

## Robert Musil's Literary Ethics

The Man without Qualities Reconsidered

Blok, Mette

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**Author:**

[Blok, Mette](#), Roskilde University

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**Author Bio:**

Ph.D., part-time lecturer

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**Abstract:**

In this article I present a reading of Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities* from an ethical perspective, examining the work as an important contribution to philosophical ethics.

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**Robert Musil's Literary Ethics:**  
*The Man without Qualities* Reconsidered

Mette Blok

It used to be the widespread opinion that fiction is not an appropriate area for philosophical investigation. However, in the field of ethics during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, things are not that simple. Philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Emerson, and Nietzsche have forced us to consider the connection between form and content in ethics, and more recently theorists like Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell have argued that literature is indispensable when thinking about how to live one's life. In this essay I will present a reading of Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities* from an ethical perspective, examining the work as an important contribution to philosophical ethics. As I shall show, there are biographical, literary, and philosophical grounds for doing so.

The Austrian engineer, empirical psychologist and philosopher Robert Musil was born in Klagenfurt in 1880, and embarked on his life work *The Man without Qualities* in Vienna in the 1920s. At his death in 1942 two huge volumes had been published (1930/32), but the novel was still far from finished.<sup>1</sup> In the book Musil attempted to present a precise and nuanced picture of the modern, urban world and the conditions of life for the people inhabiting that world. While embodying the crisis in public and private life in the aftermath of what Nietzsche had identified as 'the death of God', Musil tried at the same time to reach out for new meaningful ways of living. At the beginning of the novel the protagonist Ulrich, a promising mathematician in his early thirties, decides to take a year's leave of absence to think his life over. But almost simultaneously he is persuaded to take the post of secretary for a patriotic campaign based in Vienna, which involves planning a celebration to mark seventy years of rule by the aged Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy. It is 1913, and the reader knows that World War I is rapidly approaching, but despite its length the novel never catches up with the catastrophe and thus remains in a kind of mild permanent suspense. Ulrich becomes increasingly estranged from the people surrounding the campaign and from himself, and the novel reaches a turning point when at the very end of the first volume Ulrich's father — a patriarch and establishment figure — dies and, at the funeral, Ulrich is reunited with his sister Agathe, with whom he has long lost contact. Brother and sister decide to settle down together, and the novel now, at the start of the second volume, takes on the character of a very unusual love story between siblings, a love story to which conversation on ethical and religious matters is central. One might describe the two volumes as follows: the first is critical and ironic, a condemnation of bourgeois society and its moral values, whereas the second is a positive, sincere and constructive attempt to show that a more authentic life is possible. Common to the two volumes are long essayistic passages which are neatly interwoven with the

narrative itself and contribute to the novel's extraordinary philosophicality. Musil insisted that this was indeed a novel, however, and accused critics who complained about its form and content of not being willing to think.

*The Man without Qualities* contains abundant ethical themes and subplots, and indeed, the whole scope of the novel is ethical. A few examples: Ulrich is in search of the right way to live and he thinks out several strategies — he calls these 'utopias' — to meet this classical ethical challenge. One of them is the utopia of what he calls 'the other condition', a part religious, part mystical feeling of oneness with the world; this state touches on the relation between ethics and religion. There is also the psychopathic but somehow sympathetic murderer Moosbrugger and the issues of responsibility, guilt and punishment that relate to his case, as well as the patriotic campaign with all its intrigues, its self-serving but irresponsible idealism and its internal fights for love and power. There are the 'spotless' moralists Hagauer and Lindner who live like Kantian automatons of duty and Meingast, the caricature of a Nietzschean overman, with his enthusiastic but manic-depressive follower Clarisse. And last but not least there is the question of the guilt and bliss of Ulrich and Agathe, who not only falsify their father's will but also live dangerously close to committing what is traditionally considered one of the greatest sins: incest. At the same time, however, their unusual love story highlights the role of love in ethics and shows the necessary connection between love of self and love of others.

