FOREWORD

The subject of this book is the ancient all-important question that was initially debated by the Sophists, Socrates and Plato. Namely, is there a solid foundation for the ethical concept of the good and if so what is it? I will discuss four answers to this question, a skeptical answer, a rationalistic answer, and two existential answers, one of which I favour.

I have limited myself to worldviews that are significant in current Western culture and that can be supported by arguments (not to be understood as providing proof; the impossibility of doing so is a main point of mine).

For this reason I have refrained from discussing even minimally dogmatic theistic viewpoints of high intellectual quality although I respect them and am enriched by them in ways I have expressed in other writings.

This book takes the form of a series of dialogues. These dialogues should not be mistaken for actual conversations. For instance, they frequently contain sentences that given their precision and deviation from regular verbal speech hardly seem improvised. These dialogues are intended as a variation on the essay form – i.e. they are essays in dialogue.

I have chosen this unusual format partly for my own sake because I clarify my opinions best when I imagine myself in a situation discussing with someone else; partly for the sake of the reader, because I believe that the thought processes presented here are easier to follow in this format.

The person in the dialogues who represents my own views is Anders, whose name I have chosen to suggest my own first name. Hanne is named after Sartre, of whom she

approves (her name suggests the first part of Sartre's first name Jean-Paul). [Trans. Jean equals Hans in Danish. Hanne is the feminine version]. However, the names of Karl and Magnus are not meant to suggest actual persons.

April 1983 *Andreas Simonsen*

FIRST CONVERSATION

A skeptical view

(*The conversation takes place in the home of Anders' friend Karl. After an hour of regular conversation*):

ANDERS: Before it gets too late we had better change the subject from private matters and current issues and move on to the discussion of ethics you promised me, Karl. That is, if you still want to discuss a concept you consider empty?

KARL: Of course, I'll keep my promise. I don't dodge my promises – even though I'm a moral skeptic!

ANDERS: No, I know you don't. And I also know that despite your theoretical skepticism regarding ethics you are a remarkably accommodating and pleasant person. That is the reason I hoped you would discuss a subject that isn't of much interest to you. Also, if I didn't regard you as highly as I do I wouldn't much feel like discussing ethics with you or expect any benefit from it.

KARL: Of course, but I don't quite understand why you would want such a discussion. If you hope to convert me I must warn you that you'll be disappointed, Anders! You see, I've given these matters a lot of thought.

ANDERS: That's the impression I had whenever we've touched on these matters tangentially. And that is the main reason I want a real conversation with you about them. I don't expect that our discussion will win you over to my viewpoint (or me to yours), but that it will provide me with clarification and a broader outlook on the issues I consider most important in life.

[Karl maintains that our morality is only relative, conditioned by the tradition of our culture].

KARL: Very good! Then I will begin, as I have done before, by referring to the fact that nations living outside our culture hold moral values different from our own; even some that are contrary to ours. I needn't document this, but I will just mention an example I remember from Ruth Benedict's description of North-Western American Indians, the Kwakiutl. She observed that for them the aim of all activities was to show superiority over competitors. This was displayed in the most uninhibited gloating and ridicule of others. She reports speeches of chiefs that assessed by our cultural norms attest to shameless megalomania. As an example, she mentions this statement, "I am the great chief who shames people. I drive shame and envy into their faces by everything that I do."

A shaper contrast to our values of modesty and consideration is hard to imagine. And we cannot gainsay this contrast; we have no right to judge between these two concepts of morality – to declare our own for the right one.

ANDERS: Yes, we have. I will maintain that our concept of morality is at a higher level than the Kwakiutl.

KARL: Honestly, I think you are at a primitive level when you evade the fact that the only reason we view our concept of morality as better is because it is – ours! That it is the one we have been instilled and been indoctrinated into from childhood and for that reason we feel that its is naturally correct.

But since you push aside the Kwakiutl as primitive I would like you to consider a society that is anything but primitive, the Japanese. I recently read an interesting book

about the Japanese view of humanity and ethics, also by Ruth Benedict (you know how interested I am in ethnology).

Here we encounter an ethics where everything is based on reputation, not on a personal conviction of right and wrong. Ruth Benedict calls it a shame culture distinguishing it from a guilt culture. 'On' (pronounced as the English 'own') is the central concept, a set of distinctly authoritarian, mechanical duties especially to the emperor, down to one's parents and to people who have been helpful. It is significant that this norm must be applied unconditionally. What is demanded is a maximum of obedience (while in individual matters Chinese ethics acknowledges a general concept of fellow human feeling requiring a personal decision), the norms are based in the perception of a series of onerous relationships of debt that you are duty-bound to repay by strength of self-conquest. This fundamental position expresses itself partly when Japanese people only reluctantly accept help due to the resulting 'on' (even in the case of small things like being offered a cigarette) and when, correspondingly, they are reluctant to offer help, for example, at a traffic accident – and partly by the fact that self discipline is valued as the highest virtue and is developed through the strictest of upbringings.

ANDERS: Do you think it is correct to consider gratitude burdensome and unpleasant, something to be avoided, and to glorify self-discipline, indeed, a concept of self-discipline that presents itself as blind duty?

KARL: No, Anders. But why do I think it is incorrect? Because I grew up in Europe. And why do the Japanese think it is correct? Because they grew up in Japan.

ANDERS: That explanation serves us well when we encounter customs among other peoples and in milieus that we wince at, customs that have little to do with morality, such

as interior decorating, dress and eating habits. But when we encounter foreign moral norms that we spontaneously dislike it is also important to take your relativistic view. For instance, some cultures place significant value on kinship while others do so on the individual's right and duty to articulate an independent position. In those cases we are dealing with different traditions, with differences of kinds of morality and not with their levels of morality.

However, if the demand for kinship loyalty steamrollers an individual's right to self-expression or if an individualistic morality rejects any sense of belonging then I cannot abide a relativistic view, but must consider these as defects from the point of view of a universally valid morality.

I also deny that my rejection of the Japanese morality you described is exclusively because of my being European and therefore unable to judge simply as a human being. I will maintain that from an absolute standpoint Japanese 'on' morality is on a lower level than Biblical love of neighbour.

KARL: From an absolute standpoint? What does that mean? Are you able to abstract yourself from the entire content of your consciousness, which is from beginning to end European and evaluate globally "simply as human being," as if from some point in outer space whence you can view earth and all its forms of human life? Are you to able to reason and evaluate free from your own – thoroughly European – personality? Are you able to lift yourself by your hair?

ANDERS: Yes, Karl, that ability is one of the wonders of being human. This ability of going beyond oneself (self-transcendence, the philosophers call it) is a kind of 'open sesame' that you also have and make use of even if you are not cognizant of it.

Don't you think that our serfs had miserable lives?

KARL: Yes, of course. What of it?

ANDERS: Most of them probably didn't feel miserable, weren't cognizant of the outrageous violence they suffered (I'm thinking of the 16th and 17th Centuries, not of the 18th Century when the emerging Enlightenment awoke of a healthy sense of self-consciousness and discontent). If we accepted your subjectivist view and said that the serfs weren't actually miserable because they didn't feel they were – that is, from the point of view of their moral values – then the obligation to change their condition becomes problematic.

Conservative cynics have often legitimized the oppression of a group by stating that it didn't experience its situation as unacceptable. The conservative program was to avoid actual brutalities – that could have awoken the group's recognition of its oppression – and quietly continue oppressing since it wasn't experienced as such.

KARL: This is a case of sheer cynicism, because it takes advantage of others' lack of enlightenment. It is not a case of respecting the moral values of others. Such cynicism is obviously condemnable, but again from my European point of view, not from a universal human point of view.

ANDERS: But in your respect for the moral values of others your unlimited relativism results in unacceptable cynicism, Karl. You discard any kind of interference in other cultures and demand passivity even regarding grievously inhuman conditions. For instance, I happen to know that you object to interventions against female circumcision as practiced widely in Africa. This is not a harmless religious ritual, but a heinous mutilation intended to secure a woman's faithfulness to her husband-to-be, since the

damage leads to an inability to enjoy intercourse, indeed to pain during intercourse – as well as to other complications, even life-threatening ones.

KARL: Yes, this is horrible. But it is even more horrible, Anders, for us to impose our values on foreign cultures!

ANDERS: Obviously inhuman offences can be committed that way. I see a very difficult dilemma between the universal ideas of humanity that I espouse and the respect and caution we owe to foreign cultures. The difference between us is that you don't recognize that the dilemma exists. You are unconsciously driven by a universal ethics but intellectually you deny this in favour of moral relativism.

KARL: What you call a dilemma is actually a contradiction. The difference between us is that I'm trying to dissolve the contradiction while you're trying to obscure it, embellishing it by calling it a "difficult dilemma."

ANDERS: No, this is definitely not only a question of words. When I say "dilemma" I'm not seeking to obscure of diffuse it. I am convinced that we must distinguish sharply between actual contradictions and contradiction seeming – paradoxical – dualities and that this distinction is of radical importance.

When dealing with other individuals, just as with other groups, we find ourselves in the apparently absurd yet meaningful position of having to unite idealism, i.e. faithfulness to our convictions, and realism, i.e. tolerance towards other people's opinions and behavior. Insistence without tolerance turns into a caricature of idealism, viz. fanaticism – the monstrosity your vigilance is aimed at; but tolerance without enthusiasm for an idea about right and wrong, good and evil is a caricature of realism, viz. indifference and spinelessness. Genuine idealism must include understanding and

sensitivity; genuine realism must mean having to a position, having a guiding idealistic passion.

We encounter this paradoxical demand, this dilemma, as educators, when we must both lead and listen, both develop the student's sensitivity to the values we support and understand his/her unique possibilities and aptitudes.

After all, it is a fundamental paradox in our existence that two seemingly contrary positions belong together. Indeed, they only are valuable and meaningful once they infuse each other. We must be both open to the world, discerning, knowing, and able to act in it, as willing, subjective beings. We are confronted by what Bohr called a complementary relationship; a term he originally coined for special conditions in atomic physics that he became aware of in 1928.

KARL: These philosophical abstractions mean nothing to me.

But tell me, Anders. Since you apparently think love of neighbour is not only a European moral ideal derived from the most influential work in our past, the Bible, but consider it the absolute truth of ethics, how can you allow yourself to distinguish between higher and lower levels among cultures? The Biblical ideal of loving our fellow implies that everyone is of equal value!

ANDERS: Certainly. But it doesn't imply that we are equally valuable in our manner of living. That is whether according to our circumstances we develop into cynical exploiters or into helpful and sensitive persons. The only implication is that we are equally valuable from a deeper point of view - positively, because everyone has the possibility of contributing something valuable, and, negatively, because everyone is selfish and fundamentally dependent on circumstance. The Biblical view of humanity teaches that

we are equal in the sight of God, being His creation – equal in having been created egocentric and bound by causality, like all other creatures, and as spiritual and willing beings created "in the image of God."

KARL: As I said, you won't engage me in such abstract considerations and they don't get better by being theological rather than philosophical. I'll have to ask you to be more concrete and stay closer to our topic. With what right do you disqualify a culture as primitive?

ANDERS: Thank you for reminding me of the expression you used about my attitude toward the Kwakiutl, that I "pushed them aside" as primitive. My point is that the cultures we commonly call primitive can only be called that in the value neutral meaning of the word; i.e. as "representing a far older stage of development than our own." However, in some instances they must be called primitive in the pejorative sense, say regarding their scientific or technical level and in part their moral-religious level. In return they must be regarded as being at a higher level than ours in other areas.

For example, in our one-sided development of the intellect – by focusing on philosophy, science and technology - we have lost much perspicacity and the facility of direct experience, that is, experiencing with our entire personality. We have undergone a dulling of basic wonder at the sun, the moon and darkness, and the intense joy and gratitude of coming back to life after severe illness. And with its attempts at precise delimitations of concepts analytic thinking has stifled or narrowed many older words that expressed valuable perceptions of wholeness (For example, the word 'virtue' [trans.: in Danish 'dyd'] which is related to 'capable' [trans.: in Danish 'duelig'] was not originally

used to denote morality, but was used generally for what was valuable; and the Greek work logos was the common word for both speech and the thought expressed).

Like you, I reject the widespread arrogant feeling of superiority toward older cultures, an arrogance Vilhelm Grønbech fought against with his recovery of many unique splendors in the worldviews of the ancients. Unfortunately, he erred in the opposite direction with his merciless belittling of Hellenism as decadent in comparison to older Greek culture.

In the cases where I use the word primitive pejoratively, I am simply expressing an evaluation of a certain way of thinking, feeling or acting, of ethical standards. I also use it that way about aspects of our culture and other highly developed cultures, such as the Japanese view you described.

KARL: That doesn't improve matters. It still remains that when you evaluate the moral norms of different societies you apply a universal standard. From where did you get it?

ANDERS (smiling): I can't answer that, Karl. I can only tell you that I have it – and that you have it, too, and that you use it unconsciously. From a thoroughly neutral stance could you compare the moral concepts that determine our penal code with those that consider it just to stone women who have had relations outside marriage and those that still use refined methods of torture and humiliation by pillory, administrations of justice that serve revenge and public entertainment? Can you really objectively see those cultures' moral concepts in the same way as ours? Can you hold back from applying a general, evaluative point of view?

KARL: I try to. Let me as you a question in return. Is it really so self-evident that our administration of justice represents a higher morality when we punish economic crimes

so much more severely than crimes of violence – apparently out of the conviction that property requires more respect and protection that than do life and limb.

ANDERS: I completely agree with that criticism. Human empathy that fortunately led us to milder forms of punishment, as when we exclude motives of revenge and attempt to understand the criminal's whole story, has unfortunately degenerated into a form of benevolence where serious violence against innocents lead to 30 or 60 days in prison. Justifiable consideration of the criminal's background has been given too much weight over the equally necessary regard for the maintenance of a healthy sense of justice. In this case humane arguments have weakened our fundamental human feelings of indignation against violence and empathy toward victims of violence.

I certainly do think that on this point our administration of justice – by being blasé – stands at a lower lever than that of many primitive societies. Earlier I mentioned our one-side development of the intellect as a negative, as the main reason why we cannot generally speaking regard our culture as higher. As I said, it is only at specific moments that I apply my general idea of good and evil.

[Karl explains his moral relativism as part of his deterministic and positivistic worldview].

KARL: This notion of an absolute idea seems primitive to me in the word's pejorative sense, fit for an age when people believed that the earth was the fixed centre of the universe. Today a relativistic view of morals is the only reasonable position. Science has enlightened us to the fact of our globe's relative standing, that its placement and movements are dependent on everything else, and that our behaviour is thoroughly dependent on external and internal factors (I'm especially thinking about Freud's

uncovering of the subconscious forces that determine our behaviour); and about the dependency of language on our sensory system. The Positivists have unveiled that all those words that are not rooted in experience have no content. That is, metaphysical words or supposedly independent moral concepts. When science and philosophy teaches us to think deterministically and empirically then our stand toward morality must be a relativistic one.

