'Gnostics', 181. Paul's warning is in 1 Timothy 1:4.
66 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 308.
67 Wedgwood, 'Gnostics', 181.
68 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 311. 'Blunder' is another characteristic Wedgwood word.
69 Wedgwood, 'Gnostics', 181.
70 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 308, spelling out the source: Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme* (Paris: Bertrand, 1843).
71 Wedgwood, 'Gnostics', 182.
72 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*,p. 314.

14.6 Evidence from Digital Stylometry

The final method I have used for attribution is corpus stylometrics, specifically using Stylo in RStudio, a corpus analysis programme. Supplied with a corpus of texts for comparison, it produces tree diagrams showing the relative stylistic proximity of the component texts.

Scholars are beginning to realise the possibilities of stylometric analysis for recovering women's intellectual work. A recent example is Christoph Schmidt-Petri, Michael Schefczyk, and Lilly Osburg, who use Stylo to assess whether Harriet Taylor Mill co-authored *On Liberty*.[73] Using a closed, contrastive corpus consisting solely of writings by Mill and Taylor Mill, they identify stylistic characteristics of these two authors. Then they divide *On Liberty* into segments grouped by similarity and ascertain that certain passages show more characteristics of Taylor Mill and therefore are more likely authored by her, in turn concluding that Mill was probably not the sole author of *On Liberty*.

I use Stylo differently from Schmidt-Petri *et al.* in two ways. First, I aim to recover Wedgwood's work in its own right, whereas they seek to establish what role Taylor Mill had in writing an already-canonical text. Second, Schmidt-Petri *et al.* use a tightly circumscribed two-author corpus to ask whether passages in *On Liberty* cluster more with Mill or with Taylor Mill, a binary choice. In contrast, I use a much bigger corpus, the same one that I used for my analyses using AntConc, containing texts from over forty Victorian authors.

In both regards I am most indebted to periodicals researcher Alexis Antonia, who uses digital stylometry to disambiguate Victorian journal authors and, especially, to attribute Anne Mozley's periodical articles. Antonia uses a large contextual corpus including many authors, and she treats stylometry as one probabilistic source of evidence alongside Mozley's publication history, thematic continuities, and further contextual information.[74] Like Antonia, I use a wide comparative corpus, rather than a binary Wedgwood/Hutton model. With a binary corpus,

73 Schmidt-Petri, Schefczyk, and Osburg, 'Who Authored *On Liberty*? Stylometric Evidence on Harriet Taylor Mill's Contribution', *Utilitas* 34, no. 2 (2021), 120–38.

74 See Antonia (with Ellen Jordan), 'Identifying Anne Mozley's Contributions to the *Christian Remembrancer:* A Computational Stylistic Approach', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42, no. 2 (2014), 303–23, and *Anonymity, Individuality and Commonality in Writing in British Periodicals – 1830 to 1890: A Computational Stylistics Approach* (PhD dissn., University of Newcastle, Australia, 2009).

every anonymous text must be assigned to one author or the other, yet the texts' stylistic features might actually cluster with additional authors not included in the corpus. The more authors we include, the more robust the discriminations. By analogy, if we compare red and orange in isolation, they will look sharply different; but place them in a broader colour spectrum, and we will see that they are similar. Yet if red and orange still remain distinguishable *within* their part of the colour spectrum, then the distinction between them is more robust.

An example of my results is Stylometric Diagram 1, contained in the online Appendix to this book. This uses a corpus that includes Christian Isobel Johnstone, Francis Newman, Anne Mozley, James Stephen, Anna Kingsford, Emilia Dilke, Margaret Oliphant, James Martineau, Hensleigh Wedgwood, and several anonymous *Spectator* authors.



Stylometric Diagram 1 Wedgwood's writings amongst other Victorian periodical writings. Image created by the author (2026), http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/c0e2bee9

Looking at Diagram 1, we see that the bulk of Wedgwood's writings cluster tightly at the bottom (note that some of them are not labelled 'Wedgwood' because I was still testing the attributions). Their closest stylistic neighbour is, unsurprisingly, Hutton. He and Wedgwood share a branch of the tree, with all other identified authors (and some of Hutton's further essays) on separate branches. Hutton's work is closest to her letters on vivisection, capital punishment, and the 'dread of science'. This is probably because letters have to be concise and structurally simple, pushing her away from her trademark long, complex sentences and making her writing less distinctive. There are limits on many litotes one can use in a polemical 'letter to the editor'.

Stylo clusters texts by comparing the relative frequency with which they use the top 300 most common words in the total pool: words like 'the', 'this', 'of', 'which', etc. (or one can use the top 100, top 500, etc.).[75] There are telltale variations in how often different authors use each

75 See John Burrows, '"Delta": A Measure of Stylistic Difference and a Guide to Likely Authorship', *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 17, no. 3 (2002), 267–87.

MFW (most frequent word). Stylo should be instructed to slice the corpus into chunks of the same length (e.g., 3000 words a chunk), so that scale differences do not introduce distortions.

In grouping texts, Stylo ignores which author one has provisionally assigned a piece to. This means there is no confirmation bias. However, it also means one can get results like Diagram 1, which places Wedgwood's later writings *The Moral Ideal* and 'Male and Female Created He Them' near the top of the tree, far away from her *Spectator* articles of the 1870s and early 1880s. This confirms that any attributions Stylo suggests are probabilistic and fallible. We should not infer that Wedgwood didn't really author *The Moral Ideal*! Presumably, instead, its placement far away from her *Spectator* pieces shows that her style in the book was measurably different.

This leads to an important issue. Victorian journals had house styles; authors crafted their work to suit, and editors made further adjustments. This creates an obvious challenge for attribution. But it also shows how digital stylometry is best used against a background of contextual knowledge. Comparing Hutton's and Wedgwood's pieces at the bottom of Diagram 1, all are in the *Spectator*, and so Stylo has picked out the differences that persist *despite* shared house style.

I have also run test comparisons of Hutton and Wedgwood alone (please see Stylometric Diagram 2). We see again that they are largely distinct, blurring together mostly around Wedgwood's letters, but with a few other Wedgwood pieces creeping into the Hutton cluster. This bleeding confirms that we can actually differentiate Wedgwood and Hutton better against the backdrop of a wider corpus. For then some of their shared linguistic features become recognisable as part of the wider Victorian periodical discourse common to the entire corpus. The algorithm thereupon discounts these features, and the more individual stylistic markers remain.



Stylometric Diagram 2 Wedgwood's and Hutton's writings. Image created by the author (2026), http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/30181f70

Let me explain further the usefulness of digital stylometry. My *antithesis* word search pulled up the two-part essay from 1880, 'Aristotle on Free-Will'. At first, I was unconvinced. However, I entered the piece into

Stylo (see, again, Stylometric Diagram 1). Being probabilistic, Stylo can say that 'Aristotle on Free-Will' is more like 'Wedgwood_Gnostics' and 'Wedgwood_faith' (i.e., 'Science and Faith') than any other texts in the corpus. That can always change if one adds another text to the corpus. Nevertheless, these probabilistic clusters provide grounds to look more closely at a given essay or not (as does the use of signature images and metaphors), and this is invaluable faced with a huge *Spectator* back catalogue. So, given this result, I looked more closely at 'Aristotle on Free-Will'. Textual analysis corroborated the attribution.