Considering the fact that Musil frequently pronounced his main interest to be ethics, it is remarkable that the vast secondary literature on Musil contains very few works devoted specifically to this theme (among the exceptions are Ego 1992 and McBride 2006). Likewise, until now very few academic philosophers have written extensively on Musil in this respect, though in recent years he often is mentioned briefly (e.g., Ricoeur 1992, Agamben 1999, and Vattimo 2004). It is true, of course, that literary scholars rarely occupy themselves with ethics and that philosophers seldom dedicate themselves to the study of literature, but there is another reason for the difficulty of seeing Musil as an ethicist. Early in Musil scholarship it was established that Nietzsche constitutes the main source of inspiration for Musil. Scholars have identified links between Musil and Nietzsche with respect to the critique of the established order, the destruction of the traditional idealistic morality and the adherence to an epistemological perspectivism. But it has been much more difficult to establish a positive or edifying contribution to ethics in either of them. Thus the difficulty in receiving Musil as an ethicist is a direct consequence of the notorious difficulty in understanding Nietzsche as an ethicist. The widespread view that Nietzsche subverts any morality whatsoever has at least partly inhibited any serious preoccupation with Musil as an ethicist.

In his diaries and essays and also in *The Man without Qualities*, however, Musil leaves no doubt that he is motivated by a deep concern for ethics. In fact, at one point he states explicitly that he considers Nietzsche to be an ethicist on a par with Christ, the mystics and the great essayists (Musil 1999, 312).<sup>2</sup> Musil

scholarship has had difficulties putting this statement to good use, but I believe it is a key to understanding Musil, his relation to Nietzsche and his use of the concept ethics. So far I have used *ethics* to designate a philosophical discipline that has to do with all moral and ethical issues we can identify. Musil does this at times as well, but more often he distinguishes between ethics and morality as two very different ways of thinking about and handling our life with our fellow human beings and our actions towards them. I will follow Musil's distinction, which is not uncommon in philosophy, whether academic or otherwise, but will try to be more consistent than he, since, as a novelist, he allows himself more liberties than a philosopher would normally take. However, it is notoriously difficult to define the concepts morality and ethics, and Musil might even have a philosophical point in not distinguishing too sharply between them. Obviously, he considers morality to be a subdivision of the broader concept of ethics so that the two are not absolute opposites on a horizontal level. Rather, ethics for Musil is the more fundamental concept on a vertical axis from the perspective of which specific concepts of morality can be criticized and from which there can also be positive concepts of morality. This explains how Musil can sometimes use the term morality positively, as *pars pro toto* for ethics.

In Musil's notes for his autobiography he says: "It was important that I had always wanted to become involved with ethics, but knew of no suitable means of access" (Musil 1999, 442-443). After the completion of his philosophical dissertation in 1908, Musil's decision against philosophy in favour of writing is not due to a loss of interest in ethical issues, but rather because he found the way academic philosophy treated these issues deeply unsatisfying. As he summarizes in the following note, Musil considers literature to be the appropriate vehicle for ethics: "Literature is living ethos. Normally a description of moral exceptions. But from time to time also a summary of the morality of exception" (Musil 1978, vol. 7, 971, my translation). In Musil's diaries, which often supplied the raw material for the novel, he called literature a "battle to achieve a higher species of morality" (1999, 487) — here too the echo of Nietzsche's notion of the overman can be heard — and in an interview about the novel from 1926 he said: "We need a new morality. The old one will not do. My novel wishes to deliver material for such a new morality. It is an attempt at dissolution and an indication of synthesis" (1978, vol. 7, 942, my translation). It is important to note that in the last three quotations, Musil uses "morality" in a positive sense.