ANDERS: But, Karl! I think it's unfortunate that so many people under the influence of the monumental success of the natural sciences have become convinced that we should become determinists and empiricists regarding our entire view of life, that we should take a scientific attitude to all problems, including ethical ones. It's as if science had proven its ability to explain all things and that a scientific approach is the only legitimate way of encountering life. This is the one-sided approach I mentioned, believing that the intellect is the most important part of us.

KARL: Well, it is this ability that distinguishes us form the animals.

ANDERS: Our distinction, yes. But it is not our hallmark. Viewed separately, the intellect only separates us quantitatively from the animals, in terms of power and effectiveness. Qualitatively speaking we only rise above them in the fortuitous interaction between reason and personality aspects (drives, passions, feelings) oriented toward values, an interaction that presents itself as will. This is considered an illusion by determinists, who you believe have contributed importantly to our time's relativistic view of life, liberated us from naïve moral absolutism.

You mentioned Freud as a major inspiration, and for good reason. His very valuable discovery of powerful subconscious forces led him to the notion that a human

being is the natural product of innate strengths (first and foremost our drives) and the environment. This view didn't lead him to dissolve the concept of responsibility, but it is the conclusion that must be drawn and has been in this century, not only by psychologists but also more generally.

KARL: But wrongly, Anders. This conclusion need not and ought not be drawn. It is possible, just as Freud himself did, to hold on to pertinent moral concepts by recognizing them as important environmental factors. I too think that people are determined by the moral concepts governing the society in which they live.

ANDERS: According to strict determinism how much or how little effect this factor, the pressure from the prevailing morality, will have is already a given in each case by the relationship between the strength of those pressures and other factors working on the individual. This is just like how the path of a projectile is mechanically determined by the strengths among the factors impinging on it. There is no room for efforts will, no meaning in the concept of moral will.

For that reason 'acceptance' has become nearly a sacred word. The edict, "you must accept any behaviour, including your own," has to a large extent replaced the Ten Commandments and the commandment to love your neighbour. This is a moral edict that even you moral relativists bow to and regard as an absolute. Not only in the sense I'm using it in my conversation with you as valid for all people, but also in the sense of valid in all situations. Incessantly we hear today that we must learn to accept ourselves. I recall that Suzanne Brøgger in an interview stated that we must learn that we have been created good enough.

KARL: And I agree with her 100%. That kind of acceptance is a barrier against the horrible suffering we cause others by intolerance. Not to mention the suffering we cause ourselves by doing violence to our natures because of moral ideals and torturing ourselves with self-recriminations or by actually undermining ourselves with desperate remorse.

ANDERS: I, too, see an essential truth in the deterministic view. But I don't regard it as 100% valid. At this point we exchange roles. In this case I distance myself from absolutism – and not only in this case, but generally speaking. I do not view any single moral rule as absolute in the sense that it is valid in all situations. In the case of acceptance, I have stern caveats, especially concerning self-acceptance. For instance, I shuddered when I heard about a psychiatrist recently who in order to provide a patient with an example of psychic health stated, "I have realized that I am a jealous person and I have accepted that and I will live with it." That made me think of the story of the drunkard who when told to stop drinking said that it was too late. When his partner objected that it is never too late, he exclaimed, "Then I still have some time."

No, the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's comprehensive criticism of Freudian determinism seems appropriate to me. Among other things he says that by emphasizing our fundamental determination by our drives you'll end up ignoring our essential character of spirit and our proclivity for meaning.

KARL: Spirit! That is one of those words that positivistic analysis to its credit has taken aim at – all these speculative and highly idealistic words. Ayer made a great and much needed contribution when he exposed the emptiness of the word God.

And likewise when he went further than Moore in matters of ethics (to stay with our topic), who had already maintained that ethics was based on intuition and not on experience and for that reason was beyond argument. Ayer realized that intuition is an unsustainable concept. You cannot assert that there's a form of intuitive knowledge side by side with empirical knowledge. He realized that ethical statements have no rational content whatsoever. They are only emotive, expressions of feelings and thoroughly subjective. Thus he states correctly that the claim that some act action is morally wrong is equal to saying, "Ugh" and is meant to express (and inform others of) a certain emotional reaction. When we speak about moral evaluations – and evaluations generally, including aesthetical evaluations and in matters of scents and tastes – it is impossible to convince someone, at best we can persuade. We cannot make rational arguments, at best we can suggest, because in these matters opinions are based merely on each individual's emotions and first and foremost on what kind of culture and milieu we are part of. After the positivists' thorough scientific analysis discovered that language has two distinctly separate functions, one rational, the other emotive, it behooves us to get over our childish tendencies to believe in absolute, universally valid human moral truths. ANDERS: I'm sure that's so – if one shared your enthusiasm for positivism. That philosophy holds no wisdom for me.

The only true and useful thing for me is its reminder of how tempting and misleading careless use of language can be, both when appropriating words that because of their tinge of erudition or trendiness seem intelligent or by using concepts that are overdone, formed in thoughts free flight with no connection to real life. It is undeniably important for us to remember that in our eagerness to know and in our joy of using the

intellect, its ability to abstract and make sharp distinctions, we should not pursue concepts utterly detached from experience (quotidian as well as scientific) or from our senses. Such a philosophy would be warped and distorting – as meaningless as a tree overwhelmed by a desire to grow an amazing crown forgot to draw nourishments from its roots.

KARL: Now you're speaking sensibly, and you're quite in line with the positivists. So where is the point at which you say you part from them?

ANDERS: I will tell you, Karl. While they clearly see the continuity that exists between intellect and senses they overlook the just as essential continuity between intellect and emotions. While statements about how a piece of food tastes doesn't involve the intellect and is purely subjective and inarguable, this is not the case for aesthetic evaluations and even less so for ethical ones. Both of these are based in the interaction of a person's intellect and emotions. Granted, the involvement of emotions means that the statement cannot be articulated in exact language, or indeed proven. I.e. the statement cannot be made fully rational and assume scientific validity. But due to the involvement of the intellect aesthetic and ethical opinions appeal to thinking and thus may become the basis for reasoning and for conversations. These opinions will contain more than "ugh." They are not entirely subjective. They are not similar to a value judgment like "blood sausage tastes awful."

When positivists insists on a sharp distinction between intellect and emotion they neglect complementing their useful analysis with the synthesis necessary to retrieve the holistic view of a personality we all already have and that cannot be dismissed as naïve or wrong. Indeed, 2,500 years of philosophy has given us invaluable training in thinking,

including analyzing and dissolving totalities. We have learnt to distinguish between body and soul, and in the case of the soul, between reason, emotions, drives and will. But just as we learn to analyze from philosophers and others we, must also learn from those whose main strength is their intense immediate experience (i.e. especially from children and primitive cultures) so that we do not end up making life destroying dissections.

The positivists' loss of holistic experience is characterized by the fact that they consider all words formed through such an experience empty or second rate. That is not only the case with supposedly speculative words like soul, spirit or beauty, but also with words that express convictions, presenting interactions between reason and emotion, such as, "I have a keen sense that there is something wrong about doing this," or "the legitimacy of a white lie can only be assessed in the specific instance by weighing the duty to be truthful against the need to be kind – that is, intuitively."

KARL: But, Anders, now you're bringing in Moore's vague concept of intuition that has been shown by positivism to be unsustainable.

ANDERS: True, words like intuition are often used very loosely – as when elevating barely considered opinions to intuitions – but properly used the word is a reasonable designation for the deepest and strongest perception a person can mobilize when important decisions have to be made. What is needed is judgment reached by holistic efforts, by the totality of the person, and not solely intellectually nor solely emotionally. Since our existence has a dimension of being as well as a dimension of value – equally fundamental dimensions, even if you intellectualists don't recognize it - in situations where both dimensions are involved we must make use of both intellectual and emotional abilities. That is, make intuitive judgments. Holistic views gained in this way are

completely legitimate, along side those that are purely analytical, derived intellectually. When ethical statements are based on such intuitions they are not unfounded.

KARL: That seems like an obscure explication to me. I vastly prefer the positivists' crystal clear thinking.

ANDERS: But Karl, listen to what Bohr said about them. (I recently read Heisenberg's *Der Teil und das Ganze* [The Part and the Whole] in which he reports several conversations he and his coworkers had with Bohr). Bohr is in agreement with their ambition of extreme clarity in all concepts but he distances himself from them insofar that such clarity cannot be achieved in life's more general questions. He also objects to the positivists because they don't recognize that the natural sciences themselves cannot live up to the demand for absolute distinctions as the very language describing experiments involve concepts whose domain cannot be defined absolutely. Somewhere in the process it becomes necessary to move from mathematical language to common language if the goal is to say anything about nature.

In other words, Bohr thinks that when we speak of general problems – about the whole as opposed to parts (hence Heisenberg's title) – we are forced to give up on absolute precision. But that doesn't mean we should remain silent about them. He emphasizes that this is even the case in quite specific matters in physics.

So evidently we must give up on precision in ethical matters in which all our decisions must be made by applying our intellect to individual events, not by arriving at logical conclusions, but by a synthesis that incorporates general values that are buried deep down in our emotional and unconscious layers. What we arrive at is a totality, not a mixture of emotion and intellect, realism and idealism. A totality is greater than the sum

of its parts – just as the impact of a poem is not equal to the sum of the effects revealed by an aesthetic analysis. There is a particular, complementary relationship between part and whole, between the individual and the universal. Such as, again, between the need to be kind to an individual and the duty to be truthful, or between group loyalty and the general regard for justice.

KARL: Now you bring in Bohr's complementarity, again. But I have already told you, Anders, that I lack any receptivity for elusive concepts; I am anything but speculative by nature. So I remain with the positivists' earth bound philosophy.

ANDERS: I have to say that Bohr's concept of complementarity is very grounded, not at all speculative. As mentioned, it is empirically founded in subatomic observations and the transposition of these insights to human life, as in the relationship between justice and love of fellow. Bohr was very careful about and utterly averse to making grand and frivolous pronouncements.

I cannot help but see positivist philosophy (and deterministic philosophy as the outcome of – and a significant influence on – the general tendency toward a one-sided scientific-philosophical worldview in our time, a monomaniac obsession with the intellect, as if human beings distinguished themselves above the animals by virtue of this facility alone.

In fact, humans only arose through a fortuitous integration of intellectual and emotional knowledge. Our culture has little understanding of life as a totality and thus as awe-inspiring, fundamentally inaccessible to analysis – indeed it gets destroyed in the process of close analysis. One-side use of analysis turns into dissection that kills.

[Karl turns to our fundamental moral norm; the law of reciprocity and states that it is not based in nature. It is unnatural].

KARL (with a little smile): After having spent so much ammunition attacking moral relativism (especially as a consequence of determinism and positivism), don't you think it's time for you to give an account of what ought to been seen as absolutely valid in ethics?

ANDERS: Yes, that is a reasonable demand. To begin with I will stay with an aspect of ethics that I hope will find resonance with you because it is broadly speaking rational. I say broadly speaking because I admit to non-rationality in two important ways. Firstly, we are concerned with an aspect, not with an independent element, that can be dissected and observed separately (ethics concerns a totality of the rational and the emotional). Secondly, I must step back from complete rationality since I cannot be fully assured of the absolute validity of the moral norm I will mention. I cannot prove it or generate it from a rationally acceptable grounding.

The moral norm I am thinking of is the so-called golden rule – behave towards others as you wish them to behave towards you – because it is fundamental to the rational aspect of ethics, righteousness. (I would actually have liked to use the word morality in this case and to reserve the word ethics for the totality of rational and emotional aspects. That is, the totality of righteousness and love of neighbour, including this love's presupposition in the religious feelings of awe, humility and reverence. But such parsing common language is only poorly equipped to handle, so I will not pursue this).

We may use righteousness as the common denominator for all of the virtues of rational morality, such as justice – both in behaviour (respecting the rights of others) and

in legal judgments (judging objectively, without regard for status) – trustworthiness (especially regarding truthfulness and promise keeping), tolerance, considerateness, self-control. The main concern in these concepts is, as in law, negative one, not to transgress the prescriptions, not to break the laws everyone wants to see upheld. This is the law of reciprocity that Jesus pronounced in positive terms, but which is commonly expresses in the negative, as in "do not do unto others…"

We are confronted by a rational rule. I wonder if you, too, might not recognize it, at least, as absolutely valid?

KARL: No, I'm sorry, Anders, but my position is not so superficial that it can be thrown over that easily. I naturally expected that you would propose the law of reciprocity as the essence of the prevailing moral code. You claim that everyone for their own sake would wish to uphold it. I repudiate that claim.

ANDERS: However, it is a fact that we find this fundamental moral norm in several cultures, not only in the Judeo-Christian (articulated by Jesus as well as by Hillel, the 1st Century sage), but also in Chinese culture (Confucius), in Indian and in Greek cultures (as hinted at already in Homer). This fact must provoke some reconsideration for a cultural relativist.

KARL: I don't dispute that it is necessary for a society to establish this norm in order to have a society; a peaceful, orderly form of co-existence in contradistinction to what Hobbes called "the war of all against all." But that is not the same as saying that everybody desires such order and – as you maintain – wishes to uphold the law of reciprocity. If that were so, there would be general agreement about its basic notion, that

all humans should have equal rights. As far as I can see, it is on this humanist-democratic notion that you confer the status of absolute truth?

ANDERS: Exactly!

KARL: It should suffice to remind you of the fact that far from everyone accepts this idea. But I will add that there is an overwhelmingly good reason why so many refute it; namely, for the simple reason that people are so utterly different from one another, intellectually as well as emotionally.

The enormous differences in intelligence among people make it reasonable to suggest that humans have different value. In this area (the only one) we have legitimate, fully valid rational measure of value. We can actually measure the intellectual distance between individual humans and animals. So there is good reason to view it as unnatural to assign equal rights to them. Clever people such as Plato, Goethe, Nietzsche, and Brandes here at home have made this argument. There is much to be said against equality and for elitism, against a democratic view and for an aristocratic one.

ANDERS: First of all, I do not accept any "fully valid rational measure of value." Secondly, when I speak of human value I primarily refer to universal human values, ethical qualities, and only secondarily to individual ones and in those cases I'm not especially thinking of scientific or philosophical achievements. I have as much regard for all other contributions that are just as necessary for a society, such art, craft, industry, trade, and politics. Thirdly, I too speak of differences in value, but with two caveats. There is no rational measure, and as I mentioned earlier, that at the deepest level there is no difference in the value of people. My evaluations only concern concrete events that are dependent on external factors (including happenstances).

As it is undeniable that people in concrete reality differ, what I mean to express by "equal rights," is equal after having taken this into account. What this means is that, say, in the intellectual arena, there should not be equal access to intellectually demanding jobs for someone who is not equipped for it. Or to a job that requires great theoretical talent for someone who doesn't possess it, but who has significant aesthetic or practical talents. People should not be made identical – that kind of equality is a caricature of democratic equality – but they should be respected as equal in their differences. Everyone, according to particular abilities (and everyone has some) should have equal opportunity to employ them and to be valued for them.