'Aristotle on Free-Will'	Other writings
'Plato knows only two pair of spiritual antithesis,—the pleasant and the painful, appealing to the sensuous, animal nature; and the true and the false, appealing to the spiritual principle in man'.[76]	'Plato [...] knows only two antitheses—the pleasant in contrast to the painful, the true in contrast to the false'.[77]
Aristotle succeeded in 'dissolving the fallacious bond of antithesis'.[78]	'No more fertile source of error exists than what we would call the *fallacy of antithesis*'.[79]
'The saying of Hegel, the profound significance of which is perhaps deadened to the reader by frequent quotation, that Nature is the Other of Spirit'.[80]	'Many who have never read a line of Hegel will be reminded by these words of a sentence often quoted from Hegel, that Nature is the "Other of Spirit"'.[81]
'Nature is bound in indissoluble sequence—Spirit is a force whose governing impulse lies wholly within Itself'.[82]	'The essence of Matter is Gravity; that is, subordination to something out of itself; the essence of Spirit is Freedom, subordination to nothing out of itself'.[83]

76 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942.
77 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 85.
78 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–II', 973.
79 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure', 1195.
80 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle–I', 942.
81 Wedgwood, 'William Law', 97. Also: 'Hegel has called Spirit the Other of Nature; if this be true, there must be a knowledge which is the Other of Science'; *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 465. See also 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', 674.
82 Wedgwood, 'Aristotle-I', 942.
83 Wedgwood, 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', 674.

'Aristotle on Free-Will'	Other writings
'Both possibilities would vanish at once, and it is only at the meeting of their slopes that we are enabled to distinguish the great watershed of our moral being,—the Will'.[84]	'… the watershed of good and evil'; 'They parted on the watershed of thought';[85] 'The habit of surveying all moral ideas from the watershed of right and wrong'.[86]
'The mists of passion or prejudice not only obscure the outlines which we need to observe, they refract and distort their images'.[87]	Her use of refraction has been noted above.
Relates Aristotle to Hinton.	Describes Hinton in similar terms to Aristotle.[88] This matters, because these two authors are not obvious comparison points – their association is rather singular.

Table 2 Comparison between 'Aristotle on Free-Will' and other Wedgwood writings.

Digital stylometry is not sufficient for attribution on its own. But applying labour-intensive textual analysis would be near-impossible without digital stylometry to forward plausible candidates from the otherwise overwhelming mass of anonymous *Spectator* material.

In addition, although Stylo cannot give certainty, unlike a human being it can approach the corpus without preconceptions. I initially discounted 'Aristotle on Free-Will' probably because, on some level, I doubted a woman would venture authoritative Aristotle interpretation in 1880. Unlike me, the software simply checked for stylistic similarity to other texts and placed the piece squarely in the dense Wedgwood cluster.

Another example illustrates the way the software can overcome human biases and errors. 'Christianity and Politics', a piece flagged when I searched the *Spectator* archived full-text for 'supernatural AND antithesis', begins:

84 Ibid.
85 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, pp. 107, 332.
86 Wedgwood, 'Old Friends and New', *Spectator*, 11 October 1879, 1280.
87 Ibid., 941.
88 Wedgwood, 'Self and Unself', 631.

> We have recently been occupied in the attempt to answer the question whether that scheme of society known as Socialism derives any special sanction from Christianity. We would to-day return upon the relation between politics and religion from a wider point of view.[89]

That 'recent attempt' was Hutton's 'Christianity and Socialism' from two months before,[90] so I assumed this follow-up piece must be his work too, even though Tener's meticulous records did not attribute it to him. I therefore tagged it 'Hutton_politics' (see Diagram 1). Yet, as in Diagram 1, Stylo continually placed the piece in the Wedgwood cluster. I persisted in treating this as a mistake – until I realised the piece reproduces a rather unique statement about Spartacus, Blandine, and Renan from *The Moral Ideal*. Closer analysis reinforces the attribution to Wedgwood (more details are in Section 14.9 below). Her opening cross-allusion to Hutton is misleading, though it reflects their intellectual teamwork and proximity. Stylo was able to place the piece in the Wedgwood cluster without being misled.

14.7 Linguistic Top Tens

Stylo can provide valuable further information about authors' linguistic fingerprints. It can compare authors' top ten MFWs pairwise – that is, which ten words Wedgwood uses most compared with Hutton, or compared with Cobbe, or Margaret Oliphant, etc.

Here are Wedgwood's compared with Hutton's:

we, to, that, a, it, be, have, our, an, was

And his compared with hers:

and, the, his, he, I, Goethe, in, poetry, Mr, her

Hutton's words are noticeably more male-oriented, although a little more female-oriented as well. Wedgwood's words are more neutral and abstract (*we, our*). The greater appearance of both genders in Hutton reflects his heavier focus on individuals and their ideas (using *his, he, her*, and with one proper name figuring very heavily, *Goethe*). We see

89 Wedgwood, 'Christianity and Politics', *Spectator*, 2 February 1884, 151.
90 Hutton, 'Christianity and Socialism', *Spectator*, 1 December 1883, 1541–42.

his focus on individuals, for example, in his essay 'Auguste Comte's Aspiration', contrasted with, say, Wedgwood's 'Negative Stage in the Life of Thought', also on Comte. Wedgwood is concerned with Comte's *idea* of the three stages of thought, distinguishing it from his personal views and the secularist way he applied the idea. Going in the opposite direction, Hutton fixes Comte's ideas on the person:

> Sir Erskine Perry's picture helps us to see the kind of man to whom such an experiment was possible. The 'smallish, stooping man, in long tweed dressing-gown, much bloodshot in one eye, healthy rose tint, short black hair, small Celtic features, forehead unremarkable, agreeable physiognomy'.[91]

The difference is reflected in Wedgwood's and Hutton's respective essay titles. Wedgwood's are more abstract: 'Justice', 'Gratitude', 'Character and Position'. Hutton's titles often take the form 'A's View of B': e.g., 'Mr Scott Holland's Sermons', 'Professor Huxley on the Evolution of Theology', 'Mozley's University Sermons', 'Dr Martineau on Professor Tyndall', etc.[92] Relatedly, Hutton more often invokes people's titles – viz. 'Mr' – perhaps an appeal to (male) authority. Wedgwood leans to collective thought, Hutton to individual thinkers.

Wedgwood is also more analytical and general, oriented towards categorising (with *that, to, have*, in her top ten). One might have expected Hutton, the man, to be more philosophical, and she, the woman, to be the committed polemicist. The reverse is true: Hutton places himself more into the immediate cut-and-thrust of debates among real people, whereas she rises to general questions and longer historical arcs, even when writing on named individuals like Thomas Carlyle. For her, the individual is a window onto the age.

To underscore how much can be gleaned from people's relative top ten MFWs, here are Vernon Lee's compared to Wedgwood:

> *and, I, music, or, my, you, me, such, musical, emotion*

With *I, my, you,* and *me* in the top ten this is personal, intimate, and subjective. *Music, musical*, and *emotion* are there because Lee wrote mainly on aesthetics and art. Wedgwood's top ten compared to Lee runs:

> *the, was, his, of, he, that, it, we, to, a*

91 Hutton, 'Auguste Comte's Aspiration', *Spectator*, 17 November, 1877, 1429.
92 See Tener, 'Hutton's Identified Writings'.

Compared to Hutton, Wedgwood is more gender-neutral; compared to Lee, she is more masculine and more impersonal. Compared to Lee and Hutton together, we see her studious care to convey nothing individual and subjective.

14.8 Final List of New Attributions

Here are my new attributions, using the following codes for the grounds of the attribution:[93]

SB – identified by Sue Brown
TA+DS – textual analysis plus digital stylometry
NT – identified in Wedgwood's *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*
C – mentioned in correspondence
I – initialled
CR – cross-referenced by another of her writings
RT – identified by Robert Tener from Hutton's notebooks

Spectator essays:

1. 'Mr Darwin's *Descent of Man*' [second notice], Mar 1871 (SB)
2. 'Christianity and Positivism', August 1871 (SB)
3. 'The Natural and the Supernatural', November 1871 (SB)
4. 'Christianity as a System', August 1872 (SB)
5. 'The Constitution and Course of Nature', November 1872 (C)[94]
6. 'The Development of Christianity', August 1873 (TA+DS)
7. 'The Fair Haven', November 1873 (C)[95]
8. 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', April 1874 (TA+DS)
9. 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', April 1874 (CR)

93 In addition, twenty-five substantial letters, some already identified by Sue Brown, are listed in the Bibliography.

94 '*Butler* which I have been studying, as you know. I don't know when the article will come out. […] I see it is late and my Butler proof has just come', J. W. to Jane Gourlay, 5 November 1872, WM 447.