These quotations raise a number of new questions. Why is literature the place where ethics lives? Why is it interested in the exceptions and not in the rules? What is going to be dissolved and which new synthesis is Musil imagining? Here one needs to keep Musil's distinction between ethics and morality in mind, a distinction he has in common with Nietzsche and is likely to have adopted from him. In his works *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, and also in his other late works, Nietzsche carries out a harsh campaign against the Platonistic morality of Christianity. He contrasts the object of his devastating critique with what he calls

a 'higher morality', or sometimes 'ethics', which has at its heart the flourishing of human beings and the satisfaction of their real needs. Here Nietzsche even depicts Jesus as an ideal worthy of imitation, and distinguishes between Christ's intentions and the distortions of these in institutionalised Christianity. In Musil this distinction between morality in the narrow sense and ethics in a broader sense is restated. Morality he understands by and large negatively, namely as a stiff or dead logical system of universal and eternal maxims and principles — an example of such a principle would be the fifth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', which is relativized or ironically deconstructed in *The Man without Qualities* in the sense that it is shown how many exceptions there are to this seemingly universal rule.<sup>3</sup> For Musil, ethics, on the other hand, has to do with the individual, with the uncommon exception to the rule, with what cannot be settled, codified or made an object of statistical analysis. What is wrong with morality — its most intrinsic quality — is that it is impersonal; it excludes the individual even though the individual is the only source of genuine ethical experience. Thus human beings are reduced to 'das Man' ('the they'), to borrow a term from the early Heidegger of *Being and Time*, with whom Musil has striking similarities. In one of his essays Musil formulates this distinction between morality and ethics very clearly: "In accord with its prescriptive nature, morality is tied to experiences that can be replicated, [...] whereas the truly ethical experience, such as love, introspection or humility, is, even where it is of a social nature, something difficult to transmit, something quite personal and almost antisocial" (Musil 1990, 132). Musil's dissatisfaction with important aspects of the way in which philosophy treats ethical questions now becomes understandable: while moral philosophy has traditionally focused on the universal validity of our principles, on the universalizability of duty, and on the relation to others or to society, Musil wants to call attention to the experience of the individual and his/her relation to him/herself as an ethical relation. Only thinkers who do this are 'ethicists' in Musil's terminology, whereby ethics is turned, paradoxically, into a subject that is rarely treated in philosophy and more often makes its appearance in religion or art. As the above-mentioned essay continues: "What passes for ethics in our current literature is for the most part a narrow foundation of real ethics, with a skyscraper of morality above it. What genuine ethics there are today lead a very meagre life in art, in essayism, and in the chaos of private relationships" (ibid.). It is no longer any wonder that Musil turned literature into his "moral laboratory" (1978, vol. 8, 1351, my translation) and produced his most audacious ethical experiment, *The Man without Qualities*.

For several reasons *The Man without Qualities* is not as obviously ethical in intent as one might expect from what I have argued above. First, the reader moves here so to speak from the theory of the essays to the practice of the novel — Musil defines literature as "teaching of living in examples," again "living ethos" (1978, vol. 7, 971, my translation) — and naturally the novel must not explicitly focus on ethics to be classified as an ethical novel. Second, Musil explicitly thematizes

ethics to what is a highly unusual degree for a novel but does not do so until the second volume, i.e., 700 pages into the work. Until then the allusions to morality and ethics are rather sporadic, and the first volume is, at least on first reading, a Nietzschean dissolution of traditional moral concepts, not the description of unique ethical experiences which Musil demands of ethics. The two volumes of the novel are very different; whereas the first is ironic and destructive with respect to morality, the second explores without a hint of irony the authentic ethical experience called by Musil 'the other condition' which is, according to him, the vital source of morality. In this sense the novel undertakes — as Musil said in the interview of 1926 — a dissolution of morality as we know it and an attempt at a new synthesis where the 'other condition' of ethics becomes active. I shall return to this shortly.