KARL: But regarding the ethical qualities you favour, what remains of your idea of equality, Anders, when, as you must admit, they too differ in "concrete reality," as you say? Regarding a sense of duty, you emphasized that everyone should be respected equally when they employ their talents. But what about those who don't employ their talents or who do so badly? People are different not only in talents but also in strengths of will and their moral approaches to these talents. You must accept a difference in value in these cases, insofar as your criterion is social usefulness. How can you maintain your idea of equality when you compare criminals and law-abiding citizens?

ANDERS: Because I do take into account what you just mentioned, how people comport themselves in concrete reality. With this short and patently pedantic sounding expression I mean that the value of a human being can only be assessed superficially based on how they function and behave in society insofar as society is always the result of conditions the individual has had no influence on. All those people we regard as proper and highly

esteemed members of society could under other circumstances have ended in quite different sutations, perhaps even as criminals.

KARL: What are you saying? Now you are taking my position, the determinism you earlier rejected as moral dissolution! What you are suggesting now is – exactly what I propose – that we are conditioned by external factors and that we cannot control how we behave. Which means that concepts like will, responsibility, guilt and ethics in general are meaningless.

ANDERS: No, what I challenged earlier was one-sided determinism. I naturally think that we must make use of our intellect, our capacity to understand, and therefore use the concept of causality – applying a deterministic view. That is what I am doing now when I reflect on the idea of equality, the main tenet of morality. This must be the foundation of tolerance fully understood (as respect, not as acquiescence). On the other hand I maintain that morality's other pole is the individual's strength of will applied to his/her conviction of what is right. This is a factor that seems to contradict the first, but it is precisely this tension makes tolerance lively and an achievement instead of passionless observation of differences.

Earlier I stated that our duality as knowing as well as willing beings necessitates partly a deterministic-realistic view and partly an indeterministic-idealistic view depending on how the given situation guides our intuition. For example, when my hatred of a violent criminal must yield to my understanding of him as a human being quite like myself. And, when my explanations for how I developed an unpleasant trait must yield to a determined struggle against it. It is true that humans are causally determined, but it is equally true that we are all equipped with will. In every situation we must involve our

entire personality in our evaluations (the intellect alone cannot decide by itself in the contest between intellect and will) as to which of two truths is relevant – or, rather how much weight to give each in the specific case and which way they'd lead us. That is, they are complementary. Sorry to have to irritate you with this term again.

KARL: It's not that the term irritates me. It mystifies me! (Using a sharp tone). I take you to mean that on one hand you would maintain that the actions of a violent criminal are determined, and on the other, that he has a will and thus a responsibility for what he has made of his opportunities. That's a strange form of logic! Excuse my somewhat aggressive formulation.

ANDERS: Not at all, Karl. Friends should be able to interact openly and excitedly.

KARL (smiling): In my excitement I also forgot how to be a host. Would you like a cigar?

ANDERS: No, thank you. I don't smoke.

KARL: Of course, I knew that. But I have just been given a box of homemade candies. You tend to like that sort of thing. I'll put the box in front you and you are welcome to take as many as you like.

ANDERS: You'd better not. That's a very risky proposition.

KARL: I'll happily assume the risk. You're welcome to empty the box, Anders!

Now back to our subject. What do you do about the fact that some people already from birth – that is, before the will you stipulate has developed – are excluded from the possibility of becoming good, in the sense of good citizens? How can your idea of equality be maintained in the face of this fact?

ANDERS: Fact? No such observable fact exists. In that case we are beyond concepts of experience and reason and have entered matters of worldviews. It is my conviction that no human is born without the possibility of becoming a good citizen.

KARL: Isn't it a scientific fact incontestably proven by biochemists and psychologists (in collaboration with animal psychologists) that every human being is born with particular strengths among various secretions (hormones, enzymes, etc.) and among various instincts?

ANDERS: Yes, but from this only follows that people have different possibilities, not that there are some that have none.

KARL: But what about, say, a man who unfortunately has a hormonal system that gives him an extremely aggressive sex drive, what are his possibilities for avoiding conflict even in our society with its relatively liberal sexual morality? Even though the pressure from opposing determinants – moral codes and criminal law – keeps him from committing rape, he wouldn't manage to avoid lesser sexual crimes. By this fact he is already dubious and marked to such an extent that he is entirely cut off from being a good citizen.

ANDERS: No, there are always opportunities. And the fewer they are – as in cases of disability and severe illness – the greater value and meaning they have, when they are utilized.

Apart from that you've overlooked the fact that such handicaps are often associated with boons. In the case of the man you mentioned, a person like that is usually be equipped with great vitality and would in situations demanding action and bravery be better positioned than most to accomplish something valuable.

But when you mentioned individual biological configurations you also spoke of the strengths of various instincts. Which did you have in mind, Karl?

KARL: First and foremost the instinct for freedom and the instinct for security. Biologists have pointed out that these instincts that are clearly present in animals in the need to move freely and needs for security (as in the territorial sense and den building), show up in humans in varied proportions from one individual to the next. In unhealthy cases they express themselves as irrational fear of enclosed or open spaces. That is, as claustrophobia or agoraphobia. In this connection, I want to say that it would be much harder for people who have a relatively strong instinct for freedom to fit into society with its many limitations on freedom than people who are dominated by a strong need for security.

ANDERS: To this I will respond as I did earlier, that corresponding to different personality types there are widely different situations making their own demands. So a society certainly needs its freedom oriented personalities, in order to achieve reforms and development and in all those jobs that require adaptability to continually changing tasks and conditions (as when the job moves from place to place or many travels must be made. In such situations people who only thrive and function under secure consistency would be useless).

KARL: I see what you mean. I had better get to my main objection to your idea of equal value. Namely, that no person possesses a moral quality. By nature we are all, like animals, instinctively egocentric, amoral beings. Consistent with each individual's biochemistry and other determinants this reveals itself more or less plainly in one way or another, such as in sensuality or aggressiveness, or cowardliness or vanity.

Yes, I am convinced that every one of us under suitably stressful conditions could be guilty of cruel abuses of others, just like the Nazi war criminals. I will refer you to an interesting scientific investigation. Not all that long ago an American psychologist proved through extensive experiments how most normal humans could be led by authoritarian commands to commit horrible acts, without ever being threatened with violent reprisals. The participants in the study were told that the experiment aimed at undersatnding the effects of punishment on learning. Therefore they had to give "the student" electrical shocks every time a wrong answer was given.

ANDERS: You are referring to Stanley Milgram's experiments?

KARL: Yes, do you know about them?

ANDERS: Yes, both from reading about them and from a documentary film. And of course I'm horrified by the results that most participants obeyed the commands to the point where they gave increasing electrical shocks despite "the students'" screams, indeed they went so far as to give shocks that according to the "instruments" would have caused death.

But I would argue that the experiment was encumbered by a number of uncontrollable errors. First, despite complete personal integrity Milgram may not have avoided that the experiment in some way was influenced by his expectations (that resistance to committing abuse is weaker that generally accepted). More concretely, I would object that the participants trusted, albeit blindly, that the harm they might cause was part of a scientific experiment conducted by a respected researcher and taking place in a psychology lab and therefore could not possibly be actually damaging nor deadly. Finally, it is intellectually too simplistic to believe or to take it for granted that the

horrible and frightening effects of "the students'" screams wouldn't have been much greater if they had been real rather than simulated (after all, they weren't given actual shocks).

What the experiment shows for me is first and foremost the outrageous glorification of science in our time. This is illustrated not only by the participants' willingness to involve themselves in such an experiment and in their blind trust and obedience, but also in the basic conviction underlying the experiment itself, that it is possible to prove anything about the depth of the soul, to say anything exact about it in scientific terms – as it were, to map it.

No science is competent to deal with the ultimate, most general aspects of human life. No science can remove my conviction that there is something good in every person.
KARL: But perhaps your own experiences – you knowledge of yourself and others might. Despite your fanaticism it can't have escaped your notice the kind of impulses that continually arise in us – before moral reflection begins – that reveal what we essentially are. I think of impulses like aggression when we feel offended or desire at seeing a beautiful woman.
ANDERS: I haven't closed my eyes to such impulses. On the contrary, I've given them a lot of thought and I've come to the conclusion that they show – not as you say our essential selves, but – a side of our selves, viz. that we belong to the animal kingdom. But the other side, the particularly human side, shows up in how we react to those impulses, when not only a specific instincts but in fact our entire personality is activated. It is this reaction only that is morally relevant. The mechanical event of anger or sexual

arousal is not morally compromising just as it shows no cowardice to duck at a sudden bang.

KARL: Well, Anders, it seems that I have spent my ammunition in vain against your notion of equality. I must retreat and conclude that I cannot move you from your stiff-necked idealism. After all, experience shows that against fanatics all arguments are wasted.

Against your claim that this idea represents a universal human truth I will just state (as I did to begin with) that far from everyone accepts it. Indeed, only a minority of the earth's inhabitants has accepted it.

ANDERS: And this holds no proof, either as I'm sure you know. But our discussion has nonetheless led to a good result, an important one as I see it. That is, neither yours nor my view is provable. We have moved beyond the domain of rationality. What we have is a confrontation between two fundamental views.

KARL: And mine is that there are as many moral patterns as there are societies, milieu – that morality is not founded in nature. In fact, it is unnatural.

[Karl is induced to conclude that our rejection of the rights of the stronger is but culturally determined]

ANDERS: You have now radicalized or clarified to position just as the sophists in ancient Greece. In the beginning, the most important of the early sophists, Protagoras, claimed that moral norms had no theoretic, philosophical foundation, that they were merely practical, like traffic rules, generated by each individual society to make it possible for people to live together in peace and order. For the later sophists this pragmatic moral view extended into moral nihilism by their putting emphasis on the

supposed conditionality of moral norms, thus their unjustifiability, their discrepancy with human nature. You have done the same with your claim that morality is an unnatural invention. You have refined your moral relativism to moral nihilism (or at least to moral skepticism, because in practical terms you do feel bound by you society's moral norms). In this way you remind me of Callicles, spokesperson for the later sophists, who in Plato's "Gorgias" faces Socrates. Callicles is extremely consistent. There is complete contradiction between what is right in nature, pursuing the greatest amount of pleasure, and what is socially right, obedience to accepted moral (and legal) rules, that are invented by the vast majority. I.e. the weak have banded together to create defenses against the strong. However, in nature the correct principle is not a form of morality it is rather the right of the stronger.

KARL: You seem to deduce that I support the right of the stronger and this makes you culpable of an immoral rhetorical maneuver like the ones used by the very sophists you reject. And by the way, also by your beloved Socrates who in a few places in "Gorgias" uses unfair arguments. You slyly overlook the caveat I made by suggesting that morality is essentially unnatural. By essentially I meant, from a higher view like the one you take when you try to lift yourself by the hair to evaluate the position you've taken. While you by self-transcendence discover that our actual moral norms, generally speaking European norms, are absolutely true, I would discover that they are untrue, unnatural, a strait jacket. That is, if I were ever to get involved in such philosophical air acrobatics. But I'll remain on the ground with my actual view of morality, the one I hold as someone born into in our culture. And given that, I naturally reject the right of the stronger. That I am unable

to reject this principle from a higher, heavenly standpoint is not the same as being its supporter. You must see that this is an important difference.

ANDERS: I acknowledge that difference, Karl. But in my view it is less important than the fact that below your acceptance of the prevailing moral your intuition (which you refuse to call a general conviction) tells you that our morality like any other is an artificial phenomenon. You believe that humans by nature are not essentially different from animals – there is only a quantitative difference in intelligence and therefore we too belong under the principle of "survival of the fittest," i.e. the right of the stronger. In other words, intuitively you reject democratic ideals and applaud elitism.

I cannot help to see but that you too hold to a fundamental view that lies at the bottom of your personality and influence the various convictions of your intellect and for that reason they are not 100% rational, even though you assume they are and that you aim for it. Like everyone else you're building on an fundamentally intuitive conviction of what humans are and what human life is.

And your conviction entails that humans are simply the most intelligently developed animal species. This is a view of humanity that might be termed animalism. I profess humanism because I believe – in the end it really is about beliefs – that in addition to being part of the animal kingdom we differ from the animals qualitatively because we are not only outfitted with intelligence but with spirit. That is, we have ideas about value (expressed as "the good" and "the beautiful") and corresponding passions and will. This is the trait The Bible presents in the statement about humans being created in the image of God.

KARL: These lofty words about "the good" and "the beautiful," and some essential – and mystical - will directed toward them, and humanity in the image of God all sound lovely and they do have a certain evocative effect. But they are hollow and over-confident. I stay honestly and humbly with what I can know by reasoning, the ability that raises me above the animals. The passions, on the other hand, in which you believe there is something heavenly I see as essentially animalistic. Against their misdirection I mobilize to the utmost my ability to reason.

ANDERS: For me reason and passion are two complementary and equal sides of humans.

Hollowness is more easily found in your position when you declare that as a European you accept fundamental Biblical-humanist moral concepts, while as a human being you are a moral skeptic.

And with regards to your accusation of over-confidence, we only find that in the idealism of extremist stoics who speak of people who by the power of their spirit have overcome their animal nature. Over-confidence is recognized as dangerous by the kind of idealism that like Biblical idealism contains a complement of humility. That is, a form of idealism that unites our will to goodness with an acceptance of our ineffectiveness. I'm thinking of the kind of ineffectiveness revealed in the fact that wretchedness (egocentrism) is not removable from a single person and in the fact that whenever we catch sight of the good and the beautiful it is only minimally due to triumphant striving, but essentially due to good fortune and inspiration – like all good gifts they come from above.

But I agree with you, Karl, that your worldview is considerably free from over-confidence. It is undeniably modest to believe that humans are only intelligent animals. However, I think this is a false modesty. I think – I don't merely hope – that you actually have a higher opinion of what it means to be human.

KARL (a little irritated): What are you saying? Don't you think I know best – better than you – what I mean?

ANDERS: Yes, what your brain knows. But what your heart says is possibly sensed properly by me who knows not only your intellectual side but also the whole of your personality; not just your words and your opinions but the way you are. For example, I know that you are polite and friendly to others, but beyond that you are sensitive and kind toward people. This is a way of being that seems completely natural to you. It is not the result of some indoctrination in – as you say – artificial, straitjacket moral rules.

In addition, I recall your unconditional anger at Nazi Germany's pursuit of the right of the stronger against minorities and neighbouring countries. If you really believed that our concepts of justice only serves an orderly social system you couldn't have used them validly against a ruler and a state that felt that given their superiority they weren't served by these concepts and therefore wanted to establish a new "order" fitting their own desires.

