and “proud”. These are words that stand for what Williams calls “thick” ethical concepts. The notion of a thick ethical concept is an extremely important one for Williams. What a thick ethical concept is is a concept that has both an evaluative aspect, in that to apply it in a given situation is, in part, to evaluate the situation, and a factual aspect, in that to apply it in a given situation is to make a judgement which is subject to correction if the situation turns out not to be a certain way. Thus if I claim that you have been unfaithful, I thereby censure you; but I also say something straightforwardly false if it turns out that you have not in fact gone back on any relevant agreement. Nor is the concept of infidelity just a value-free concept with a flag of disapproval attached. Williams, in opposition to many who have considered these concepts, argues vigorously that fact and value are inextricably intertwined in them. This is one reason why the language in which they are couched gives such a poor indication of the underlying metaphysics.

The analysis of language is of very limited use in moral philosophy, then. Nevertheless, it is of some use. It can serve to remind us that our ethical life, just like our ethical language, is a complex multifarious social phenomenon, which varies from one time to another and from one group to another; and that ethical understanding, which needs to account for such variation, also thereby “needs a dimension of social explanation” (p. 131).

Chapter 8: Knowledge, Science, Convergence

Chapter 8 is the heart of the book. It is in this chapter that Williams directly confronts these issues about the metaphysics of value (the issue whether there is some fundamental distinction between fact and value and the like).

These issues are also issues, in some sense, about the objectivity of our ethical thinking, and it is in these terms that Williams broaches them. He thinks that there is a kind of objectivity which, on any realistic view of the matter, fails to attach to our ethical thinking, even though it does attach to our thinking in other areas. (This connects with the claim made earlier that he acknowledges a
The question is: what kind of objectivity?

The word “objectivity” is used in a bewildering variety of ways. But on any construal, objectivity has something to do with agreement. To say that there is a kind of objectivity which does or does not attach to our thinking in a given area is to say something about the prospect of our reaching principled agreement in that area, or, as Williams puts it, of our converging in our beliefs in that area. Very well, then; what exactly is it that Williams is prepared to say about the prospect of our converging in some of our beliefs which he is not prepared to say about the prospect of our converging in our ethical beliefs? This turns out to be a surprisingly delicate question.

Williams’ position is not that we can reasonably expect to converge in some of our beliefs but cannot reasonably expect to do so in our ethical beliefs. Still less is it that we actually do converge in some of our beliefs but never do so in our ethical beliefs. Nor does it have to do with whether, where there is convergence, the beliefs in question merit the title of “knowledge” or not. It has to do with the different ways of explaining whatever convergence there is. The fundamental contrast is between science and ethics.

Williams’ position is as follows. We do sometimes converge in our ethical beliefs, and those beliefs do sometimes merit the title of “knowledge”. This can happen when the beliefs in question involve a thick ethical concept. Thus people who use the concept of chastity might have no difficulty in agreeing, and indeed in knowing, whether a certain act is chaste. The crux, however, lies in what is involved in their using the concept of chastity in the first place. Granted the concept’s distinctive combination of evaluation and factuality, using it is part of living in a particular social world, a world in which certain things are prized and others abhorred. People need to live in some such social world. But, as history amply demonstrates, there is no one such social world in which people need to live. They certainly do not need to live in a world that sustains the concept of chastity. Thus any good reflective explanation for why people converge in their beliefs about what is chaste must include an explanation for why they use the concept of
chastity at all; why they live in *that* social world. (This is the “dimension of social explanation” to which Williams refers at the end of Chapter 7.) This explanation cannot itself invoke the concept of chastity, because it must be from a vantage-point of reflection outside the social world in question. So it cannot directly vindicate their beliefs. (That is, it cannot conform to the schema: “These people converge in their beliefs about $x$ because they are suitably sensitive to truths about $x$.” It cannot represent them as agreeing about what is chaste because of insights that they have into what is chaste.) By contrast, a good reflective explanation for why people converge in their beliefs about a particular range of scientific issues, say in their beliefs about what oxygen is like, can invoke the very concepts at work in the beliefs, and hence, provided that the beliefs have been arrived at properly, can vindicate them. (It *can* conform to the schema specified above. It can represent these people as agreeing about what oxygen is like because of insights that they have achieved into what oxygen is like—because of what they have discovered about oxygen.)

One consequence of this position is that whatever ethical knowledge people have they have by unwaveringly and unguardedly exercising their thick ethical concepts. There is no ethical knowledge to be had by reflecting on whether it is “right” to use those concepts or not. This is why Williams presents his argument for the existence of ethical knowledge by invoking the fiction of a “hypertraditional” society, a society that is “maximally homogeneous and minimally given to reflection” (p. 142). It is there, for Williams, that the clearest examples of ethical knowledge are to be found.

But Williams goes further. He argues that, in a society such as our own, where there is plenty of reflection, the reflection can have an unsettling effect. People can come to abandon some of their thick ethical concepts, say because they realize that those concepts are associated with false beliefs, or simply because they become aware of alternatives. That makes it impossible for them to retain whatever knowledge they had by exercising the concepts. It is thus that Williams comes to draw one of the most striking and most controversial conclusions in the book: “the notably un-
Socratic conclusion,” as he calls it, “that, in ethics, reflection can destroy knowledge” (p. 148, his emphasis). This conclusion is “un-Socratic” because Socrates, whose reflective question initiated this whole enquiry and who insisted that a life without reflection—an “unexamined” life—was not worth living, believed that “nothing unreflective could be knowledge in the first place” (p. 168).

Chapter 9: Relativism and Reflection

The contrast between science and ethics that Williams explores in Chapter 8 leads him to say that “science has some chance of being more or less what it seems, a systematized theoretical account of how the world really is, while ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems” (p. 135). In particular, ethical thought “can never fully manifest the fact that it rests in human dispositions” (pp. 199–200). There was reference in the opening section above to the hope which Williams expresses in the Postscript, that our ethical experience may stand up to any self-understanding that exposes it as other than it seems. In Chapter 9 Williams addresses the question of how, given the onslaught of Chapter 8, it can do this.

What we need, he says, is confidence. This is a social phenomenon. Although it is individuals who possess confidence, their confidence is typically fostered and reinforced by such social devices as upbringing, the support of institutions, and public discourse. (What does not much help it, Williams insists—developing one of his main themes—is philosophy. On the contrary, philosophy helps to create the need for it.) Confidence enables individuals to abide by their thick ethical concepts despite the unsettling effects of reflection. It is a good thing. But it is not a supremely good thing. Some ways of achieving it, for example by suppressing rational argument, involve undue sacrifice of other things that are good, and they are to be resisted.

Another question that Williams addresses in Chapter 9 is what form of relativism, if any, is implied by his conception; that is, by his conception of different social worlds sustaining different thick ethical concepts, in some cases different to the point of