There are clear indications of Musil's ethical intent in the first volume. Thus he has his protagonist Ulrich, the mathematician with strong philosophical inclinations, state the view that there is "only one question worth thinking about, the question of the right way to live" (Musil 1995, 275, henceforth referred to only by page number). Even as a scientist Ulrich is "in love with science not so much on scientific as on human grounds" (37), he hopes passionately to learn from science how to live. This unmistakably Socratic question, which is found in Plato's *Politeia* among other places, is expressly repeated in the second volume of the novel. Here Ulrich tells his sister Agathe, who is just about to move in with him after her divorce: "My dear Agathe, there's a whole circle of questions here, which has a large circumference and no center, and all these questions are: 'How should I live?'" (972). To this "circle of questions" belongs Ulrich's decision, made at the beginning of the novel, "to take a year's leave of absence from his life in order to seek an appropriate application of his abilities" (44). In spite of his promising career as a mathematician Ulrich feels increasingly estranged from his life and his qualities; he decides, therefore, to attempt a "salvation of singularity" (ibid., my translation of "Rettung der Eigenheit"), that is, to reflect on himself to find out what he really wants to be. Ulrich's "leave of absence from ... life" (44) is not a flight from reality. It is motivated by the ethical endeavour to find the right way to live and to move toward an authentic existence.

In addition to distinguishing between morality and ethics, Musil introduces other pairs of concepts, some of which I shall explore below. These include the following: with qualities/without qualities, sense of reality/sense of possibility, the like of it happens/doing what is unlike anything else, normal condition/other condition. They are all structured so that one side of the pair has negative, the other positive connotations, and they all correspond to two distinct ways of living. With respect to ways of living the two most starkly contrasting figures in the novel are Ulrich, the moral experimenter, and his father, the law professor who upholds the status quo. But Ulrich is different from all other characters in the novel in that he undergoes change whereas all other characters, even Agathe, remain static. This distinction between becoming and being, movement and inertia, life and death is also



found on the level of Musil's poetic language. To give just one example, ethics is often associated with movement, fire, or the sea, whereas morality, with its systematic character and fixity, is linked to stasis, to calcification and to the rigidity of the built environment. In other words, Musil thinks in dualisms, and more often than not his pairs of contrasting concepts are almost synonymous so that, for instance, being without qualities partly *means* having a sense of possibility, and having qualities *means* having a sense of reality.

It is appropriate that much has been written in Musil scholarship about the concept 'without qualities'; since this phrase is to be found in the novel's title it must be considered central to the work. From an ethical perspective the concept bears on the overall intention of the novel; on the one hand it implies a dissolution of traditional morality, on the other the potential for a new ethical synthesis. Thus the concept has at least two meanings or two aspects, which can be evaluated differently according to the perception of the beholder (cf., Musil's perspectivism). On the one hand 'without qualities' points to the redundancy of the hitherto prevailing order that Stefan Zweig, in *The World of Yesterday*, termed "the Golden Age of Security" and that Musil calls somewhat condescendingly "The like of it happens."<sup>4</sup> In this negative sense Ulrich's boyhood friend Walter calls him a 'man without qualities'; to Walter, this is equivalent to a dissolution of personality and all hitherto prevailing values. He sums up what he considers a dangerous relativization of good and evil in the following damning but entirely accurate description of Ulrich: "He'll always see a good side to every bad action. What he thinks of anything will always depend on some possible context — nothing is, to him, what it is; everything is subject to change, in flux, part of a whole, of an infinite number of wholes presumably adding up to a superwhole that, however, he knows nothing about" (63-64). To Walter's annoyance, Ulrich happily accepts this description of himself. He has a strong aversion against being defined by fixed qualities, by a specific character or a specific occupation. To Ulrich, being without qualities has a positive resonance: it means that he does not identify with the qualities that he clearly possesses; they are, as it were, external to him, not affecting the question of who he really is. Therefore Musil says in a chapter heading that "[a] man without qualities consists of qualities without a man" (156), that Ulrich's personal qualities have "more to do with one another than with him" (157), and that "experiences have made themselves independent of people" (158), hanging in the air without any connection to those that have them. Ulrich conceives this estrangement and the dissolution of that which should be the most personal to individuals, namely their qualities and experiences, as possibilities for a new understanding of man, a setting free for another, more authentic existence. One example of how this notion comes to the fore in the novel is Ulrich's arrest where, after being asked for his personal details, he experiences a "statistical demystification of his person," a "dismembering ... into impersonal, general components" (168-69). Another is his father's funeral where Ulrich, this time asked by a journalist about his father's life and achievements, is unable to find