The fact is, that your moral position consists of more than two layers; of what you have said during our discussion, a conventional acceptance of prevailing norms, and of an underlying moral nihilism. There is a third layer, however, the most important one, but which evades the light of your rational reflections; that is, your basic compassion for others. That's what I think.

KARL: Very well, Anders. I am happy that our friendship leads you to a favorable interpretation of me – your belief that I am really a nice three-layered cake. I can't disabuse you of this belief in my personality any more than I can't disabuse you of the wishful thinking that underlies your position. But you must admit that you are unable to prove the correctness of you view.

ANDERS: I do admit that. I recognized that before we began and during our discussion. No one can prove the correctness of their view of life.

(*Their conversation continues with private matters after which Anders thanks Karl for the evening and leaves*).

SECOND CONVERSATION

A rationalistic view

(*Anders is visiting another of his friends, Magnus, on a Sunday afternoon. First, they have a great deal to catch up on because they haven't seen each other in a long time. Then*).

ANDERS: The other evening I was together with Karl. I would like to know what you think of him. You know him better that I.

MAGNUS: Although I've spent a lot of time with him I find it difficult to understand him. I like him quite a lot. He is a very kind fellow, almost charming, if you can say that about a man. And talking to him is interesting. He is very knowledgeable and is remarkably intelligent. But whenever we discuss more general views we clash. I cannot stand his view of life. I can't comprehend how such a sympathetic person can hold such a corrupt view.

ANDERS: Those are harsh words, "a corrupt view" that you "cannot stand."

MAGNUS: You undoubtedly know him well enough to know the nihilistic view he takes on morality?

ANDERS: Yes, I know that very well because it was the question of the foundation of morals that was our main topic the other evening. And I, too, disagree with him. I just find it strange that you do, Magnus.

MAGNUS: But you are aware of my view on morality?

ANDERS: That's exactly why.

MAGNUS: I don't understand what you mean. You know that I consider moral relativism not only fundamentally mistaken but also dangerous because it is so

widespread. Like you I am alarmed that by how widespread it is, much more widespread than it appears. Granted Karl expresses it clearly and has thought it through, but more widely it appears in half-digested forms in which it plays a significant role.

ANDERS: We agree on that. And, of course, I remember that you often have distanced yourself from moral skepticism. But reflecting on it, I don't think you and Karl differ all that much. You do arrive at opposite conclusions. You view is that morality has an unshakable and rationally discernible foundation in our nature. His is that morality has no foundation and that it is unnatural. However, if we look at your starting points and your methods, that is, your presuppositions, there are remarkable similarities.

MAGNUS: You are claiming that we reach different conclusions using the same starting point and method? Unless one of us made a mistake, that is impossible.

ANDERS: Yes, what is extraordinary is that it is possible – without either of you making a single logical mistake. I have never observed one in either case. You are both uncommonly clear in your logic.

For that reason I expect that you acknowledge the rule of logic that says, that when something actually is the case it must also be possible – the rule, "ab esse ad posse valet consequentia." [Trans. "From the fact that something exists, it follows that it is possible."]

MAGNUS: Of course, I acknowledge it. What of it?

ANDERS: Then you'll have to accept that it possible that your conclusions could be drawn from the same starting point and method when I show you that this is the case. The foundation for both of you is empirical, understood as referring to relations we can observe with our senses (extended by instruments). And both of you use rational

methodology, reasoning, causality to deduce regularities (that you also test empirically). In other words, you both arrive at your views of morality – and of life generally – by using the same method as the sciences, rational empiricism.

MAGNUS: What else would we do? It is the only solid method humans have, the only useful one.

ANDERS: This is the crucial point. For the time being you must admit that by using the same starting point and method you have reached different conclusions and therefore that this was possible.

MAGNUS: But how do you explain it?

ANDERS: If a person's opinions about life are not merely a theoretical construct but in fact serve as a view of life – that is, roughly corresponding to his or her actual way of life – then these opinions cannot have derived from empirical-rational knowledge alone. The fact that we both wonder at Karl's view of life is because it doesn't seem to be a genuine view, corresponding to his personality. It seems more like a theoretical view, constructed to fit his intense need for order and clarity. His view of life mirrors only the intellectual side of his personality, which he takes to be its essence. It doesn't mirror his personality in total, its interaction between the intellectual and emotional sides.

MAGNUS: That sounds reasonable. So we agree in our response to Karl's view of morality. We find it strange and we reject it as a mistaken construction. But how can you claim that your rejection goes deeper than mine?

ANDERS: Because you have attempted to build your moral view in the same way as him, purely rational-empirically. The difference is limited to the fact that your attempt failed – fortunately!

MAGNUS: Now you're splitting hairs, Anders! What kind of pretzel making is that?

[Anders claims that Magnus' intellectualism – i.e. his utilitarianism and determinism - will end in moral skepticism].

ANDERS: I mean that the principle you both affirm – that a view of life should be built scientifically – Karl has followed through to its logical end. What is wrong about his morality and view of life is not that it is, as you put it, a mistaken construction, but that it is constructed. A philosophy of life (a genuine one that expresses your inner convictions) is not something you can observe or reason your way to, it is something you come to through experience. The mistake Karl made was that by correctly applying an incorrect principle he arrived at an unrealistic, deceptive conclusion. By his use of blinkers he has created an abstraction based on one side of the human personality.

With regards to your view I believe it is just the reverse. You haven't succeeded in carrying out a scientific, value-free analysis because your moral view in the end is influenced by emotional, idealistic elements. That makes it truer, better fitting the total human being and more genuine, better fitting your own personality, as you actually are. The difference between the two resulting views is therefore great. I haven't denied that. My provocative remark about how from your perspective you couldn't call Karl's view corrupt was intended to intimate the apparently invisible but not unimportant similarity between your views; one caused by your shared intellectualism. You both assume that empirical-rational methodology not only is valuable and absolutely indispensible (which you are right about) but also that it is the only acceptable method. You disregard powerful subconscious, emotional factors that participates in all knowledge – unavoidably often in misleading ways, but happily also in good ways. First and foremost

they participate in generating a total view of human life, but they also participate in knowledge creation in the Humanities and even in the sciences.

MAGNUS: You speak so abstractly. Please state in concrete terms where you find essential agreement between Karl's and my views. What do you think we have in common?

ANDERS: First of all, utilitarianism! For both of you morality is simply the product of two factors, the instinct for self-preservation or, rather, the raw egoism of the instinct for self-gratification, and reason's detection that you achieve this best by accepting a set of moral rules than by living in a war of all against all. In that way morality is merely enlightened egoism. In your reflections on morality you are as rational as an engineer calculating how the colossal energy of a river threatening to flood can become useful by leading it into a system of canals and turbines.

MAGNUS: Indeed, Karl and I share these fundamental views. So does everyone who wants to be free of metaphysical or dogmatic moral thinking, just as you normally do. So I wonder why you talk about these views in such supercilious terms. I'd like to know your objection to them. A rational stance towards morality must be preferable to a speculative one or an authoritarian, dogmatic one. Those are the three possible positions, there is no other.

ANDERS: Yes, Magnus. In your model of humans, dynamism is considered amorally, as a dark chaos. Therefore only the light of reason can represent morality. I am personally convinced that our instincts generate significant ethical impulses – for example from our parental instinct issues a propensity for tenderness towards others – and that a humane morality comprises an interaction in our emotional lives among these impulses and those

that derive from intellectual reasoning. In short, while morality for the two of you is anchored purely intellectually, I believe that to become meaningful it must result from passion as well as reason.

MAGNUS: Again, you're being overly abstract and theoretical. What practical effect do these differences have? Try to be a little more precise.

ANDERS: I mean that morality in both of your intellectual and utilitarian views ends up concerning only compliance with the principle of reciprocity. You turn morality into solely a matter of righteousness, i.e. avoiding violence, exploitation, ruthlessness, and unreliability.

MAGNUS: I see where you're heading. You need a higher principle than righteousness, namely love.

ANDERS: Exactly.

MAGNUS: I think it is unrealistic to assert so high a principle as that for morality. After all, humans are by nature selfish. Demanding unselfishness will produce a negative result, such as aversion and distrust. Morality will be seen as a hostile and oppressive force and will probably lead to lesser compliance with rules of righteousness – and even drive people theoretically toward Karl's form of moral skepticism. Or, people might turn aversion and distrust inward rather than against morality, feeling like helpless sinners. You can't deny that such feelings can be very damaging, undermining joy of life, competence and health.

ANDERS: Of course I won't deny that oppressive feelings of sinfulness are destructive. But let us not attempt to avoid them by diminishing our ideals. A poet shouldn't diminish her ideals of beauty in order to avoid moments of despair and instead be

satisfied with writing technically proficient but uninspired pieces. That would entail closing our eyes to such important aspects of reality as the good and the beautiful that won't cease existing just because we find them uncomfortable. So it is you who are unrealistic when you – based on your utilitarianism – close your eyes to that part of the good that is represented by love of neighbour and instead define the good as righteousness, i.e. as something manageable.

MAGNUS: You are using circular logic, Anders. You accused my morality of righteousness for being unrealistic by asserting that the good in reality includes love of neighbour. You presuppose what you needed to prove.

ANDERS: Proving the fundamental is impossible, in my view. That is the essence of my opposition to the naturalistic view of life. My most inner conviction is that it is through love that human existence, our life, achieves its fullest expression. This naturally means that it must also hold true for you, but that you close your eyes to it, because you zealously want to get a firm grasp on existence, one that is both practical (your utilitarian moral view) and theoretical (your rationalistic philosophy).

And now for the second point at which I think there are shared aims between your position and Karl's. The fact that you are a rationalistic means that you, like him, believe that everything is the effect of necessary causes that we can discover and that such discovery is our primary task. Like Karl you are a determinist.

MAGNUS: Yes, like all clear and open-minded thinking persons. But this similarity between Karl and myself is beside the point of what we are discussing. He misuses determinism to arrive at moral skepticism. I use it in the opposite direction to discover a rational foundation of morality.

ANDERS: Without realizing that if you did apply determinism as consistently as does Karl you would end up in moral skepticism. Because if everything about our behaviour is the product of present causes then what room is left for choice, which is the prerequisite for morality? Strict determinism cannot fuse with ethical idealism.

MAGNUS: But such as fusion was made by none other than the brilliant Spinoza!

ANDERS: I admire his brilliant rationality and his passionate idealism but not his attempt (in book 5 of his Ethics, "On human Freedom") at establishing a rational unity of those two factors. For me the problem of will is the most remarkable evidence we have for the unfathomability of our existence.

MAGNUS: You know what? Let's continue our conversation while we walk? There's a little woods fifteen minutes from here. Let's not get stuck here while the weather is so lovely.

ANDERS: That is a good idea. I believe that you think best while walking.

(*While they put on their coats and walk to the woods they let the topic lie and exchange small observations en route. Once in the woods they resume their conversation*).

MAGNUS: I want to get back to your statement that I want to get a firm grasp on existence. My response to that is that you, too, have a firm starting point for your view of life.

ANDERS: Yes, Magnus. But a firm starting point is not the same as a firm grasp. It is almost the opposite. For me everything begins with the experience of life as a wonder – something we can never grasp, neither theoretically, pursuing absolute knowledge, or practically, realizing the good, that is, self-transcending compassion for our fellows.

Naturally, this leads to a deep sense of helplessness. But it does not need to take on the undermining aspect, you mentioned. The vertigo that accompanies our experiences of the pinnacles of beauty and love, as well as of misery and evil and undeserved suffering paradoxically can lift us up rather than oppress us. It can take on the feeling of warm, strong humility like the one promoted in the Bible and that for a good many people has enabled love and the ability to bear awful suffering.

MAGNUS: Now I am confused. What you just said gives the impression that your moral view is based on the Bible. I always thought that you do not believe in a personal God.

ANDERS: Both of your assumptions are right and they are easily amalgamated. I know from myself and from many others that it is possible to find your foundation for living in the ethical teachings of the Bible, even if you are unable to believe in a personal God, as long as you are not an atheist. The non-religious humanists who claim to be able to find a moral view in the Bible independent of religion are mistaken. The vital religiosity that supports and permeates Biblical ethics may be found among people who do not experience God as a person. I consider its fundamental view that life is a gift – something you have been given not something you simply have – and a wonder; that is something we cannot grasp. In other words, this is the basic attitude of gratitude and reverence fostered by the introductory words of the Ten Commandments, "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage."

Insofar as morality is to become morality in the full sense of the word (though for that I prefer the word ethics) and not merely enlightened self-interest it must take its premise and its manifestation in gratitude and reverence for life. Only then does it move beyond righteousness and is founded on love and reverence, opening to a spontaneous

feeling of fellowship with all others, with whom we share a life task and each of whom we honour as wonders of creation.

MAGNUS: Those are beautiful words, Karl, but they are unclear. What is essential to Biblical ethics is its call for obedience to commandments. As a humanist how can you suddenly buy into such an authoritarian view of morality? You have always talked of the good not as slavish fulfillment of duties, but as encompassing essential human happiness. You've also spoken of love of neighbour as the finest manifestation of what we are.

ANDERS: I cannot deny that in earlier times – and still in ours – it was common to consider Biblical commandments purely as commands to be obeyed without question. The scholastic philosopher, Duns Scotus, stated this clearly, that the good was good because God wanted it. If God had wanted something else then that would have been the good. This claim was aimed at Thomas Aquinas who a little earlier had maintained the opposite, that God wanted the good because it was good. The understanding I support is that goodness is at once our mission (put in Biblical terms it is God's will for us, God's demand of us), our purpose, and the finest manifestation of what we are, at once our duty and our path to happiness. Seen in this way the Ten Commandments are not despotic commands requiring obedience; they appeal to deliberation and gratitude. Insofar as life is a gift – in spite of everything that comes with it of despair (See Job who nonetheless was able to say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away," followed by, "Praise the Lord") – we will experience the Bible's ethical rules not as commands but as guides from a loving father who wishes us well. Ethics must be based on our recognition of life as a wonder. The experience of life as a gift implies that it comes with a task.

MAGNUS: When you so subtly rely on the Bible it dawns on me that I too can find support in it for my view in the words of the commandment to love our neighbour. The statement, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," implies that morality is deduced from love of self, plain egoism!

ANDERS: You would be right if the common translation were correct. But it isn't. The Hebrew text in Leviticus does not mean, "You shall love your neighbour (just as much) as you love yourself," but "You shall love your neighbour, he is like you." I.e. your neighbour is a being of the same kind as you, a human being. What the commandment addresses is not only righteousness but also empathy with ones fellows. The commandment is directed against our tendency to put ourselves at the centre, to favour ourselves over others (egocentrism, egoism), or favouring our group, kin or nation. Against this the commandment teaches that humanity is a unity, corresponding to God as one. Already the prophets understood the close connection between love of neighbour and love of God, the same connection that was emphasized by Jesus in his teachings. Monotheism is of special importance in our relationship with others. Since we all have one creator, one father, we should relate to each other as siblings.