95 'Did you read Snow's review of the Fair Haven in the Spec. it was the most unintelligible mystical thing I ever read', wrote George Howard Darwin to his mother Emma, 24 November 1873, DCP-LETT-9157F. The review-essay had appeared on the 15 November; 'Snow' was Wedgwood's nickname.

10. 'Supernatural Religion', two parts, July and August 1874 (C)[96]
11. 'Mr Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics', two parts, March 1875 (RT)
12. 'Henry Thomas Buckle', October 1875 (NT)
13. '"The Unseen Universe"', November 1875 (TA+DS)
14. 'The Gnostics of the First Two Centuries', February 1876 (TA+DS)
15. 'Lord Amberley's "Analysis of Religious Belief"', two parts, July 1876 (CR)
16. 'What is Christianity?', November 1876 (TA+DS)
17. 'Life of Charles Kingsley', two parts, January 1877 (NT)
18. 'John M'Leod Campbell', two parts, September 1877 (C)[97]
19. 'The First Opponent of Christianity', March 1878 (C)[98]
20. 'Altruism and Selfishness', May 1878 (TA+DS)
21. 'Self and Unself', May 1878 (TA+DS)
22. 'Eternal Punishment and Eternal Hope', July 1878 (I)
23. 'The Negative Stage in the Life of Thought', August 1878 (TA+DS)
24. 'A German Hypatia', August 1878 (TA+DS)
25. 'Invalids', August 1878 (NT)
26. 'The Drawbacks of the Intellectual Life', August 1878 (NT)
27. 'The Relation of Memory to Will', September 1878 (NT)
28. 'The Vanity of Men of Letters', September 1878 (NT)
29. 'Apologies', September 1878 (NT)
30. 'Character and Position', October 1878 (TA+DS)

96 J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 28 July and 2 August 1874, WM 401. 'Supernatural Religion writes to thank for my article. How ungrateful of me not to have thanked you for your help. I hope you will like y[our] 2nd notice', she wrote to Tollet on 28 July, cryptically thanking Tollet for looking at the first notice, mentioned in her letter of 10 July.

97 J. W. to Jane Gourlay, 4, 5, and 6 September 1877, WM 447. Campbell was an associate of Erskine.

98 J. W. to Jane Gourlay, 12 April 1878, WM 447.

31. 'A Dialogue on Fate and Free-Will', two parts, January 1879 (I)
32. 'Science and Faith', April 1879 (C)[99]
33. 'Friends Old and New', October 1879 (TA+DS)
34. 'Justice', October 1879 (TA+DS)
35. 'The Moral Ideal', two parts, December 1879 (TA+DS)
36. '"Grievances of Women"', May 1880 (TA+DS)
37. 'Aristotle on Free-Will', two parts, July 1880 (TA+DS)
38. 'The Duke of Argyll on the Unity of Nature', September 1880 (C)[100]
39. 'The Political Characteristics of Woman', October 1880 (TA+DS)
40. 'Reserve', November 1880 (RT)
41. 'The Duke of Argyll on Nature and the Supernatural', January 1881 (C)[101]
42. '"The Majority"', February 1881 (NT)
43. 'The Hero as Man of Letters', April 1881 (CR)
44. 'More Biographies of Carlyle', November 1881 (RT)
45. 'Youth and Age', December 1881 (NT)
46. 'Moral Purpose in Fiction', March 1882 (RT)
47. 'A Botanist on Evolution', May 1882 (RT)[102]
48. 'The Relation of History of Politics', July 1882 (RT)
49. 'Biography', July 1882 (NT)
50. 'Selfishness', August 1882 (TA+DS)

99 J. W. to Richard Holt Hutton, 5 April 1879, WM E59, 37232–37234.

100 'Uncle Charles read the *Spec.* article [...] with some respect. [...] Uncle Charles said [...] "it does seem to me a question what motive is to come on the side of duty when every thing supernatural is done away with"' (J. W. to Ellen Tollet, 2 October 1880, WM 401).

101 This article continues the above one responding to Argyll, so the correspondence that evidences the former also applies to the latter.

102 J. W. to Asa Gray, 21 July 1881, 3 February 1882, 4 May 1882, 11 June 1882. *Gray Herbarium*, 1820-1904, https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:50233615$78i–95i

51. 'Pleasure and Pain', September 1882 (TA+DS)
52. 'Dislike', February 1883 (TA+DS)
53. 'Gratitude', March 1883 (CR)
54. 'The Future Life', July 1883 (CR)
55. 'The Misleading Character of Law as an Index to Morals', September 1883 (RT)
56. 'Christianity and Politics', February 1884 (TA+DS)
57. 'The Treatment of the Insane', September 1884 (C)[103]
58. 'Democracy and Truth', September 1885 (TA+DS)
59. 'Party Spirit', October 1885 (TA+DS)
60. 'Men and Women', July 1886 (TA+DS)
61. 'Obedience', August 1886 (TA+DS)
62. 'The Age of Woman', August 1887 (C)[104]
63. 'Fellow-Travellers', August 1887 (TA+DS)
64. 'Experiment', September 1887 (TA+DS)
65. 'Charles Darwin' [third notice], November 1887 (SB)
66. 'The Decay of Reticence', October 1888 (TA+DS)
67. 'Twelve Years' Trial of the Vivisection Act', March 1889 (RT)
68. 'Evolution and Politics', July 1889 (TA+DS)
69. 'Democracy and Justice', April 1890 (RT)

103 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 7 October 1884, Welby Fonds 1970-010_box019.

104 'I sh[oul]d like n[ot] to call your article "drivel" [...] I admire only Mesdames [Mary] Wilkins and [Annie] Slosson (and y[ou] on woman)'; Hope Wedgwood to J. W., 29 June 1887, WM 326. The only *Spectator* articles on *woman* or *women* from May through October 1887 are 'Mr Romanes on Men's and Women's Power of Will' on May 7, 'The Women and the Universities' on June 25, and 'The Age of Woman' on 13 August. The first two are both Hutton's (see Tener, 'Hutton's Identified Writings'), so by elimination, Wedgwood authored the latter, and must have shown it to Hope in advance. 'Not drivel' is as positive as Hope ever was. Incidentally, 'The Age of Woman' claims: 'If there be a law that is common to the physical and mental universe throughout their whole extent, it would seem to be that of balanced movement' (1085), exactly like *The Moral Ideal*: 'the fact of balanced movement [is] a clue to the most important laws of the visible world. [...] If there be a law common to the world without and the world within [...] it is [...] the rush hither and thither of invisible atoms, swaying in rhythmic balance' (p. 330).

70. 'Women and Politics', May 1890 (RT)
71. '"Le Disciple"', August 1890 (TA+DS)
72. 'Old and Young', September 1890 (TA+DS)
73. 'Shakespeare as a Historian', February 1892 (RT)
74. 'Experimental Legislation', March 1892 (RT)
75. 'The Church in Danger', August 1892 (RT)

I also found the following in *The Reader*, where we know Wedgwood published regularly in the 1860s:[105]

1. 'Utilitarianism', March 1864 (TA+DS)
2. 'Büchner's "Matter and Force"', May 1864 (TA+DS)
3. 'Books on Free-Will and Necessity', July 1864 (C)[106]
4. 'Secret of Hegel', March 1865 (C)[107]
5. 'Hegel's "Dead Secret"', June 1865 (C)

14.9 Grounds for Further Attributions

This section gives my textual grounds for attributing further anonymous essays to Wedgwood which have not already been discussed. I have reserved these details for now, aware that not all readers will want this level of detail. However, I provide it so that readers know the basis for all my attributions. With writings discussed philosophically in this book, I give more detail, because the more substantial the textual overlap, the stronger the attribution becomes. I move more quickly over my grounds for attributing other essays not especially relevant to imperfect antithesis. All attributions are corroborated by digital stylometry and contextual knowledge of Wedgwood's publication patterns. After the textual details, two stylometric diagrams show Wedgwood's branch within my entire corpus and the dense clustering of many Wedgwood essays.