anything “worth saying about his father” and finally accepts the journalist’s highly standardized phrases, “astonished at the little heap of ashes that remains of a human life” (753). One could also think of Ulrich’s confrontations with other prominent characters of the novel such as Clarisse, Diotima and Arnheim, who all accuse him of being passive, unworldly, apolitical, irresponsible and even dangerous. This leads to the other, positive meaning of the concept ‘without qualities’, to what could be called its ethical or even its mystical meaning. The idea that man’s qualities are external and inauthentic, something to be disposed of in order to reach authentic ground, can be followed back to the German mystic Meister Eckhart. Jochen Schmidt and others have documented Eckhart’s influence on Musil convincingly (Schmidt 1975, Goltschnigg 1974, Spreitzer 2000). Thus to become a man without qualities is also, for Ulrich, an ideal that he pursues with increasing vigour throughout the novel; this ideal is at the heart of the audacious attempt by Ulrich and Agathe to make permanent ‘the other condition’, this merging with the world, this *unio mystica*. To sum up, the concept ‘without qualities’ points in two directions: from the perspective of prevailing morality it means a dissolution; from a broader ethical perspective it denotes an — admittedly utopian — ideal.

The main part of the first volume of *The Man without Qualities*, apart from a short introductory section ironically called “A Sort of Introduction,” is titled — and I translate literally — “The like of it happens.” The two existing English translations have rendered the German “Seinesgleichen geschieht” as “The like of it now happens” (1953-60) and “Pseudoreality Prevails” (1995) respectively. Of these I strongly prefer the older, literal translation because Musil has a distinct intention with this central concept. He contrasts it with that which is unlike anything else (in German *ohnegleichen*); his title designates a world of uniform systems, of repetition, automatism, impersonality and statistical averages. In the novel, Musil exposes this world ironically through the medium of the ambitious, patriotic “Parallel Campaign,” the task of which is to assert Austria-Hungary as a haven of peace, contrasting it with Prussia whose only pre-eminence is in the field of military might. The glaring passivity of the campaign and its pseudo-idealistic vision of a “redeeming idea” (500) — which might turn out to be anything from an Imperial Franz Joseph Soup Kitchen to a Pan Austria — slowly but unavoidably moves toward a military confrontation, i.e., World War I. The tragi-comic element is that so little happens in the campaign, despite the constant mantra that something has to happen (cf., “The like of it happens”), that in the end military force is recommended, not least to cover up the failure and move from stasis to action. Thus Musil poses the question of the possibility of political action versus non-action — here especially the figures Arnheim and Ulrich, Prussian man of the world and Viennese visionary, are set against each other — and demonstrates that political processes have their own inner logic, which is, however, not necessary.

In the field of ethics, “The like of it happens” designates a moral idealism or Platonism in the sense that good and evil are absolute, hypostasized entities, idling

in their ideal heaven without any connection to real public and private life. Again one could think of Moosbrugger and the fifth commandment, but in fact almost all the characters in the novel break the moral law in some way or another, though this does not necessarily lead them to question it. Ulrich's mistress, Bonadea, for example, is a very decent person, a loving mother and a good wife, but she is also a nymphomaniac who suffers pangs of conscience for her transgressions. Likewise Diotima, whose cultural salon hosts the "Parallel Campaign," contemplates an affair with Arnheim, and in the end it is not the moral law but Arnheim's reluctance that stands in the way of adultery. The conservative patriot Count Leinsdorf unknowingly sums up the irony of the situation as he, when asked by Ulrich where duty lies, exclaims: "Why, in doing our duty, of course!" (923); where one's duty lies is anything but clear at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a child, Ulrich is punished for an offence with the sentence that he is only allowed to have soup for dinner; however, since he is ill and has a fever, he is only allowed to have soup anyway. This moral doctrinarianism for the sake of duty remains completely incomprehensible to his sister Agathe. The novel is full of such ironic allusions to the focus on the concept of duty in Kant's moral philosophy (especially in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*), and it misses no opportunity to expose the prevailing idealistic morality as pseudo-morality and hypocrisy. In a more serious vein, Musil shows how this morality and its legal counterpart, the judicial system, fail in the case of Moosbrugger, the murderer: the jurists and the court psychiatrists argue about the definition of mental sanity, and Moosbrugger, who is alternately held responsible and not responsible for his acts, moves back and forth between prison and psychiatric wards, only to be (according to a draft version of a later chapter) executed in the end.