While the commandment to love our fellow really does speak of love, it is commonly reduced to righteousness, enlightened egoism. It gets distorted to be about me instead of humanity and its creator, to be about my possibilities, instead of about a holistic view of life and God. In practice this means that my attitude to everyone else focuses on me rather than on the specificity of the other. In order to address that the rabbinical sages emphasized that even though you personally might live ascetically regarding food and clothing this must not become the basis of your actions toward the

poor who seek your help; and that even though you might not be affected by thoughtless remarks you must not presume the same is the case for others.

MAGNUS: I totally agree with you and the rabbis. One mustn't engage with other people from such a narrow perspective.

ANDERS: Precisely. But, Magnus, the correction you now admit to entails that you cannot maintain your purely ego-based moral theory. You are now adding to your view the higher idea of compassion toward others by acknowledging a form of spontaneous respect and goodwill toward others, which is contrary to utilitarianism's need of reflection, since it requires thinking about what is good for one self.

Contrary to your ethics based on the pursuit of happiness, you might now accept an element on duty, and thus move closer to understanding the good as a totality of personal growth and fulfillment of duties. On one hand, the aspect of duty in the teaching of loving our fellow is already present in the fact that it is a commandment as well as in its content because it requires something as uncomfortable and insuperable as unselfishness – love, understood not just as selfish righteousness. On the other hand the teaching's view of happiness issues from the fact that it is not merely a command. It is founded in reason. As such, it is not demanding obedience but understanding. That is, a growing understanding that it is through our compassion for others, through unselfishness that we truly become human. This understanding of life cannot be arrived at empirically, or by rationally constructing it on top of our survival instincts; it must, as in the Bible, develop out of the fullness of one's personality, out of a fundamental experience of life as a gift and a wonder.

I have already mentioned the aspect of life as a gift. Regarding wonder, only when we realize that existence (and especially the human soul) is unfathomable do we arrive at the place where we can torpedo our immediate judgments of each other, see through surfaces and conditional differences in value and appreciate the wealth of possibilities hidden in every human being. The fundamental ethical idea of equality only becomes wholly meaningful when we experience existence as a wonder.

MAGNUS: I cannot accept this turn to anti-rationalism. We have seen too much harm done throughout history by irrational views, whether by primitive superstition, religious dogmatism or passionate and fanatical nationalism.

ANDERS: You know very well that I consider rationality extremely important. The form of religiosity I profess against rationalism is in no way anti-rationalistic. (I, too, recognize the rational side of ethics, as a complement to its emotional side, love). But when it comes to a basic view of life – and everyone has one – it must necessarily be deduced from holistic experience. Self-delusion will generate a significant discrepancy between one's philosophy of life and one's actual attitude. This has happened with Karl. That your moral theory contains as contradiction was revealed when you expanded it.

The inconsistency I detect in your moral view, Magnus, is that unlike Karl you don't pursue your one-side empirical-rationalistic method to its inevitable end in skepticism. Fortunately you let the idealistic tendencies of your heart bend your thinking sufficiently to acknowledge that the concept of the good expresses an absolute reality.

You remind me of Stuart Mill who contradicted his conviction of rational morality by involving emotional-intuitive aspects in his thinking. He substituted Bentham's utilitarian quantitative concept of happiness with a qualitative concept by

claiming that happiness must include the fulfillment of our highest aspirations, and that it is better to be a dissatisfied human being than to be a satisfied swine. However, already Bentham (as Sidgwick pointed shortly after Mill's death) who supposedly defined the good completely rationally as the greatest possible happiness for the largest possible number had an element of idealistic intuition by presupposing that each is to count as one and none for more than one. That is, he presupposed nothing less than the fundamental, non-rational, not provable idea that all humans are of equal worth. You maintain that idea also, Magnus, with happy inconsistency – unlike Karl who rejects it with unhappy consequences.

I will now focus on that aspect of idealism that is the last stand of your moral view and that makes it contrary to Karl's.

[Anders criticizes the aspect of idealism in Magnus' moral philosophy as mistaken absolutism]

MAGNUS: Yes, Anders, I do think that my moral philosophy is characterized by a strong rejection of skepticism. I would say that it is a main concern of mine to consolidate morality against prevailing tendencies to skepticism. My impression is that you agree with me that skepticism is widespread (latently and otherwise) and that it represents a danger that demands attention and robust opposition.

ANDERS: I do, Magnus. But I think that your unwavering rationalism has brought the realistic aspect of your view very close to skepticism and sidetracked your idealistic side. What I mean is that your idealism is marked by an indomitable desire for firmness, order and simplicity.

MAGNUS: How? You just challenged my realism. Now you challenge my idealism? You usually recommend the unification of realism and idealism.

ANDERS: Not when both aspects are founded on rationalism. Then both aspects end up in disingenuous, self-dissolving forms. Against your realism (basing your morality on the undeniable fact of self-preservation) I have attempted to show that it ends in a horrible abstraction far removed from fundamental aspects of human nature. That is, it actually ends in lack of realism. And I will now attempt to show that your idealism based on firmness and overconfidence produces smug ideas and inflexible ideals that end up in a kind of absolutism, a constructed absolutism that results from our need for order and clarity in our existence. It is an ego centred mandate contrary to genuine idealism. After all, genuine idealism attempts to fit human will to existence (theologically stated, to fit our will to the will of God). Only when ethical will is combined with humility do we have the proper, complementary unity of realism and idealism.

MAGNUS: I understand you less and less, Anders. I think you are turning concepts around and upside down. Now you are even criticizing me for being an absolutist despite the fact that you are always fiercely against relativism.

ANDERS: It is important to differentiate between two meanings of the word ‘absolute’ in this context. Claiming that an absolute morality exists can mean either that there is a concept of morality that is valid for everyone or that there are certain moral rules that are valid in every situation.

We share the first of those meanings in contradistinction to moral relativism. But even here there is important difference between us in how we characterize this view. You consider it a rational view and provable fact. I consider it a conviction, a firm

conviction, but nonetheless it is not provable because it is primary, not deduced from anything else and because it is does not especially issue from my intellect, but from the totality of my personality. As my view is an intuition, closely connected to my seeing life as a gift, I must disagree with you when you see it as an unproblematic, almost banal truth that can be recognized by anyone who is not a fool. At this point we encounter an aspect of absolutism on your part that I do not share.

However, the stronger form of absolutism that I criticize you for comes with the second meaning of the term, as valid in all situations.

MAGNUS: Have I even said anything about that?

ANDERS: No, but this kind of absolutism follows from a consistent rationalism that like yours is combined with idealism (while for Karl it leads to relativism). Idealism that solely rests on rationality will simplify and make absolute the concept of the good by its one-sided focus on righteousness and undervaluing of love. The formal idea of equal rights for all gets the lovely simple status of an absolute principle by ignoring the problematic aspect of the essential idea of each individual's value in him/herself. Pure rationalist and intellectualists turn all their attention to the legal, judicial relationship between people, to generalities and overlook spontaneous, emotional aspects of individuals.

MAGNUS: You have a tendency to express yourself very abstractly, Anders. Please exemplify what you mean.

ANDERS: As an example, let us take Professor Jens Glebe-Møller's recent book, *On Morality* which presents a view much like yours. His aim is to consolidate the concept of

the good against challenges from moral relativism and moral nihilism and he is convinced this can be done rationally.

His main thesis is that the primary and central norm of morality is its prohibition against mendacity and that this is norm is unshakably founded rationally in something as elementary human as our interactions in language. We must all communicate in language and therefor we must comply with the rule of truthfulness. This must be respected to make communication at all possible. From this fundamental prohibition against lying Glebe-Møller deduces four other absolute moral rules (the prohibition against murder, maiming, causing pain and disrespecting tradition). Thus he believes he has consolidated morality as a complex of rules that are absolutely valid in both senses of the word, for every one, in every situation (albeit with some exceptions that I will return to).

Regarding the first meaning of the word, I must object that it is not proven and for two reasons. If we hold on to the notion of righteousness, that is, the rational aspect of the good (as in Glebe-Møller's five posited prohibitions) it is easy to make the argument that morality is founded on rationality – viz. in the rational aspect of our existence and expressed in our use of language (understood as common and scientific language, as opposed to poetic and religious language). However, although the argument is easily made it has not succeeded. The fact that language must be used truthfully cannot be proven to the powerful who – claiming the right of the stronger – use it (and everything else) for their own egoistic purposes and set these purposes above respect for rationality. Consider for a moment that the Nazis claimed that Einstein's theory of relativity was wrong because a Jew discovered it.

Regarding absolute in the sense of valid in all cases, Glebe-Møller wisely doesn't claim that that his five moral rules are without exceptions. But you haven't rid yourself from an absolutist faith in rules just by admitting to some exceptions, if you don't found these exceptions as solidly as the rules. And that cannot be found in his book. Not even in the case of the prohibition against lying. The is no consideration, not to mention analysis, given to the phenomenon of protective lying, lying for the protection of another person, which must be one of morality's most difficult issues.

MAGNUS: Now you are admitting to a need for rules and contradict yourself. You challenge Glebe-Møller's positing of main rules and now you challenge him for not having provided sub-rules for when it is permissible to lie. First you criticize him for believing that he has consolidated morality by bringing it closer to systematic jurisprudence and now you criticize him for not going far enough!

ANDERS: No, Magnus, what I am missing from him are not more rules, or sub-rules, about lies. What I'm missing is the recognition that rules and systems won't solve this problem (or any other in morality). Not only for the banal reason, faced in law, that even the most refined system of rules cannot contain the infinite diversity of existence, but also for reasons of principle. In many deeper ethical problems – like the issue of lying and in assisted suicide - we come up against the dilemma of choosing between formal-abstract concerns (in general) and real-concrete concerns (toward a particular person in an actual situation).

Against this wide-ranging dilemma an abstract, systematic view is insufficient. In such cases it is necessary to mobilize both the essential values in one's view of life and

common sense. That is, not only by thinking but also by subconscious, emotional valuation.

While Glebe-Møller wisely avoids complete absolutism by acknowledging exceptions, others promote total absolutism. A physician recently wrote in an op-ed piece that truthfulness without exception is a moral law because, "truthfulness, logic is life itself." Hence any lie, regardless of motive, is objectionable and in the long run a hopeless attempt at defying the very law of life. In other words, he is unable to accept the notion of protective lies.

MAGNUS: That's an attitude I cannot accept. There are exceptional circumstances where it is not only right but it is a duty to set aside truthfulness.

ANDERS: With your phrase, "exceptional circumstances" you are in line with Glebe-Møller's view of moral rules.

MAGNUS: Everyone is, even you. A rule suggests what is valid in most cases. What would be wrong about understanding, "you must be truthful" as a rule?

ANDERS: Nothing, when you mean 'rule' in the banal statistical sense of rule of thumb. But in our context you rationalists take the word at its more stringent, scientific sense of law and lawfulness. Otherwise the moral rules that your advocate cannot have the laudable function you ascribe to them; not theoretically in defence of morality against the undermining of skeptics – after all, a physician's decisions do not achieve rational status by the use of rules of thumb – or practically as guides for the rest of us poor insecure humans. If your rule of truthfulness were meant as a rule of thumb it wouldn't just be banal it would be misleading. The avoidance of a lie of protection may lead to serious wrongdoing. What I am pointing out is that the exceptions that you and Glebe-Møller

accept must be as solidly founded as the rule itself. That is, if it is to be considered as an actual rule rather than a rule of thumb. Since that is impossible I reject the attempt of rationalists to establish laws of morality (including the attempt to make it appear to parallel scientific knowledge); in other words, the view that I have called absolutism. (*After a brief pause*). You know what, Magnus? I'm beginning to get a little tired. Perhaps it's time we turn back.

MAGNUS: Yes, but there a little restaurant up ahead. We could get a cup of coffee there and rest a little. After all, it'll take about three quarters of an hour to get back.

ANDERS: Yes, it would be nice to sit awhile. As I near sixty I have less energy. And yet, it doesn't seem to bother you and we're practically the same age.

MAGNUS: Well, I have noticed a significant reduction during the last 5 to 10 years. (*They continue in this vein on their way to the restaurant; and while drinking coffee. After awhile Anders starts their discussion again*).

ANDERS: No, defeating moral skepticism will never succeed by using its own weapon, rationality. On the contrary it is necessary to recognize that the basic mistake in moral skepticism is its intellectualism, its rationalist view of humanity.

MAGNUS: In spite of your explication I still don't understand how you who zealously defend the absolute reality of the good can reject rationalistic absolutism.

ANDERS: Perhaps I would be clearer if I referred back to classical Greece. There we encounter an instructive example of moral absolutism around 400 BCE in two forms; one authoritarian, the other philosophical and both were against moral relativism. We even find a third moral position, free of the one-sidedness of both. These three positions faced each other for the first time in our history and with a clarity and enthusiasm never since

surpassed. Plato, Protagoras and Socrates, respectively, championed the three positions that have been significant factors in the intellectual life of Europe ever since. I would like to bring their discussion into ours. Do you have the patience for that?

MAGNUS (smiling): Yes, of course. We have lots of time. I think it is important to have conversations about topic of general concern and to pursue them in a leisurely tempo.

ANDERS: That's what the ancient Greeks would have said. The depth and charm of Plato's dialogues owe a good deal to their attentive lingering and the keenness with which he pursues his thinking.

(*There's a brief pause while Magnus pays the bill. They leave the restaurant and begin walking back home*).

It began when Protagoras, possibly the most important of the sophists, reacted strongly against the prevailing, banal, absolutism that was authoritarian in nature. The dominant moral norms were presumed, without closer investigation, to be absolutely valid, given and guarded by the gods. Against this Protagoras proposed his relativistic view. He not only rejected a religious foundation of morality – with his shocking agnostic statement that the gods did not know anything – but also any other absolute foundation. He claimed that opinions about the good and the true depend on the individual or on the convictions of a given society at a given time.

Plato fiercely combatted this moral relativism – that developed into nihilism in the next generation of sophists – with penetrating thinking, proposing a position of philosophical absolutism. He maintained that that the good truly existed and was

reflected into our shadow world. The good was the highest reality in the real, extrasensory world.

MAGNUS: Hold on for a moment, Magnus. You were talking about moral absolutism as a characteristic of idealistic rationalism. But Plato was not a rationalist.

ANDERS: I have not denied that there are other forms of absolutism than the rationalistic, such as the Greek one I just mentioned, corresponding to a Christian view. But it is true that the form of rationalism that interests me in our discussion is the one I now attribute to Plato. So your objection is well founded insofar as this thinker cannot be called a rationalist in the usual sense of the word that implies analytical thinking applied to sense data. This is what Plato rejected in contradiction to rationalistic sophists. But he does share with them an important rationalistic element, namely intellectualism. Both views are to a large extent built solely on thinking. The difference is that Plato substitutes its "lower" aspect, sense data, with a higher, visionary, level that is its very essence and end point. We could call it speculative rationalism to distinguish it from common empirical rationalism, such as that promoted by sophists.