105 See Brown, *Wedgwood*, pp. 77, 119.
106 Browning to J. W., 2 August 1864, in *The Brownings' Correspondence* 5435, https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/5894/?rsId=462752&returnPage=1
107 F. D. Maurice to J. W., 1865, WM E57-31543.

'Utilitarianism' (1864)

- 'We cannot include among our numerous obligations to Mr. John Stuart Mill the lumbering polysyllable which stands at the head of this article'.[108] Compare: 'we can never use the word Utilitarianism without a mental protest against [...] that cumbrous polysyllable'.[109]
- 'In opposition to [utilitarians on law and morality], we assert that they are not only not conterminous, but not concentric regions; that the law does not only decline to punish all wrong actions, but it declines to punish actions in proportion as they are wrong'.[110] Compare: 'The law [...] abdicates all pretension to follow the gradation of wrong. Its sphere is not concentric with that of the moralist'; 'The sphere of morals and politics are not conterminous, nor even concentric'.[111]

'Büchner's "Matter and Force"' (1864)

- Calls Grove's 'Correlation of Forces' 'one of the most pregnant treatises of our day'.[112] Compare: 'one of the most pregnant books of our time (Grove on the Correlation of Force)'.[113]
- Cause is a merely metaphysical concept – one of her core theses.
- 'If the contingency [he 'might' do X ...] refers to a mere doubt in the mind of the speaker, then he has crossed the *great watershed* of human thought' towards materialism (my emphasis).[114] *Watershed* is one of her signature words.
- 'Truth cannot ultimately be inconsistent with Truth. [... A] time will come when the knowledge of the laws of nature will blend into one harmonious knowledge. [...] But [...] the mighty curves which represent divergent paths of thought

108 Wedgwood, 'Utilitarianism', 360.
109 Wedgwood, 'Sidgwick', first notice, 343
110 Wedgwood, 'Utilitarianism', 361.
111 Wedgwood, 'Misleading', 1248; 'Gratitude', 418.
112 Wedgwood, 'Büchner', 647.
113 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', 436.
114 Wedgwood, 'Büchner', 647.

may recede for ages yet to come, and meet at last'.[115] Compare: 'No doubt all the lines of Truth converge, but it is at too small an angle, and too vast a distance, for us to be able in all cases to perceive the tendency to unite'.[116]

'The Development of Christianity' (1873)

- 'A penal code by which the shrewd intelligence of a man like Paley was so far blunted that he extolled as the result of an almost inspired wisdom the mixture of barbarity and capricious lenity in which it resulted, prepared men's minds for an everlasting hell, to which nobody worth considering was actually to be condemned'.[117] Compare: 'Paley [...] fixed upon this capricious execution of the laws as a subject of eulogy [...] "By this expedient, few actually suffer death, while the dread and the danger of it hang over the crimes of many". [...] In other words, it is adduced as the crowning merit of the English penal law that it consists, in a large measure, of empty menace!'[118] *John Wesley* quotes the very same passage from Paley about 'the expedient', summing up that Paley thought 'it a good thing that human law should be made up in large of empty menace'.[119]
- 'The belief, or rather the discovery, that we are inhabitants of a spiritual universe, revealing to the patient and discerning eye sequences as orderly and certain as that of the outward world, is fortified by quite as many words of St. Paul'.[120] Compare: the words of St Paul 'seem to me to suppose a spiritual world – not merely a Creator and a Mediator, but a highly organised set of relations towards invisible beings and realities'.[121]

115 Ibid.
116 Wedgwood, 'Boundaries', first dialogue, 135.
117 Ibid., 1019.
118 Wedgwood, 'Eternal Punishment', 857.
119 Wedgwood, *John Wesley*, p. 374.
120 Wedgwood, 'Development', 1018.
121 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 9 January 1887, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file12.

- Objects to 'Professor Müller's late sarcasm'[122] – a sarcasm she thought he directed against her father's imitative theory of language.

'Hume and the Positive Philosophy' (1874) and 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics' (1874)

A two-part set, so if she wrote one, she wrote both.

- 'If Professor Müller's phonetic types had obtained general credence, philology would have afforded us a specimen of a science not yet emerged from subjection to metaphysics'.[123] This is the key point of her 1866 article on Müller's philosophy of language.
- The account of how science has emerged from metaphysics follows her 1866 'Origin of Language' closely, including the specific examples of meteorology and Newton on the ether.[124]
- 'Hume was obliged to veil his attacks on religion in irony which [...] blinded his able and impartial biographer'.[125] Compare: 'Hume's satirical professions of admiration for Christianity, for instance, actually take in his biographer'.[126]
- 'In seeking cause the mind can rest only on will'[127] – one of her core and original philosophical claims.
- Makes a rather idiosyncratic link between the Holy Roman Empire and Comte, which recurs in *The Moral Ideal*.[128]
- Quotes 'a man of science' on 'sweeping the cobwebs off the sky' – also quoted in *Teachers*, where the phrase is attributed to Huxley (though in fact it comes from James Clerk Maxwell).[129]

122 Wedgwood, 'Development', 1018.
123 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', 435.
124 Ibid.; 'Origin of Language', 89–91.
125 Ibid., 436.
126 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 368 – specifically 'Henry Thomas Buckle', originally from 1875.
127 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', 437.
128 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 240.
129 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', 468; Wedgwood, *Teachers*, 308. See Maxwell, 'On Action at a Distance', *Nature* 7 (March 1875), 325.

- 'The word "pleasure" recalls the vaguest of all our emotions, as the word "pain" recalls the most definite, and the antithesis between two things so different in vividness has always seemed to us a source of large error'[130] – another of her core theses.
- 'The same principle which blinded our translators of the New Testament to the absurdity of the wind blowing where it listeth'.[131] In a letter, she says of John 3:8, 'the verse was mistranslated in our version, and [...] pneuma ought to have the same English word in both places, The spirit bloweth where it listeth'.[132]

'"The Unseen Universe"' (1875)

- The book reviewed, by Stewart and Tait, is discussed in her letters with Gurney from this time.[133]
- '"The art of measurement," Socrates is made to say, in the Protagoras, "will teach us to [...] find rest in the truth"'.[134] Compare: 'There is a knowledge of the truth says Plato, in the Protagoras, which gives rest to the soul, "and thus saves our life"'; '"The art of measurement," Socrates is made to say, in the Protagoras, "is that which would save the soul"'; '"The art of measurement," says Plato, "is that which would save the soul"'.[135]
- Traces the idea of continuity of force to Newton, as does 'Science and Faith'.
- 'What the very word *natura* means is transformation of force'.[136] Compare: 'Nature [...] is literally *Natura* [...] the chain of varying force by which all [...] is connected together'.[137]
- Again, hails Grove's insight on the correlation of forces.

130 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Utilitarian Ethics', 470.
131 Wedgwood, 'Hume and the Positive Philosophy', 435.
132 J. W. to Mary Rich, 7 September 1865, WM 325.
133 See Gurney to J. W., 15 September 1875, in Gurney, ed., *Letters*, p. 137.
134 Wedgwood, 'Unseen Universe', 1425.
135 Wedgwood, 'Female Suffrage, considered Chiefly', 268; 'Opponent', 410; *Moral Ideal*, p. 128.
136 Wedgwood, '"Unseen Universe"', 1426–27.
137 Wedgwood, 'Supernatural', 1340.