What characterizes the morality of "The like of it happens" is its claim to universal validity; a claim which turns out again and again to be incompatible with personal ethical experience. Like Nietzsche, Musil understands the prevailing morality as a logical system of average values which can be applied automatically and repeatedly without ever affecting the individual. As Ulrich says: "How could we expect people to behave in a virtuous manner if a virtuous act were not repeatable at will?" (410). To Musil such a repeatable moral codex has hardly anything to do with ethics, but everything with logic: "Morality replaces the soul with logic; once a soul is thoroughly moral, it no longer has any moral problems, only logical ones; it asks itself whether something it wants to do is governed by this commandment or that" (552). Of course Musil plays with words here. The meaning of both 'soul' and 'moral' has to shift from the first to the second usage for the statement to be meaningful: the second 'soul' must mean 'individual', the second 'moral' must mean 'ethical', but Musil brilliantly imitates the reduction of the questions of the soul to logic on the linguistic level by letting the meaning slide between the concepts, from 'soul' to 'logic' as it were. To Ulrich this means that the personal, singular cases cannot be settled in the dimension of morality; since morality is

confined to the general and the social, they can only be explored within the realm of ethics. Musil wants the reader to take the thought seriously that we have an earthly soul to be saved; this soul becomes stunted under the regimentation of morality. This line of thought is fundamentally the same as in Kierkegaard who asks (in *Fear and Trembling*) if a teleological suspension of the ethical in favour of faith is possible, i.e., if faith can sometimes overrule the ethical demand; it also recalls Nietzsche when he defends immoralism and strives “beyond good and evil” for the sake of man’s true well-being as is the case in all his later works. In both cases morality is criticized from a higher or broader standpoint, though it is confusing that Kierkegaard calls what I have called “morality” “ethics” and what I have called “ethics” “religion.” Musil is in search of what is individual, of that which is unlike anything else, so he has to reject a world where only ‘The like of it happens’.

Another pair of important concepts that relate to the distinction between morality and ethics is reality and possibility. In accordance with his belief that literature is “living ethos” (1978, vol. 7, 971, my translation), Musil says: “Literature doesn’t have the task to describe what is, but what should be; or what could be, as a partial solution of what should be” (1978, vol. 7, 970, my translation). In this poetological reflection Musil explicitly connects the categories of possibility and ethics; what interests him is not what is, but what could or should be; literature is nothing less than a sketch of a new world order (or even disorder), a utopian ethical endeavour. In the novel this is transformed into a merciless critique on Ulrich’s part of the prevailing order and his proposal of a series of utopias, the strengths and weaknesses of which are tested in the moral laboratory that is this novel. As early as in chapter four, Musil introduces the distinction between a sense of reality and a sense of possibility, immediately after having introduced the reader to Ulrich’s old-fashioned father in chapter three. The father is said to be a man “with qualities” (8) whereas Ulrich, as we know, is the “man without qualities” who was introduced in chapter two (6). Thereby Musil points to the connection between the possession of qualities and the possession of a sense of reality whereas being without qualities is linked to the visionary sense of possibility. Musil defines what differentiates the son from the father in the following way: “So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not” (11). Ulrich eminently matches this definition of the indefinable; to the irritation of many of those who surround him he never takes the most obvious course in a given situation, and he is less interested in transforming his ideas into reality than in keeping open the space of possibilities. As Ulrich says to his friend Clarisse, the passionate follower of Nietzsche who takes this philosopher much too literally and wants to put his thinking into practice: “You can set up a Kaiser Franz Josef Soup Kitchen, and you can meet the needs of a Society for the Protection of the House Cat, but you cannot turn great ideas into reality any more than you can do it with music” (383). Consequently, when Ulrich talks about “abolishing reality,”