Now another view appeared, separate from both of these forms of rationalism. It separated itself from the sophist position that produced moral relativism (like Karl's) and from Plato's position that via with a substantial infusion of idealism resulted in moral absolutism. I'm thinking of Socrates.

MAGNUS: Yes, I recall that in your book about him you, in line with a number of post-war philologists, strongly agued against the earlier view of him as a rationalist. But I don't recall on what statements of his you based your argument.

ANDERS: They are, briefly stated, partly his statement that ignorance is a fundamental trait of human life, partly those statements about the existence of insights deep in the soul that can be brought out and developed via conversations that penetrate the layers of prejudice and superficial knowledge. This opposition between his equal insistence on ignorance and insight seems like a contradiction, but it isn't, it is a paradox. This becomes clear when you realize that that the kind of insight he talks about does not especially intellectual but belongs to the full personality. "Fronesis" he calls it, a word related to "frenes," diaphragm, the organ where great sensations are felt. Fronesis is fundamental to our way of life (it affects our behaviour, contrary to merely intellectual insight that without the passions is ineffective); it is common to all humans, that is, it is not the preserve of intellectuals; and it is incomplete. While philosophical knowledge may be impressive and edifying, it will always be overshadowed by our ingrained egocentricity.

Free from narrow intellectualism and rationalism Socrates sees the paradox in our lives (it is characteristic that he like Jesus never wrote anything down) and takes a complementary position concerning idealism and realism. Thus his view differs significantly from the sophists' one-sided realism as well as from Plato's later one-sided idealism.

His reactions against the one-sidedness of moral relativism and moral absolutism are aimed on one hand at the sophists' relativism and on the other at the prevailing absolutism. He opposed any religious authorizing of morality. Not on anti-religious grounds, but because of his religiously inflected humility.

He also opposed the establishment four absolute cardinal virtues – courage, cautiousness, righteousness and piety.

In his conversations Socrates uncovered the fact that taken separately these concepts are indefinable, meaningless. Courage presumes cautiousness and vice versa. And a proper relationship with the divine presumes a proper relationship to other humans – and vice versa. Socrates is in line with the Bible in his conviction that true humanity must have its basis in religious gratitude and reverence. He also provokes us to think about the fact that their totality, "Virtue," comprised of individual virtues, is not an absolute as commonly understood. It cannot be defined or made precise; it isn't something rational. Still, for Socrates, "Virtue" remains a universally valid reality.

[For Magnus it is of paramount importance for rationalism to offer an indispensible consolidation for morality]

MAGNUS: Your moral view (indeed, your view of life generally) may be more nuanced and wider than mine, but mine delivers something of paramount importance because experience shows that it is indispensible, namely unshakable solidity; theoretically as well as practically.

Theoretically, as a fence against moral relativism, that is currently so strong, and practically because people will only commit to concepts that are rationally convincing.

ANDERS: Regarding theoretical consolidation, I think I have shown that though it is seemingly effective, it doesn't actually hold up. I find your rationalistic moral theory unsustainable not least because it lacks completeness. It consists of an interlacing of utilitarian realism and an aspect of idealism meant to guard it against relativism. You have made a compromise between realism and idealism, bending both aspects into

crooked forms. However, their complete unity is, paradoxically, obtained by being fully consistent in both streams of thought.

Making compromises instead of acknowledging complementarities is common in rationalism. While Socrates saw that seemingly opposing virtues belonged together because they presuppose one another and therefore must both be developed fully, Aristotle, the rationalist, promoted the superficial idea of the golden mean reached by restricting both virtues. He speaks of avoiding excesses, extremes. Although the two views in practice often come to the same result (though not in cases where extreme positions are called for. Aristotle overlooks that his own concept of moderation must be applied moderately), there is a big difference between diminishing two extremes quantitatively and holding a totality in view, admitting to something as irrational as intuition. The principle of the golden mean represents an attractive incomplete common sense reaction against absolutism. After all, the warning against having too much courage presumes that there is an absolute concept of courage.

When you claim that your moral theory excels in its firmness I will dispute that with reference to its incoherent and inorganic character.

MAGNUS: And I firmly claim it with reference to its scientific character. It is built with the most solid methodology known to man, the scientific method. (Opening his apartment door). Well, we're back. I hope it wasn't too long a walk.

ANDERS: (smiling): No, Magnus, it was really good. But it is nice to be back in your cozy living room. But heavens, it is almost half past five.

MAGNUS: You are welcome to stay for dinner if you have no other plans.

ANDERS: Thank you, but I have to get back and correct some Latin papers this evening. But let us finish our discussion. (He sits in the chair offered by Magnus who sits down in a similar chair by a west facing bay window where there's still some daylight. He gathers up his thread). Naturally, I agree with you that science is a significant force in our life. But it is not the only one, nor is it omnipotent. To think so is a glorification of it, a new form of idolatry.

The glorification of science came to the fore in rationalistic philosophy in the 17th Century, especially with Descartes and Spinoza. The former formulated rationalism emphatically with his famous, "cogito, ergo sum," that implies that thinking is the essence of humanity. Though, it is worth noting that this kind of rationalism soon produced a significant opponent, Pascal who realized that, "The last step of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things that surpass it."

In our time rationalism – in various forms and with various levels of consistency – has become widespread and enormously influential. So you are right, in that regard your conviction is well supported. But no form of idolatry is sustainable. For example, when it is claimed that "personality" is a biochemical matter, we are confronting a philosophy that can't last long, because it undervalues life's fundamental character of being a wonder. I also think that a moral view deduced solely from methodological thinking will prove lifeless – just like a poem produced by strict technical means, without inspiration. As it is stated in Psalm 127, "Unless the Lord build the house, its builders labor in vain on it."

MAGNUS: It is precisely against such religious views that my rationalism erects a bulwark. Consider the moral monstrosities committed by religion through the ages. Not

only has the struggle against injustice been stalled by beliefs in human powerlessness against an all-powerful divine ruler, but it is also a fact that innumerable offences have had their origin in superstitions and fanatical dogma and rituals.

ANDERS: You won't build a bulwark against that kind of deranged religiosity with one-sided rationalism. This only reignites it as surely as the passions it comes from cannot be doused by reason. The only obstruction to warped, destructive religiosity is a healthy form of religiosity – which is also the only firm ground for morality.

We've arrived at the practicalities of consolidating morality, that you claim to have reached rationally.

What I think is misguided about your claim is that on one hand you overvalue the effectiveness of the intellect and on the other you undervalue the indisputable power of instincts, passions, emotions. That is you undervalue their possible effects in promoting morality.

The intellect's lack of effectiveness is well known from the fact that many highly intelligent people, erudite in moral philosophy and theology often prove to be quite mediocre at transforming learning into practice. The intellect is also compromised as a moral tool since we often see it sidelined as soon as powerful subconscious prejudices enter the picture. It is often hopeless to argue with people who are otherwise considered reasonable. There seems to be a disproportion between the effectiveness of the intellect in certain subject areas – in which people are quite capable for pursuing their work – and how little it is effective in morality.

MAGNUS: That is because we develop it so badly in this area. You just mentioned how often we think we act morally but are in fact driven by latent egotistical drives. Isn't it a

main task of morality to make these drives conscious, and isn't penetrating rational reflection the only tool for that?

ANDERS: You're quite right. I must repeat, my dear friend, that I regard solid thinking to be indispensable in morality – reflective, analytical thinking as well as spontaneous scrutiny and weighing between options, and thinking that is future-directed. But it isn't sufficient for seeing through to hidden egotistical motives. Oppositional willful effort is needed for that. What we are considering now is whence ethical ideals can derive most force in order to become realized in practice. That force cannot be derived from the intellect. Ideals can only gather force to the extent that their roots reach down far enough into the same layers from whence primitive egoism derives its force, i.e. in feeling, passions and instincts.

MAGNUS: But the instincts come from our animal side that gives force to our egoism.

ANDERS: Yes, but also to the most beautiful and strongest ethos in us, Magnus. I believe that you undervalue the instincts – which I detect in your tone of voice in the way you say, "our animal side." Many idealists – especially people who have little interaction with them - wrongly view the animals as first and foremost characterized by aggression and rampant sexuality. Against this simplification animal psychologists differentiate between levels of aggression and sexual interactions among various animals and the connection of this latter to parental care.

This instinct is even greater in humans, to the extent that we feel sympathy for our offspring throughout life, and indeed for our parents, siblings and spouse, and not only for our own children but also for any little girl or boy. This powerful instinct must be

developed into an important ethical mainspring. This sympathy that is already far reaching from nature's hand must be widened to include ever more people.

Just as every individual who has a unique tendency toward forms of beauty (such as to kinds of music or fiction) may develop and expand it, the possibilities for development must be so much larger when it comes our appreciation of the beautiful, the wondrous that exists in every person and requires our sympathy and reverence. Only in this breeding ground can we grow a reasonably effective ethical will.

MAGNUS: Aren't you being a little utopian? You may believe these thoughts are solidly realistic, but to me they sound naively idealistic.

ANDERS: I cannot see that it should be more realistic to view fellow humans as opponents or potential enemies than it is to view them with spontaneous sympathy, like friends. Both are necessary. Realism requires that we do both. It is unrealistic to do only one part, as you want – by assuming that our instinctive attitude toward others is aggressive/defensive. Against this my objection is that our instincts not only prompts that our fellow is a threat but also that he/she is a joy and for that reason our instincts can become cornerstones for our morality. Indeed they must become so in order to achieve some solidity.

Insufficiently effective morality based solely on the intellect is seen clearly in a matter of decisive importance in our time, our relationship to the environment.

MAGNUS: In other words, you are unaware of the work rational moralists are doing in ecology, investigating and informing about the catastrophic effects of our overexploitation of nature.

ANDERS: Yes, I do follow these efforts attentively. They are extremely important, invaluable. But we need more than good information. The fact that knowledge has surprising little effect if it isn't combined with experience is seen in many examples from daily life. For example, while only a few have stopped smoking in reaction to information about the health risks, many have done so due to personal experience.

Likewise, if our motives for ending the overexploitation of nature are merely rational they will lack the necessary concrete impetus for action. Motivation can't be merely intellectual. It must also be emotional. Ecological morality cannot be based on risks. It must also be based on instinctive unwillingness to destroy life. If the knowledge gained by the intellect is to govern our behaviour it has to cooperate with instinctual forces – that is, with our reverence and sympathy with life.

Our greatest threat to the instinctual force that is needed in our new circumstances is our becoming blasé and weary.

Our complete focus on intellect at the expense of fundamental feelings has a blocking effect rather than a consolidating effect on morality. Morality isn't only about contributing but also about receiving, and here the rationalistic model fails. Its principle of reciprocity implies that there is an element of discomfort in receiving goodness, since it requires a gesture in return. This discomfort – feeling belittled by having to receive an act of goodness greater than one's own ability – will be felt regularly since everyone is inferior to others in many moral respects. This discomfort will work as a negative force and may produce aggressiveness when the goodness received is not taken as an opportunity to express joy, gratitude and the source of energy for new acts of goodness. Instead there'll be an obstacle to the continuous flow of friendliness.

Against this, morality must derive its power not only from the intellect but also from experiencing that everything a human being can contribute in the end is not his/her individual accomplishment, but a gift – as is life itself. In such a view we would receive goodness as a gift being passed on, that is, with gratitude, which makes it possible for us to pass it on again. This is a basic stance of gratitude for life that can turn into the source of the circulation of love.

(*Anders notes the work he still has to complete and gets ready to leave, thanking Magnus for an enjoyable afternoon*).

THIRD CONVERSATION

Two existentialist views

(*Anders sits reading a newspaper. From time to time he looks out the window because he expecting his sister, Hanne, and she is late. After a while she arrives. Anders gives her a hug while she begins explaining why she is late*).

HANNE: I'm sorry, Anders, I'm nearly half an hour late. The subway train stalled and I wasn't able to call you.

ANDERS: Yes, I' tried that myself. You feel powerless. But since we've lost some time and you'll want to get home at a decent hour, I'd better come right out with what I'd like to speak to you about. After all, we did catch each other up with news the other day.

HANNE: Yes, let's dive right in.

ANDERS: As you know I think about ethical issues a lot and these days I am particularly preoccupied by the question of the foundation of ethics. Recently I have had two discussions, one with a moral skeptic and one with our friend, Magnus, who advocates that morality can and must be founded rationally and that it can and should be subject to analysis and reasoning in the same vein as those used in science.

Now, I know that you are an existentialist and do not agree with those two views. But since I don't know your view terribly well I would like you to tell me more about it.

HANNE: With pleasure. I'd like to respond to your request and I would like to understand your thinking better. And I know you better than to think that you would sit here passively listing to me.

ANDERS: Yes, that would be difficult for me. But first I want to listen. I really don't know much more about your views apart from the fact that you're an existentialist and that word covers a lot of different positions, including my own.

HANNE: You are right about that. Unfortunately the word can be misleading because "to exists" usually means "being in reality." So the first time one comes across the word one might think that it is a philosophy about things that are actually in existence. However, we use it in its original Latin meaning of "to appear, to emerge," about the view that reality only comes into being through our relationship with it.

In this understanding of the word we already see the fundamental problem in various forms of existentialism, namely their delimitation vis-à-vis subjectivism and moral relativism. What all forms of existentialism have in common is their opposition to objectivist, absolutist views. And the two of us are in agreement about this opposition, aren't we?

ANDERS: I can only answer that once you've clarified what you include under absolutism. We have to get as clear an understanding as possible in order to move on to more contentious issues.

[The antagonism between an existentialist moral view and an absolutist one].

HANNE: The absolutism I reject as an existentialist appears in two main forms; the authoritarian, that accepts the good as something we know through tradition; and the idealistic that views the good as something each new generations must discover through spiritual discipline.

Among authoritarian views it is particularly the religious ones that have significantly disputed existentialism. One of existentialism's main projects is its opposition to the religious foundation of morality.

ANDERS: What about all the religious existentialists, not only among theologians about also among philosophers? Theologians like P.G. Lindhardt, Johannes Sløk and Dorothee Sölle and philosophers like Karl Jaspers? Even though you support a non-religious form of existentialism you cannot just write off existentialists who are religious.

HANNE: No of course not. But one thing is a philosophy of life and its attendant moral view growing out of a religious attitude. It is quite another thing to hold that morality is anchored in religion (better, perhaps, authorized by religion), that is, by a belief in divine revelation. This kind of belief in moral authorization is rejected by existentialists, who see it as a form of wishful thinking corresponding to our need for sovereign, firm and valid moral norm.

ANDERS: But let's leave aside existentialism's opposition to authoritarian forms of absolutism. After all, authoritarian convictions by their very nature cannot be challenged by reason or by discussions. I am eager to learn what you think about the form of absolutism you called idealistic.