- Crucially, formulates the law of imperfect antithesis: 'No law of thought seems to us to have a wider range than what we would call the law of imperfect antithesis.'[138]

'Lord Amberley's "Analysis of Religious Belief"', Two Parts (1876)

- 'Profoundly true are the words of Lessing, that "superstition does not lessen her influence when she is recognised"'.[139] Five months later, in 'Life of Charles Kingsley', she writes: 'it is another instance of the wisdom of that profound saying of Lessing's, *which we have had occasion to quote before*, that superstition does not lose its influence when we cease to believe in it' – thus, this is a cross-reference back to 'Amberley' and shows that she wrote the latter.[140]

'What is Christianity?' (1876)

- This uses a quotation about Burke, taken from a biography of Sheridan, which reappears word-for-word in *Nineteenth-Century Teachers*: 'his mind lay parted like a continent separated by some vast convulsion of nature, each portion peopled by its own giant race, differing altogether in feature and language, and committed in eternal hostility to one another'.[141]

'The Negative Stage in the Life of Thought' (1878)

- Hegel is, like Heraclitus, the 'dark philosopher' – a reference to Ferdinand Lassalle's book on Heraclitus, also used on the same point in *The Moral Ideal*.[142]
- Truth 'we believe to be attained by human beings in this world only by passing through a phase of blind trust, and a phase of exaggerated recoil from it'[143] – a claim made in the Amberley essay and which goes back to her 1865 Hegel article.

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138 Wedgwood, '"Unseen Universe"', 1425.
139 Wedgwood, 'Amberley', first notice, 895.
140 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 92; my emphasis.
141 Wedgwood, 'What is Christianity?', *Spectator*, 11 November 1876, 1409; *Teachers*, p. 257.
142 Wedgwood, 'Negative', 1067; *Moral Ideal*, 121. See Lassalle, *Die Philosophie Herakleitos des Dunkeln von Ephesos*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Duncker, 1858).
143 Wedgwood, 'Negative', 1068.

'A German Hypatia' (1878)

- Compares Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* to Julian's defence of the non-celibate life against Augustine – and in *The Moral Ideal*, Wedgwood says Julian was a pre-modern Charles Kingsley. This is a rather singular set of associations.[144]

'Character and Position' (1878)

- To the ancients, 'liberty meant dominion'.[145] Compare: 'Liberty, to the citizen of classic antiquity, meant dominion. To be free was to have a share in government. Freedom as much implied servitude as the convex implies the concave'.[146]
- 'Men and Women' later refers back to 'the strain that is thrown on character when position goes for nothing'.[147]
- Refers to John Morley on 'casting out the corpse of the dead self' – a slight misquotation, from his *Critical Miscellanies* vol. 1, also slightly misquoted in her 'Vanity of Men of Letters'. The two misquotations are from consecutive pages of his Byron essay.[148]
- 'A man educated under such a régime as that of J. S. Mill's childhood and youth [...] who remembers a cowed and anxious youth'.[149] Compare: 'the account given by John Stuart Mill in his autobiography, of his own education. He speaks of a [...] cowed and anxious childhood'.[150]
- 'In this imperfect world our faults invite notice much more actively than our virtues. Evil is everywhere far more obvious than good. "Le crime est bruyant par sa nature, la vertu est silencieuse par la sienne."'[151] Compare: 'Dissatisfaction [...] expresses itself. The natural impulse of human beings is to be silent about what goes right, and put every cause of

144 Wedgwood, 'Hypatia', 1043; *Moral Ideal*, p. 350.
145 Wedgwood, 'Character', 1266.
146 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 176.
147 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', 952.
148 Wedgwood, 'Character', 1267; *Teachers*, p. 341. See Morley, *Critical Miscellanies, Vol. 1*, new edn. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1878): 'cast out the body of our dead selves', p. 226; 'great men failing to recognise how great they are', p. 225.
149 Wedgwood, 'Character', 1267.
150 Wedgwood, 'Maternal Self-Sacrifice', part one, *Parents' Review* 7 (1896), 3.
151 Wedgwood, 'Character', 1267.

displeasure into words. […] We all feel it cleverer, it is hard to say why, to discover flaws than merits, and with no tendency towards grumbling or complaint, the most natural form of remark will generally be found to be depreciatory'.[152]

'La Rochefoucauld' (1879)

- 'An every-day illustration of this truth is forced upon almost all fellow-travellers. A common journey is a dangerous experiment for friendship [...] because the fellow-travellers are, under such circumstances, forced into recognising defects to which they had previously no clue'.[153] Compare: 'how impossible it is for any amount of social intercourse to test the qualities needed in travel. The first day of a common journey reveals defects that have been hidden from even intimate acquaintance for years';[154] and 'the proverbial difficulties that attend fellow-travellers. Why are those who take a journey together so certain to discover each other's faults?'[155]

'Friends Old and New' (1879)

- 'The habit of surveying all moral ideas from the watershed of right and wrong, while it is a great foe to any just and delicate appreciation of character, is by no means favourable to the sense of right and wrong itself. That faculty needs much repose. […] A delicate gradation of colour is not more surely lost under a dazzling effect of light and shade, than the true hearing of moral characteristics under the spirit that stamps every epithet with approval or with blame'.[156] Compare: 'Whatever gives our faculties repose, gives them strength. There is a tendency in human nature, to which the very meaning of words bears witness, to judge too much, – to stamp neutral qualities with praise or blame'.[157]

152 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 417.
153 Wedgwood, 'La Rochefoucauld', *Spectator*, 26 July 1879, 944.
154 Wedgwood, 'Fellow-Travellers', 1115.
155 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', 952.
156 Wedgwood, 'Friends', 1280.
157 Wedgwood, 'Purpose', 389.

- 'Old friend' had a special meaning for her. She began to call Browning her 'old friend' as soon as they met: 'You were an old friend to me long before I saw you'.[158] She dedicated *The Moral Ideal* to an 'old friend', later revealed to be Browning.[159]

'Justice' (1879)

- Justice 'we believe to be the rarest of virtues […] "I have found men more kind than I expected, and less just," said Johnson'.[160] Compare: 'The world, said Dr. Johnson, had proved more kind and less just than he expected it to be; and that, we believe, is a general experience'.[161] 'It was said by Dr. Johnson in summing up [his] experience, that he had found mankind more kind than he expected, and less just. […] No doubt justice is the most difficult duty there is'.[162] The remark is quoted yet again in 'Democracy and Justice'.[163] Over the *Spectator*'s entire history, the remark occurs just four times – once in 1850, then in 'John M'Leod Campbell', 'Democracy and Justice', and here.
- On 'Justice' being 'the most rare of virtues',[164] compare: 'The higher ideal of justice – how much higher is known to few, because it is also so wonderfully more rare'; 'A rare specimen of that little appreciated virtue, *justice*. When will people see that generosity is the easy, and so to say, coarse virtue, and that all that kind of excellence which it absorbs must, in a mind more delicately conscientious, take the form of justice?'.[165]
- 'To every Christian, some echo of the voice that bid his followers renounce the cloak when the coat was taken from them has been a disturbing influence in this ideal, – an influence not often consciously accepted, perhaps, in practice, and most

158 J. W. to Browning, 14 May 1864, in Curle, *Broken Friendship*, p. 2.
159 Brown, *Wedgwood*, p. 151.
160 Wedgwood, 'Justice', 1544.
161 Wedgwood, 'M'Leod Campbell', second notice, 1125.
162 Wedgwood, 'Maternal Self-Sacrifice', part II, 115–16.
163 Wedgwood, 'Democracy and Justice', *Spectator*, 12 April 1890, 506.
164 Wedgwood, 'M'Leod Campbell', second notice, 1124.
165 Wedgwood, 'The Relation of History to Politics', *Spectator*, 8 July 1882, 894; J. W. to Emelia Gurney, 9 July 1872, in Gurney, ed., *Letters*, p. 124.

rarely discernible there, but still never without influence on the Christian theory of a right life'.[166] Compare: 'Christendom has hallowed the precept to give the cloak to him who asks the coat [...] Christianity has moulded character, where we should vainly seek to discern that it had influenced conduct'.[167]

- 'To the merely logical intellect, no doubt, the ideas of forgiveness and of justice appear utterly incongruous'.[168] Compare: 'In the vision of truths too large for our grasp [there is] an element of that which the logical intellect, if it insist on systematising all belief, can only reckon as contradiction'; 'However certain it may appear to the logical intellect that that which is meant by virtue can have no place in the Divine nature'.[169] The following table from AntConc shows her repeated and distinctive use of 'logical intellect', a phrase not occurring anywhere else in my corpus (Figure 4):

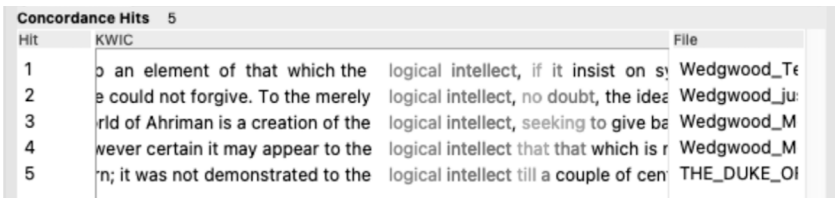


Fig. 4 AntConc table showing Wedgwood's use of *logical intellect*. Image created by the author (2026).