HANNE: I used the term collectively for a wide variety of views of life that share their faith in the intellect. They believe they can reach absolute knowledge of the good, a clear and unshakeable truth that can be rediscovered anywhere at any time. For them it is as clear as what we can be seen. This is obvious from the number of expressions they use about it, "knowledge," [viden in Danish](for them higher than science), "idea" (ideology,

ideal), "theory," "intuition," "vision," "speculative insight." All these words derive from roots that mean to see, to view.

ANDERS: You're drawing a risky conclusion from the shared origin of these words. However there is a considerable difference between "knowledge" [viden] and "vision." One describes cognition (used in the same way we see it in the word "science" [videnskab] and the other suggests something that is indefinable and irrational.

This is difference is significant in our context. We must realize that ethical knowledge is only partly rational in contradistinction to the sciences, but this must not lead you to think that the foundational concept in ethics, the good, lacks firmness or validity. Insofar I consider ethics as absolute to that extent I am an idealist, but I distance myself from the views of those who believe they are able to deliver precise answers to specific questions. That is, I distance myself from the kind of idealism I would call absolutist.

HANNE: I will try to be more precise about the various views I mean to cover with my term idealistic absolutism.

The one that we come across most in our time is the one represented by Magnus, rationalistic idealism. In its zealous desire for clear and unchallenged truth it makes use of the scientific method. That is, it builds on sense data.

While this type of idealism is empirical, the history of ideas also has many examples of speculative idealism, in which thought is independent and rejects sense date as false or inferior. Plato is the prime example. In our time speculative philosophers who view the spiritual as a particular, higher reality (our essential reality) often use expressions taken from physics, such as energy, energy fields, vibrations and waves – in

aid of emphasizing the hard reality of thought, feelings and other phenomena but with the effect of revealing this view as a crypto-form of the materialism they meant to reject.

I'm also thinking about forms of idealism where the absolute truth of human life is derived from overwhelming emotional encounters, such mystical or ecstatic experiences; teachings that promote the good as achievable through asceticism – whether as salvation or unity with the universe – that is, abstinence from all common joys of life (particularly sensual ones, and especially sexual ones) and generally through the shunning worldly matters.

But I will stick to the former type of idealism, the rationalistic, since it plays an important role these days and since you wanted to hear about my position after your discussion with Magnus.

ANDERS. Indeed, Hanne. I'm wondering if we oppose him for the same reasom.

HANNE: I believe so – in the main, that is. From earlier conversations I remember that we agree that given his rationalism he should logically end in a skeptical view and not in an idealistic one. If you hold that the scientific method of cognition, rationalism, is the only valid method then you make no room for values. Consistent positivism must lead to value nihilism. Since Magnus nonetheless holds absolutely valid moral concepts, founded on rational knowledge, he does so by virtue of a mistake in his logic. Subconsciously he allows his thinking to be influenced by his fundamental feelings and wishes. It is wishful thinking. His reasoning is inflected by factors that are a priori and emotional and anything but rational.

ANDERS: We are in full agreement about that.

HANNE: With its a priori dislike of relativism, rationalistic moral thinking ends up on the opposite side, in absolutism. That is, with more or less rigid fanatical ideas about duty. Due to its empirical base this form of idealism doesn't end up as badly as many forms of speculative or emotional idealism. Even so, its empirical aspect is too weak to secure a healthy form of realism. There is a stark unrealism in its distinctly intellectual view of life, its underrating of our immense instinctual and emotional drives. Idealistic prejudices end up generating unrealistic theories of duty that further undermine this armchair philosophy already lacking in realism.

I will take an example from classical Greece because like you I believe that we often encounter clear prototypes among those philosophers. They were not only remarkably intelligent but also the first in our history to consider these issues engagingly and with a minimum of complicated terminology.

I'm thinking of stoicism. (Grated it is not a case of pure empirical idealism, but it's speculative aspect is quite subordinate). Among stoic philosophers we find a strange lack of realism, as we do with modern rationalistic moral philosophers, in their purely intellectualistic view of humans. This is exceptionally clear in a statement by Seneca that I remember quite clearly because the aversion I felt when I first read it. He writes that we shouldn't view anything in the arrangement that is our life as important or serious, or unfortunate, because our life is no more meaningful nor anymore holy than was our conception.

ANDERS: I share your aversion against this statement because it lacks any sense of the holiness of life, or its conception.

HANNE: And he demonstrates a peculiar lack of realism. He views sexual intercourse as something that degrades humans, as something not essentially human insofar as we on the same level as the animals in this aspect. This is the denigration of human instincts and passions typical of pure intellectualism and its one-side focus and valuation of thinking.

ANDERS: Agreed.

HANNE: I think that this fundamental unrealism which together with a need for idealism led the stoics into very unrealistic and absolutist teachings of duty. I'm thinking of their vaunted concept of the wise and good person, at times adding that such a person doesn't actually exist. And I'm thinking of their inhumanely harsh moral demands and judgments. They often get close to hostility to life. Indeed, I think stoic absolutism is a form of asceticism.

ANDERS: I think you are mistaken in your last statement. There is a difference between the strict self-discipline they demand and practice and any form of asceticism. While ascetics seek suffering (at least indirectly by denying themselves pleasure) based on the warped view that our nature must be punished, the stoics want us to develop our nature in order for us to experience fully the particular beauty that is human life. It is in aid of this they accept the suffering that often follows from self-discipline. It is important to keep this theoretical difference in mind even if in their practice we sometimes observe ascetic features. There was a sharp distinction between stoics and the cynics, who cultivated asceticism.

But since these tendencies are of interest in our context I agree with your point that this is an essential weakness in the stoics' intellectualistic view and that this aspect of

unrealism affects the idealism of their ethics in absolutist and inhuman ways – at times to the point of hostility to life.

HANNE (nodding emphatically): Yes that is what I wanted to say as background to my critique of modern rationalistic moral philosophers. Like the stoics, they do not avoid unrealism just by building on experience. It is insufficient when in their endeavour to be scientific and realistic they take their point of departure in human drives although they do not recognize these for what they are – namely, equal partners in our nature – and push them aside during their constructions of morality under the influence of idealistic prejudices.

It gets much worse when idealism playing the major role in the construction of intellectualist ethics is not empirical but speculative. That is, when intellectualism doesn't recognize the need to base ethics on experience. In such cases lack of realism easily results in very inhumane duty ethics.

It is especially unfortunate and dangerous when such an inhumane ethics becomes a state philosophy, the basis for the construction of an ideal state. Consider Plato's ideas in his *Republic* and in *Laws*. For me they represent frightening examples of the inhumanity even so great a thinker and personality as he can be driven to by an absolutist ethics with cocksure concepts of the good. Here we find the unfounded division of people into the few knowledgeable, real people and the masses of the ignorant, wretched ones that must be governed by the former, the philosophers, who must hold dictatorial power and govern on the principle that the ends justify the means. Moral absolutism expresses itself politically as totalitarianism.

ANDERS: You are right. But do you view any form of ethical idealism as absolutist?

HANNE: Yes, Anders, insofar as idealism implies absolutely true ideas about human duty. As an existentialist I do not believe that you can arrive at an absolute view of the good.

I recall a statement made by our fine existentialist thinker Kai Aalbæk-Nielsen in an op-ed piece about the French philosopher Edgar Morin. Paraphrased he said something like, "Reality is more complicated and less rational than we would like to admit because we've been raised to seek simplicity in the belief that truth is simple. It is almost always impossible to state what is completely right. For that reason we must give up the fight for truth and substitute it with a fight against error."

ANDERS: Spoken as if right out of my heart. There we witness the kind of humility that was first advocated by Socrates. His original contribution was his ironical method, never presenting himself as someone who taught truth, but as someone who refuted mistakes. He broke down cocksure clichés and other simplifications of the good. He breached the position that only some were people of knowledge by understanding that everyone was ignorant, needing to seek and strive. Based on this main insight, expressed in his continuous talk of his own and everyone else's ignorance he would undoubtedly have aimed his ironical method of questioning at the absolutist state and moral philosophy his student developed later on.

On the other hand he distanced himself sharply from the kind of relativism that had powerful support during his time. Against relativism he set his unshakeable conviction that there is something universal in the concept of the good, even though we cannot affix this conviction to particular statement. That is because we are dealing with a

conviction that isn't rational, intellectual, but an intuition that grows out of a personality in interaction with others.

In this way we can say that Socrates was convinced of an absolute kernel in ethical concepts, albeit he didn't engage in absolutist thinking.

Now, when, as far as I understand, you are in line with Socrates, you must acknowledge that it makes sense to speak of an ethical ideal, an ethical knowledge?

HANNE: (firmly). I do not. I am not in line with Socrates. In my opinion he is guilty of absolutism; minimally, perhaps, but I do not accept your attempt to acquit him. That is only hairsplitting.

Any stipulation of firm knowledge of ethical duty is absolutism. What we perceive as duty is not based on knowledge but on choice – what we opt for in our existence. I support Sartre's statement that by choosing a position we affirm it as good.

ANDERS: That makes me very concerned, Hanne. If you would really go so far as to reject notions of knowledge and truth in ethics and instead rely on individual choice, you would reduce the good to something subjective, established by each individual. And then you would end up in the moral relativism you declared you were against.

HANNE: No. But let's stick to the order you proposed for our discussion. I will first complete my critique of absolutism before moving on to how I avoid relativism.

ANDERS (nodding). Yes. Let us not get sidetracked.

HANNE: When I say that the good is a question of human choice and will and is not about knowledge, it is because it is impossible to find universally valid knowledge in this area. No authority exists – modern humans cannot believe in a divine revelation of the

good – and no form of thinking can get us there. Such superstitious trust in the intellect leads either to skepticism, or when leaning toward idealism, to absolutism.

Rejecting blind faith in the intellect I seek support in our other aspect, our will, which has been undervalued for 150 years. I reject the deterministic scientific view is widely accepted and has had such a radical influence. By it very nature the phenomenon of our will lies beyond the sciences that seek causalities. There is no foundation in science for doubting or rejecting the reality of will since we experience it as elementary fact. It is this fact that distinguishes us as humans. This is the reason we existentialists claim will as the essence of morality. Sartre hits bull's eye when he says that humans are what they make of themselves – that without support we must every moment create ourselves. He maintains that while materialists have treated humans as objects, that is, as a collection of determined reactions, existentialists want to establish a human world as a collection of values, separate from the material world.

ANDERS: I cannot agree with this one-sided indeterminist view of humans. This pure subjectivism leads to moral relativism.

HANNE: The form of subjectivism you reject I'm in full agreement with. Nothing exists objectively. There is no objective knowledge. After all, what we believe we know objectively is but impressions we get from our senses and cognition (with its categories of time, space, causality). Strictly speaking our entire world could be a construction as devoid of reality as are our dreams. Also we do not have an objective being. As Sartre says, there is no human nature, because there is no God to devise it. There is no essential being in human beings but only what each individual becomes from moment to moment by virtue of choice. Existentialism submits to the pain and discomfort of understanding

that there is nothing we can know absolutely about our existence – it is simply absurd, as clearly described by Camus.

The thought that a human being is not an objective, firm reality but only becomes something through relationships is also the main idea in Martin Buber's famous book, *I and Thou*, which I know you are very fond of. The central kernel in this philosophy is the experience that you are never the same person when you interact with different people. You are always brought into an exchange with the given individual.

ANDERS (eagerly): But Buber is certainly not committing himself to pure subjectivism. He does not dismiss the subject-object problem so superficially. Like Kierkegaard he acknowledged this problem as an expression of the unfathomability, indeed the wonder of our existence. His high intellect was complemented by deep religiosity much like Kierkegaard's. It is not important that Kierkegaard was Christian and Buber Jewish. Religiosity can also be humanistic, as in the case of Karl Jaspers. The decisive difference is between the existentialists who understand the astonishing, paradoxical dichotomy of our existence and those who – like the atheist Sartre – remain uniformly subjectivist. In my opinion the latter cannot avoid relativism. So how do you guard your existentialist moral view against relativism, Hanne?

[On the problematical relationship between an existentialist moral philosophy and moral relativism]

HANNE: You seem to accuse Sartre of relativism. However, he maintains that by my choices not only do I create myself but that I also create a view of the human as I think it ought to be. Also, that in order to gain some kind of truth about myself I am dependent

on others who are indispensible for my existence. He uses the term inter-subjectivity of the world discovered in this way. So we are not talking about anarchic individualism.
ANDERS: No, I realize that neither Sartre nor you would force subjectivism into the dissolution of moral concepts. But the fact is that he actually leaves behind the pure subjectivism of his view when he speaks of "some kind of truth," that is, the recognition of fundamental human interdependence. In this way we are determined and a fundamental truth exists, a universal law that we must acknowledge and bow to. In other words, we cannot freely choose what the think is the good. If establishing the good really were only a matter of will – without interaction with knowledge – this would mean maximal thriving of the ego. That is, it would be egocentrism, not inter-subjectivity. After all, inter-subjectivity is a cold philosophical term for the universal human fellowship religious understanding points toward. When Sartre insists on the individual's total freedom, albeit, with the emphatic acknowledgment that this freedom also accrues to others he accepts (without attending to this contradiction) that freedom and subjectivity must be restricted – restricted by the fact of a universal ethical idea, the equal rights of all.

Healthy existentialism must paradoxically insist on an objective complement to subjectivism in order to avoid degenerating into relativism, as per the statement by Kai Aalbæk-Nielsen your paraphrased earlier.

We find the same opposition against pure subjectivism in the predominantly existentialist philosophy of Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist. He criticizes Sartre's statement that humans create themselves, invent themselves. His objection is that we discover ourselves, discover the meaning of our lives. He uses the expression that a

human being only realizes herself when she pursues the realization of her life's meaning. He asserts that such meaning always exists (that is, it can be discovered, be known – it is not invented or randomly chosen). He presupposes a universally valid view; that all individual objectives must align with a common final objective for all. Namely, that one must contribute to the wellbeing of others, either directly or indirectly.

In other words, for Frankl, "meaning" (and self-realization) entails being conscious of one's task. That is, given our talents and circumstances we must pursue the special task we admit as ours in reference to the universal task of being human among humans. Characteristic of his view is the term he uses, joyful responsibility. With this he expresses the totality of joy and responsibility, happiness and duty. The very same totality Socrates aimed for in all his conversations based on his vision of the joined aspects of human happiness and divine purpose.

HANNE: In the main I share your enthusiasm for Frankl. But I must pass on one point due to my skepticism at the establishment of ethical truth, a fundamental acceptance of duty. I think he undervalues pleasure. I'm thinking of pure pleasure without ethical involvement or consequence, that is, pure egoistic pleasure. I oppose his universal aim of objectifying life's meaning as altruism, being of service. I maintain that the meaning of life cannot be delimited or defined in this way. Pleasure must have a role, to take pleasure in life for one's own sake. One could take pleasure in listening to Mozart, for instance, without giving a single thought to re-energizing oneself in order to be of better benefit to others. The meaning of life is not simply a matter of duty. It also consists in pleasure and, thus, it cannot be established by an objective concept.