"'Grievances of Women'" (1880)

- 'The law of inversion. If we were to call it the closeness of all opposites, instead of the mind's tendency to pass from one to the other, we should, perhaps, seem to present to the reader a truism rather than a paradox [...] We would now call the reader's attention to another illustration of the law that

166 Wedgwood, 'Justice', 1345.
167 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 373.
168 Wedgwood, 'Justice', 1344.
169 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, p. 215; *Moral Ideal*, p. 264.

"extremes meet."'[170] Compare: 'This is one of the innumerable cases where extremes meet'; 'the truth of a saying of Plato's, that the least change of movement is that of inversion'; 'Inversion, says Plato, is the least change of movement possible'.[171]

- Note also her distinct tendency to link *truism* and *paradox*, e.g.: 'To unfold the meaning […] in that sentence would take us into the regions rather of truisms than of paradox'; 'he leaps from a truism to what would, in former ages, have been regarded as an extravagant paradox'; 'every sudden intellectual advance may seem rather a truism than a paradox'.[172]
- (Slightly mis)quotes Browning: 'Burns, Shelley, are with us; they fight from their graves' – from his poem 'The Lost Leader': 'Burns, Shelley, were with us; they watch from their graves!'. This poem was the first thing she and Browning ever discussed when they met in 1863.[173]

'Political Characteristics of Woman' (1880)

- 'It is a curious illustration of the law that extremes meet'[174] – discussed above.
- '"Nach Freiheit strebt der Mann, die Frau nach Sitte," says Goethe, through the mouth of one of his most amiable heroines. *Sitte* is a word very difficult to translate; it is, as far as we can remember, generally rendered "order"'.[175] Compare: 'Goethe put into the mouth of a woman the sentence, "Nach Freiheit strebt der Mann, die Frau nach Sitte" […] *Sitte*, however we translate it – "order", we suppose, would be the best rendering here'.[176]

170 Wedgwood, '"Grievances"', 588.
171 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 417; 'Ethics and Literature', *Contemporary Review* 71 (January 1897), 80.
172 Wedgwood, *Teachers*, pp. 265, 297, 318.
173 J. W. to Effie (Euphemia) Wedgwood, 13 July 1863, in *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*, SD 2650. See also Brown, *Wedgwood*, pp. 100–1, 323.
174 Wedgwood, 'Political Characteristics', 1281.
175 Ibid., 1281.
176 Wedgwood, 'Women and Politics', 686.

'Selfishness' (1882)

- 'The awful command, "Depart from me", is addressed to those who[…]were guilty of no sin but selfishness'.[177] Compare: 'A great preacher of our own day tells us that the invitation, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord," would, if it could fall on the ear of the sinner, give him no […] joy, but certainly he did not mean that if, by a supposition of equal difficulty, we imagined the command, "Depart from me," to fall on the ear of a saint, it would not inspire terror'; 'The command, "Depart from me, ye cursed," is addressed to those who have led the life of the average member of society, doing little harm, but less good'.[178]
- Aristotle's 'scheme of virtue as a mean between two extremes excludes the idea of that root of all that is highest in Virtue, – readiness for self-sacrifice'.[179] Compare: 'The pupil of Plato […held] the doctrine that virtue must be sought always in a mean between excess and defect. […] The very idea that lies at the root of goodness for a Christian, […] the idea of self-sacrifice – was […] foreign to the Greek ideal'.[180]
- 'Even to seek to lose our self, we must have known it […] Our own nature can be revealed to us only when we are transplanted beyond it. The depths within are always made clear by some light reflected from another soul, and can be fully illuminated only by that light which is not reflected, and which shines from the other of every human soul, the true complement of our common humanity'.[181] Compare: 'Without the self, there is no not-self'; 'no ideal is possible if that which is idealized know no Beyond. […] Man can strive towards no virtue in which he does not feel the sympathy of God. He must feel himself in some sense a fragment, if ever he is to discover his true oneness. Virtue must be a refracted ray from something above Virtue'.[182]

177 Wedgwood, 'Selfishness', 1051.
178 Wedgwood, 'Pleasure and Pain', 1196; 'Eternal Punishment and Eternal Hope', 857.
179 Wedgwood, 'Selfishness', 1052.
180 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 161.
181 Wedgwood, 'Selfishness', 1053.
182 Wedgwood, 'Self and Unself', 630; *Moral Ideal*, p. 393.

'Dislike' (1883)

- 'It is but the change of a couple of letters which converts the hostis to the hospes'.[183] Compare: 'the mere alteration of a letter, for instance, converts the hospes to a hostis'.[184]
- '"There are but three fingers' space," says the Talmud, "between Heaven and Hell."'[185] Compare: 'A quotation I remember once copying from the Talmud, "There is but three fingers space between heaven and hell"'.[186]
- 'Most people have felt at some time or other what was expressed by the dying man who, when told that he was going where the wicked would cease from troubling, responded, earnestly, "And the good, too, I hope!" For our own part, we have sometimes thought that if the good would cease from troubling, we would gladly take our chance of the wicked'.[187] Compare: 'Dean Stanley mentions somewhere a dying man who, when told that he was going where the wicked would cease from troubling, replied that what he wanted was to go where the good would cease from troubling'.[188]
- 'Almost all synonyms for [dislike] are stamped with blame, so that it seems impossible to mention an incapacity for satisfactory intercourse with another person as a mere fact about one's relation to him, and not as some contribution to an estimate of his own character'.[189] Compare the following opening lines of her next essay, 'Gratitude'.

'Gratitude' (1883)

- Opening paragraph: 'We have before this remarked on the tendency in the English language, and to some extent in

183 Wedgwood, 'Dislike', 214.
184 Wedgwood, '"Grievances"', 588.
185 Wedgwood, 'Dislike', 214.
186 J. W. to Victoria Welby, 12 December 1886 box 2, Victoria Welby Fonds, 1970-010_box019-file12.
187 Wedgwood, 'Dislike', 213.
188 Wedgwood, 'Obedience', 1114.
189 Wedgwood, 'Dislike', 212.

all language, to stamp moral epithets with too distinct an implication of praise or blame, or perhaps we should say rather of blame alone, for the impulse that approves is a much fainter one, and gives its verdict with less emphasis. We want the power of disinterested moral description'.[190] This is not only a cross-reference to 'Dislike' but also to 'Moral Purpose in Fiction': 'There is a tendency in human nature, to which the very meaning of words bears witness, to judge too much,—to stamp neutral qualities with praise or blame, and leave hardly an epithet which can be used to describe a mere quality, without connoting an opinion as to its merit. [...] Or even when the words we use have remained mere epithets, why does this habit of judging infuse condemnation into a mere attempt to give a true description of character?'[191]

'Christianity and Politics' (1884)

- 'But there can be no doubt in an unprejudiced mind what has been the influence of Christianity on slavery. "Ce n'est pas Spartacus qui a supprimé l'esclavage, c'est bien plutot Blandine," says a historian whose testimony to anything Christian will not be received with suspicion,—M. Renan.'[192] Compare: 'as Renan says of one who may be considered as the spiritual descendant of Epictetus – the slave-girl and martyr Blandina – he did more to abolish slavery than Spartacus did.'[193]
- 'It is the most theological of all poets, and the one in whom the spirit of the Middle Ages is most completely expressed, who gives a most emphatic sanction to the belief that these powers are equals. No ideal of life is more political than Dante's. The Emperor and the Pope are correlative authorities'.[194] Compare: 'We understand the Middle Ages best, when we keep as a clue to their history the yearning in the great mind which may be taken as the representative of mediaeval Faith after a corporate

190 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 416.
191 Wedgwood, 'Purpose', 389.
192 Wedgwood, 'Christianity and Politics', 153.
193 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 302.
194 Wedgwood, 'Christianity and Politics', 153.

union of which the Pope should be the heart, and the Emperor the head. Dante feels the "Holy Roman Empire" a sacred ideal'.[195]

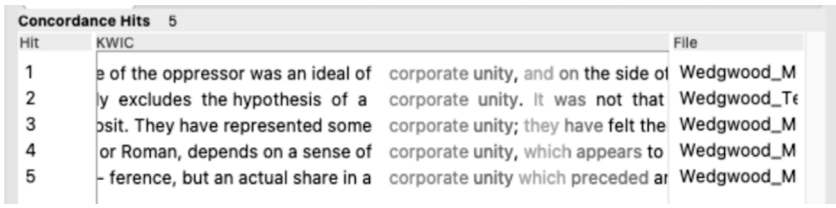
'Democracy and Truth' (1885)

- 'The scientific man, it is evident, is considering truth as it is opposed to ignorance; the poor man is considering truth as it is opposed to falsehood'.[196] Compare: 'Wearied with the keen knife-edge antithesis of Truth and Error, [science] turned with rapture to the [...] gradation that severs Knowledge from Ignorance' and 'loses the sense of any difference between ignorance and error'.[197]
- 'Respect for truth [...] forms a link between the intellectual and moral halves of our nature, [...] Truthfulness on a non-intellectual soil becomes honesty. [...] The truth of science is [...] connected with [... and] separate from, the truth of honesty'.[198] Compare: 'If the hatred of error appear side by side of the love of truth, then assuredly we have entered on a moral region. We thus enter a territory where the right borders on the wrong.'[199]
- 'Reserve is no breach of truthfulness'.[200] Compare: 'The theory that reserve is hostile to truth, is the very thing we are protesting against'.[201]
- 'The poor need, above all things, to be taught that we inhabit a world of inexorable sequences, — a world in which Will finds granite barriers, and works efficaciously only when it recognises them'.[202] Compare: 'The greatest difficulty in the way of helping the poor, is getting them to see that there are such things as non-moral laws. [...] We are inhabitants of a realm of Necessity, which it is the common interest of all [...] to understand [...] those invariable sequences which have been called its laws'.[203]

195 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 239.
196 Ibid.
197 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, pp. 380, 42.
198 Wedgwood, 'Democracy and Truth', *Spectator*, 5 September 1885, 1165, 1166.
199 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, p. 42.
200 Wedgwood, 'Democracy and Truth', 1166.
201 Wedgwood, 'Biography', in *Teachers*, p. 331.
202 Wedgwood, 'Democracy and Truth', 1166.
203 Wedgwood, 'The Church in Danger', *Spectator*, 13 August 1892, 220.

'Party Spirit' (1885)

- Invokes her signature concept of corporate unity (see concordance, Figure 5).



Concordance Hits 5

Hit	KWIC		File
1	e of the oppressor was an ideal of	corporate unity, and on the side of	Wedgwood_M
2	y excludes the hypothesis of a	corporate unity. It was not that	Wedgwood_Te
3	osit. They have represented some	corporate unity; they have felt the	Wedgwood_M
4	or Roman, depends on a sense of	corporate unity, which appears to	Wedgwood_M
5	- ference, but an actual share in a	corporate unity which preceded ar	Wedgwood_M

Fig. 5 AntConc table showing Wedgwood's use of *corporate unity*. Image created by the author (2026).

- 'We should be so much better off if we could sometimes describe a change without our either opposing or condemning it' – as in 'Gratitude': 'We have before this remarked on the tendency in the English language, and to some extent in all language, to stamp moral epithets with too distinct an implication of praise or blame'.[204]
- 'We need that warning expressed in the quaint saying of Plato, that it is "the art of measurement which would save the soul;"'[205] – the *only* four *Spectator* items containing this phrase are all by Wedgwood: '"The Unseen Universe"', 'The First Opponent of Christianity', '"The Majority"', and this essay.

'Men and Women' (1886)

- 'The old ideal of education […] was to introduce the young mind to a hierarchy of knowledge […] [Now] One fact is to be as good as another.'[206] Compare: 'The old ideal was selective […] [but now] one fact is as good as another.'[207]
- 'Only turn back to the civil sentences at the beginning of Macaulay's review of a book of Miss Aikin's, and you will feel what a different thing the relation between men and women was half a century ago. […] Macaulay evidently felt that he owed

204 Wedgwood, 'Gratitude', 416.
205 Wedgwood, 'Party Spirit', *Spectator*, 17 October 1885, 1368.
206 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', 951.
207 Wedgwood, 'Woman and Democracy', 337–38.

Miss Aikin a kind of consideration which to him and her alike it would seem absurd to expect from her, […] because she was a woman and he was a man.'[208] Compare: 'looking back no further, for instance, than Macaulay's criticisms on Miss Aikin, note the change of tone, as contrasted with anybody's criticism of a lady's book now-a-days. Every one would feel it absurd for a reviewer to take the sex of his author into account in his criticisms'.[209]

- '"Man and woman," says a mystic writer, "are each to each the image of God"'.[210] Compare: '"Man and woman," says a religious mystic, "are each to each the image of God."'[211]

'Obedience' (1886)

- Today 'the individual [is] the starting-point of moral analysis', for the ancients 'man is but a fragment, apart from those relations which bind him to the past and to the future'.[212] Compare: 'Whereas we conceive the State as a collection of individuals, they conceived the individual as a fragment of the State'.[213]
- Discusses John Stuart Mill's fraught relations with his father: 'He does not exaggerate the bad influence of this stern discipline; it did not, he tells us, prevent his having a happy childhood. He does not underrate its good influence; he allows that it gave him an intellectual start in life a quarter of a century ahead of his contemporaries'.[214] Compare: 'He speaks of a careful and laborious training, the advantages of which were fully appreciated by him […] which, as he tells us, started him in life with intellectual equipments equal to those of contemporaries ten years ahead of him'. His autobiography expresses 'old-fashioned manly reserve'; later she speaks of 'the incurable habit of reserve instilled by' his education.[215]

208 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', 952.
209 Wedgwood, '"Grievances of Women"', 389.
210 Wedgwood, 'Men and Women', 953.
211 Wedgwood, 'Woman and Democracy', 340.
212 Wedgwood, 'Obedience', *Spectator*, 21 August 1886, 1114.
213 Wedgwood, 'Aeschylus and Shakespeare', 84.
214 Wedgwood, 'Obedience', 1113.
215 Wedgwood, 'Maternal Self-Sacrifice', Part I, 3; 'Obedience', 1113; 'Maternal Self-Sacrifice', Part I, 3.