ANDERS: I fully agree with you we should enjoy life for itself (as the Jerusalem Talmud puts it, "In the world to come we will have to account before the judgment seat of God for every pleasure we denied ourselves in this world, if it was permitted and affordable" [Kiddushin 4:12], and that Frankl underestimates this aspect.

However, we are left with the fact that whatever pleasure one may obtain for oneself depends greatly on of shifting life circumstances and it is often in weak opposition to the suffering most of us encounter, that threatens everyone and that we experience around us. Pleasure however wonderful and attractive is not able by itself to generate anything we could call meaning in life. We are forced to seek for meaning in our devotion to our fellows, those with whom we are inextricably connected. The "I" can only achieve actual self-realization, full happiness by interacting with a "thou." This is the fundamental view of Buber's – to whom Frankl is indebted – and whom you supported earlier.

HANNE: Yes. And Sartre doesn't differ all that much, either. One of the words he uses constantly, responsibility, presumes – apart from free will – certain notions of right and wrong. Thus, he acknowledges a necessary limit to subjectivism. Indeed, he does emphasize the human freedom to choose themselves but since he also stresses the corresponding responsibility, he clearly doesn't mean that we choose ourselves randomly or that all choices are of equal value.

ANDERS: I understand. I realize that Sartre (like you) wants to distance himself from subjectivist moral relativism, by using such safeguards as responsibility. But in my opinion he contradicts his own main point. What often happens in philosophical thinking is that it is disavowed by common sense. That is, by correctives that aren't

acknowledged as such and so they don't lead to revised theses but are just glued on as supposedly necessary formalities. For instance you spoke of the "necessary limit to subjectivism," but it is no more necessary than it remains unacknowledged by millions of moral skeptics, against whom we aim to stand. (In any event contradictions between philosophical theory and deeper knowledge are very common because people possess much more knowledge in their total personality than they do by intellect).

The thinkers we need help from must warn against moral relativism in their central theses not just in caveats, however well meant. They must fight against both forms of idolatry that undermine our elementary ethical awareness. They must unmask the idol of science and the idol of freedom. While Sartre is focused on one of them, Frankl fights on both fronts. Though he is mainly fighting against Freudian determinism, he also torpedoes the prevailing exaggeration of the concept of freedom. I call this exaggeration idolatry because much celebrated freedom is most often just a phantom; as when freedom is taken to mean freedom to pursue personal impulses or freedom to develop oneself independently. Many people desire to free by reacting strongly against the influence of their childhood and many behave in a chameleon-like fashion in order not to be predictable. But such forced independence actually makes one dependent on others since they determine one's contrariness. Likewise, the freedom gained by following one's impulses is illusory, since they are then allowed fully to determine one, much like an animal. This type of freedom is actually bondage. True freedom emerges when we strive for ideals. True, we are also constrained in that case, but constrained to being true to ourself. It is the only alternately to the constraints of bondage.

(He gets up and begins to exit while he says) I'll put water on for coffee. It must be about time.

HANNE: Today I'd rather have tea. Which you'd prefer too, wouldn't you?

ANDERS: Yes, but don't think of that, Hanne. You usually have a passion for coffee.

HANNE: I'd better become more moderate in that passion. Twice this past week I couldn't sleep because I'd had coffee too late in the day.

ANDERS: Well, then. Tea it is.

HANNE (when Anders returns): Since you criticized Sartre for contradicting himself I will take aim at you and ask if you aren't guilty of the same when you attack both existentialists for founding ethics on choice and the rationalists for building theirs on knowledge. Aren't you the one being illogical when you turn against both indeterminism and determinism, against both subjectivism and objectivism, dear Anders?

ANDERS: No. Sartre is being illogical when he maintains that the individual is free to establish the good and in other contexts he maintains that one kind of good is better than another; After all, there is something universal that the individual must recognize and submit to.

However, it is not illogical for me to distance myself from both indeterminism and determinism. I do this in acknowledgement of the paradox that we are, in fact, knowing beings and beings of will and despite philosophical striving for simplicity we must accept the concept of truth as well as the concept of freedom.

HANNE: A moment ago you rejected both these concepts as idolatry. Are you not contradicting yourself now?

ANDERS: No, I am stating the same thing in two ways. One of them is, I must accept both views, both knowledge and will; the other is, I must reject any philosophy that only accepts one of these.

HANNE (smiling ironically): Very well. In reality you want to answer the key question of free will with yes and no. Is that not illogical?

ANDERS: No, it is only paradoxical, Hanne. It is an acceptance of the paradox that is actually the case in human existence. Our existence concern both "I" and an environment, as subject plus objects, so we must assume both a subjective (willing) stance as well as an objective (reflective/knowing) stance. I am not suggesting two independent stances – I am not a dualist – but two insolubly intertwined views that presuppose one another and only have meaning in their interaction because they form a totality. Whatever would an "I" be without objects? Whatever would objects be without a subject to observe them? The two positions must interact and complete one another as complements to one another. They are complementary and only seemingly contradictory.

We must found the good on both choice and knowledge in one. And in fact we do. But this fact is difficult to capture in philosophical thinking because it strives to analyze and to simplify and to reach definitive consistency. Philosophers demand simplicity and to reach that they don't hold back from doing violence to reality.

HANNE: On the other hand you don't hold back from doing violence to thinking – by transgressing the fundamental law of logic, that S cannot be both P and not-P. And you do that by claiming that our will can be both free and unfree. You call your way of thinking complementary, but when Sartre does the same thing to avoid doing violence to

reality you call it illogical. A propos reality, you seem to ignore that the kettle is actually whistling.

ANDERS (getting up): I couldn't attend to that till you had finished your statement.

HANNE: Again, this unnecessary politeness on your part. I am your sister!

ANDERS: Yes, I'm glad that you are. But you are also a human being and every human being, including those closest to us, deserve respect – which only a stranger takes as politeness. I think it's reasonable to have more respect for what a person is saying that for a whistling kettle. I'll be back with our tea in a moment.

(*A little later Anders returns with tea*).

ANDERS: Shall we return to our topic? Or would you rather talk about something else?

HANNE: No, Anders, I would like to continue our discussion. Just not for too long, I'd like to get home relatively early.

ANDERS: That's fine. Where were we? Yes, I hadn't persuaded you of the difference between contradicting myself and complementarity. I will try to be clearer, albeit the concept of complementarity by its nature cannot be completely clarified, because it implies a paradox, a delimitation of rationality. To assert that our existence is characterized by complementarity is the same as asserting that it cannot be fully penetrated, in the end it evades philosophical understanding and presents us with a wonder that demands humility.

Let me seek help from two of the deepest thinkers in our history, Socrates and Kierkegaard, who both hinted at this fundamental complementarity.

Socrates claimed that the good was a question of knowledge. But he added that humans are ignorant. In other word, he was raising a paradox; he didn't contradict

himself. Against his claim that ethics is a question of knowing he claimed paradoxically that no one acts badly on purpose, which means that our innermost will is directed toward the good (our essential happiness).

On the surface Kierkegaard could be seen as holding the opposite view to Socrates' ethics as knowing when he locates the good in choice, to choose oneself. But that this is not the case we already see in his extremely high regard for Socrates and even more by the fact that by his expression, to choose oneself, he means, to become conscious as a human being. That is, knowledge and will in one. Kierkegaard's main concepts of choice and freedom do not entail that the individual can choose randomly, but she has freedom to choose her own purpose, that is, to become human – which means to relate to God. Paraphrased he says, "If what I chose didn't exists prior to my choosing then I didn't choose I created." This is different from Sartre who claims that humans create themselves. Likewise, Kierkegaard's central word, passion, is not about any kind of passion, but the passion directed toward God. So he points to the kernel of the "I" which can no longer be described by rational thinking and language and their otherwise practical differentiation between knowledge and will. Here human knowledge is existential (inflected by passion), and our will-passion is an act of knowing. This is the paradoxical relationship Kierkegaard calls dialectical.

This is the relationship between knowledge and will as a totality that I aim at when I use Bohr's term complementarity.

HANNE: It seems that you have been mainly occupied with legitimizing your view by reference to major authorities like Socrates and Kierkegaard. But you were supposed to explain it. Please explain it in your own words rather than presenting others' philosophy.

ANDERS: It was in order to explain the concept, better than I can myself that I mobilized Socrates, who inspired the philosophy we both support, and Kierkegaard, because you are an existentialist. In explaining complementarity to an existentialist it is reasonable that I refer to an existentialist concept, dialectic, that covers some of the same ground. After all, Kierkegaard uses the word much in the same way that I use complementary. But I will try to explain by means of other words, but till using the words of others.

HANNE (a little disappointed): Why Anders? I want your explanation. I understand you better when you speak directly than when you include references to philosophers you then comment on.

ANDERS: I won't do that. But it will only be my own formulations to a small extent since I spoon from all that I have read or learnt.

To begin let's assume that knowledge is primary and our will secondary. We must first know what the good is before we can want it. However, things are not as simple as that, which all existentialists point out.

Some of them, like Sartre, go to the other extreme, saying, humans find themselves in the frightening and challenging situation that they cannot know anything about the good, neither by use of the intellect, nor – since "God's death" – from any authority. Therefore we must establish the good ourselves by willing it.

Other existentialist (the group I count myself part of) claim a paradoxical relationship between knowledge and will – they call this dialectical, but to my mind the better term is complementary.

This group holds that there actually is an innermost truth of the good, but it is paradoxically one that cannot be known directly, only indirectly – by will. In the Gospel of John it says that if anyone wants to know the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God. That is we are to begin with obedience to the commandment to love our neighbour. We must want to live accordingly and slowly we will know its truth. The British philologist and thinker C.S. Lewis says, do not speculate on whether you really love your neighbour but behave as though you did and you will discover a secret; you will soon be able to love. When considering the basis of our existence we must want before we can know.

But claiming that ethics begins with will, with wanting, albeit not just anything, but a final truth, we might equally claim that it begins with knowledge, that is knowledge that there is a final truth. Indeed this is not intellectual knowledge but an intuitive sense that arises from the total personality. That is, it issues from the innermost vitality of our passion and will. But now we are back at the first claim – and so on. This is the paradoxical relationship between knowledge and will. In the end they make an insoluble totality. This is what I have in mind when I speak of complementarity in contradistinction to contractions.

HANNE: Now I think I understand what you mean. But I still can't accept your criticism of Sartre. What you call a contradiction in his case is an acknowledgment of the complementarity you talk about.

ANDERS: There may be a hint of it but there is no acknowledgment of it. We are at most talking of a belief that remains subconscious. He has not managed to make it sufficiently evident to express it as other thinkers have.

However, let's us leave the interpretation of Sartre. The question is whether we agree on the subject. My point is that we should stay clear of simplifying philosophies such as determinism and indeterminism, objectivism and subjectivism. We must realize that the subject-object problem is bottomless from which follows that our existence is definitively unfathomable. The assertions of our intellect must capitulate in the face of the wonder of existence and we must substitute them with humility.

In this way our moral view will avoids degenerating into either objectivist absolutism or subjective relativism.

HANNE: But I don't think you manage to avoid them both. I think you tend to an absolutist position when you speak of a final truth.

ANDERS: As we did not bring about life ourselves, I view life as a gift that must be realized through our life with others. That is, those others come along with the gift of life. We belong in each other's world.

HANNE: But Anders, that kind of thinking presumes that life is a gift from God. How does this fit with the fact that you don't believe in a personal God?

ANDERS: I have always experienced life as a gift - except for periods of illness when I have felt completely destroyed - but I have never been able to imagine or to accept any notion of a giver. I cannot deny either part in order to give my philosophy of life an attractive rational, logical order. I must hold on to this paradox in my consciousness, in my thoughts and words about life – rather than suppressing it only to have it lie there as an unacknowledged discrepancy between a view of life and an attitude to life, between head and heart.

HANNE (somewhat sharply): In other words you, an atheist, are trying to solve the problem of ethics by claiming that life is a gift from God and we are therefore duty bound to live according to His command to love our neighbour!

ANDERS (emphatically): First, I do not accept the term "solve." I am convinced that the deepest problems in our existence are not rational, that is, they are not solvable. Second, I do not accept the appellation "atheist." While the word God is meaningless for an atheist, for me it is the only natural expression of my experience of life as a gift and an assignment and above all as an overwhelming wonder that cannot be apprehended by the human intellect. Third, I prefer Løgstrup's word demand rather than command. Løgstrup's point is that love of neighbour is at once demanded and instinctive. It is not contrary to our nature but completely in accordance with our innermost essence.

HANNE: As an atheist I dispute that it is demanded. As a realist I dispute that is instinctive, spontaneous. And besides now you are leaving existentialism in favour of Løgstrup's religious philosophy.

ANDERS: First, I will merely refer you to the parental instinct's sympathy and tenderness toward another, which is much more developed in humans than it is among animals. Second, I am only in accord with Løgstrup's ethical ideas. To say that love must be the North Star in our lives is to take an absolute stance, but it is not absolutism. Indeed, my conviction that this is the founding value of our lives is stronger than any scientific knowledge provides for us. I follow your existentialism in that I don't believe that ethics can be anchored in philosophy or in religion (understood as a series of dogma), but contrary to you and other irreligious existentialists is view morality as insolubly connected with religiosity, where it has its wellspring; it does not float freely in the air. It

can stand on its own legs as righteousness, but in its deeper dimension as love it is rooted in a religious view of life, that is in humility and gratitude.

Humility is not the same as resignation in the face of what existentialists call "the absurdity of our existence," or "our situation after the death of God."

HANNE: And what about the horrible suffering many people have to bear? Is that not a confrontation with absurdity in which one must create one's own meaning?

ANDERS: I don't accept is form of ultra-humanism. On the one hand you judge the life you nevertheless value as being absurd; on the other you assert that humans can create meaning for themselves even in the face of horrible suffering. True, history gives us marvelous examples of people who have created meaning in the face of suffering by coping with it nobly and given strength and encouragement to others. But no one can count on be able to respond like that, as though in the end there is some form of security, safety. Also, no one can exclude the possibility of being able to cope in this manner even when considering our existence as absurd. The strength needed lies beyond our calculations and beyond our talents. Like life itself, it cannot be created it can only be received. For that reason we must fight against our egocentric overvaluation of ourselves, and our pretentiousness. Instead we must seek the kind of humility that merges with gratitude.

There are people who do that, people who even in the direst need live through their suffering self-forgetful and in awareness of what they owe their fellows.

Under heavy loads they bear witness to the inextinguishable loadstar of our lives, love.

(*Hanne expresses that she's in some agreement with these views but that she still maintains central parts of her own argument. She suggests that they continue their discussion another day, but that she'd prefer to go home now. After some concluding declarations of love for one another, Hanne leaves*).