'Experiment' (1887)

- 'Among the many signs which meet the eye everywhere of the triumphant progress made by Physical Science in our day, none is more striking than the way in which the notion of scientific method has invaded the realm of moral and political relation. A few years ago, to say that any proposed measure affecting the welfare of human beings was an experiment, would have been more or less of a warning. Now it is becoming almost a recommendation'.[216] Compare: 'Experimental Legislation' on 'the new view of Parliament as an experimental laboratory [...] this is part of the identification of "experiment" and "science"', 'the habit of considering an experiment as in itself a valuable thing', and that 'men are ready in all regions to enter on any new line of action against which an overpowering case cannot be made out'.[217]
- 'A similar rigidity in keeping hold of one principle and neglecting the rhythm of intellectual movement, would – if such a thing were possible – end the progress not of a part of science, but of Truth itself'.[218] Compare: 'Truth, for finite beings, consists in an orderly and rhythmic change in the point of view'.[219]

'The Decay of Reticence' (1888)

- The title phrase is used in 'Reserve' and nowhere else in the entire *Spectator* back catalogue or the ProQuest database of Victorian periodical content.
- The essay enlarges on the core claims of 'Reserve': our increasing desire to reveal all,[220] and the loss of reserve as a driving force in current literature, manifested in Mary Ward's *Robert Elsmere*.[221]

216 Wedgwood, 'Experiment', *Spectator*, 9 July 1887, 1244.
217 Wedgwood, 'Experimental Legislation', *Spectator*, 12 March 1892, 362–63.
218 Wedgwood, 'Experiment', 1245.
219 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 145.
220 Wedgwood, 'Reserve', 1475; 'Decay of Reticence', *Spectator*, 27 October 1888, 1462.
221 Wedgwood, 'Reticence', 1462; 'Fiction and Faith', 221, discussing Ward's 'loss of reticence'.

'Evolution and Politics' (1889)

- 'We are now in an epoch like that which, after the acceptance of the Newtonian philosophy, rendered true ideas of chemistry difficult of acceptance, because they seemed to oppose themselves to Newton's great generalisation'.[222] The same is argued at length in 'Supernatural Religion' and reiterated in 'Experiment'.[223]
- That memory is a record is an inexplicable but given fact, which not even the most hardened sceptic can deny – a point made in 'The Relation of Memory to Will'.[224]
- 'There is no single truth [...] that is not a fragment'.[225] Compare: 'The history of thought is a continual exhibition of the incapacity of the human intellect to express in any single statement more than half of a truth'.[226]

'"Le Disciple"' (1890)

- Regarding experiment, 'If we accept this knowledge as the basis of human intercourse, we shall find its canons are changed',[227] especially regarding men and women – as argued in 'Experiment' and in 'Science and Faith'.
- 'Man and woman, as a mystic writer has said, are each to each the image of God'[228] – exact wording as in 'Woman and Democracy' and 'Men and Women' (see above).

'Old and Young' (1890)

- Quotes Quinet: '"On me disait dans ces jours," says Edgar Quinet, "'Tu ne vois pas ce qui est au devant de toi. Rien n'était plus vrai, je n'y voyais que moi."'[229] Compare:'"On me disait

222 Wedgwood, 'Evolution and Politics', *Spectator*, 20 July 1887, 77.
223 Ibid.; Wedgwood, 'Supernatural Religion', 978–99; 'Experiment', 1245.
224 Wedgwood, 'Evolution and Politics', 78; 'Relation of Memory to Will', 1122.
225 Wedgwood, 'Evolution and Politics', 78.
226 Wedgwood, *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., p. 463.
227 Wedgwood, '"Le disciple"', *Spectator*, 2 August 1890, 152.
228 Ibid.
229 Wedgwood, 'Old and Young', *Spectator*, 13 September 1890, 338.

dans ce temps-ci" (i.e., his youth), says Edgar Quinet, "Tu n'observes pas ce qui est autour de toi. Rien n'était plus vrai."'[230]

- 'The Cordelia of Sophocles cares […] little for her betrothed'.[231] On Antigone as the ancient Cordelia, see *Moral Ideal* second edition: 'Antigone, the Cordelia of the ancient stage'.[232]

Confirmation from Stylometry

I ran stylometric analyses hundreds of times with slightly varying corpora to test the robustness of the Wedgwood cluster, and the online Appendix presents two diagrams as representative examples.



Stylometric Diagram 3 Wedgwood's writings within a large periodical corpus. Image created by the author (2026), http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/35f1ae26



Stylometric Diagram 4 Wedgwood's writings excerpted from a large periodical corpus. Image created by the author (2026), http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/4ca1f2f7

Diagram 3 spans a large cross-section of my corpus. Almost all of Wedgwood's work occupies its own branch of the tree. The closest neighbour is a few writings by Hutton, which are placed as a sub-branch within the bigger Wedgwood branch, while other writings of his are clustered separately, and slightly higher up the tree. One or two of Wedgwood's writings have seeped into this Hutton cluster. But, overall, Diagram 3 makes the stylistic distinction between Wedgwood and Hutton apparent, as well as the much sharper distinction between Wedgwood and all other known authors in the corpus.

230 Wedgwood, 'Negative Stage', 1068.
231 Wedgwood, 'Old and Young', 338.
232 Wedgwood, 'Aeschylus and Shakespeare', 84–85; *Moral Ideal*, 2nd edn., pp. 192–93.

Diagram 4 is excerpted from a much larger dendrogram in which the Wedgwood branch sits at the top. The Diagram confirms the distinctness of the Wedgwood cluster. Her closest neighbours are Hutton and anti-vivisectionist *Spectator* author George Hoggan, who creep into the bottom of the image, but remain distinguished from Wedgwood. Incidentally, this diagram contains several possible attributions to Wedgwood (an article on Lewes, 'Analogy as a Guide to Truth', and 'The Social Life'), for which I have not found corroborating textual evidence, so I do not attribute them to her on this stylometric basis alone.

Online Appendix

Available online at
https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0543#resources

Stylometric Diagram 1 Wedgwood's writings amongst other Victorian periodical writings, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/c0e2bee9

Stylometric Diagram 2 Wedgwood's and Hutton's writings, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/30181f70

Stylometric Diagram 3 Wedgwood's writings within a large periodical corpus, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/35f1ae26

Stylometric Diagram 4 Wedgwood's writings excerpted from a large periodical corpus, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/4ca1f2f7

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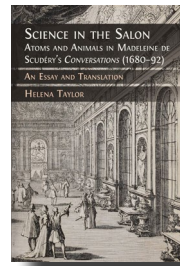
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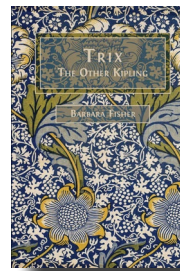


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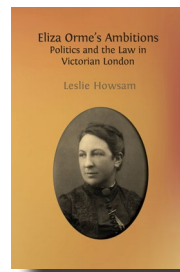


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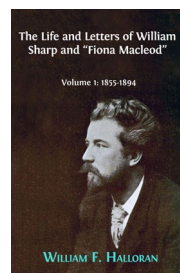


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The Philosophy of Julia Wedgwood

Imperfect Antithesis

Alison Stone

Julia Wedgwood (1833–1913) was a major intellectual presence in the Victorian period, yet her philosophical work has long remained overlooked. This book offers the first sustained study of her philosophy, recovering a distinctive and original framework centred on what she called the 'law of imperfect antithesis'. Drawing on both published texts and newly attributed anonymous essays, it reconstructs the unity of her thought across ethics, metaphysics, religion, and history.

Wedgwood argues that human life is structured by oppositions, between pleasure and pain, self and others, freedom and necessity, nature and the supernatural, but that these oppositions are never symmetrical. Instead, they are uneven, unstable, and rooted in lived experience. By resisting the simplifying tendencies of abstract logic, she develops a phenomenologically sensitive account of moral life. She emphasises self-sacrifice, aspiration, and the plurality of moral ideals, and criticises rival theories such as utilitarianism.

The book further shows how Wedgwood extends this framework into a philosophy of history, interpreting civilisations as developing through asymmetrical 'recoils' from earlier forms of life. Situating her in dialogue with figures such as Aristotle, Darwin, and Hegel, it demonstrates both her intellectual range and her independence.

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