about the “overestimation of the present” compared to the future (312), and about “making history up” and “living the history of ideas instead of the history of the world” (388, 395), he is not issuing invitations to take direct action. Rather they are attempts to *think* differently, to show that reality is not as solid as it seems, and that everything could just as well be otherwise, and indeed better.<sup>5</sup> The ‘other condition’, however, *is* a way of experiencing reality differently, thus abolishing it; however, it turns out that this condition does not to allow itself to be made permanent. The condition is introduced in the novel as young Ulrich’s short experience of love with a major’s wife. This love is only the catalyst of an intense merging of inner and outer world where all distances and differences melt away and Ulrich reaches “the heart of the world” (131). Though this experience defies description, Musil tries to capture it in words, and indeed ‘the other condition’ makes repeated appearances in the novel. He considers it the source of authentic ethical experience but it is not capable of exploitation, of being instrumentalized and made into guidelines for action. So although he thinks that if people “could be taught to think a new way, they would change their lives” (37) — an important Musilian theme is the disjunction between thinking and public life — neither Musil nor his protagonist Ulrich deliver guidelines for action or moral prescriptions. A subordinate character in the novel, the Jewish maid Rachel, even makes the disappointing discovery that she cannot use literature as a guide to action (367). The space of possibility and thereby the space of ethics is necessarily indefinite but this circumstance does not diminish its relevance as an alternative and corrective to a fixed reality which most people wrongly consider necessary and unchangeable. Arguably, quite a lot can be said about this alternative provided that it lives up to Musil’s utopian requirements.

I have referred to the second volume of *The Man without Qualities* as being ethical according to the criteria that Musil and Nietzsche attach to this term. It bears the title “Into the Millennium” and has the subtitle “The Criminals.” Once again the reader should pay careful attention to Musil’s choice of titles. This volume deals with the utopia of the ‘other condition’ or rather the utopia of making this ‘other condition’ permanent. That would be the Millennium, Heaven on Earth. Ulrich and his sister Agathe embark upon an experiment of living that turns them into criminals, immoralists, and nihilists in the eyes of society, leading them — as the narrator warns — “to the edge of the possible,” and making them into “believers without God” (826). So they are at once criminals and saints, depending on the perspective from which they are approached. Before testing this most important utopia, however, Ulrich — still in the first volume — sets out at least two other utopias, both ethically relevant, which prepare the way for the utopia of the other condition. The first of these is called by the narrator “the utopia of exact living” (263) or “the utopia of precision” (266). Ulrich is, as we recall, a mathematician; Musil himself was also trained in the natural sciences, and the novel is on all levels characterized by great sympathy and respect for scientific ideals such as exactness and sobriety. Likewise it praises the method of the natural sciences whereby

hypotheses are set forth and tested through experiments. Here one is reminded of Nietzsche's 'gay science' with its anti-metaphysic experimentalism and its defence of the 'free spirit'. Musil is not a scientific reductionist; he certainly thinks that natural science has its limits, but following the positivist spirit of his time he tries to do away with redundant metaphysics and exaggerated worship of feeling. "The utopia of precision" asks the question of whether it is possible to transfer the ideals of natural science to life, to live exactly even outside the laboratory, so to speak. This would mean that the realm of morality would have to be reduced dramatically but as the narrator ironically states what holds for soap does not hold for morality: great expenditure does not necessarily imply great purity. He then continues: "It would be a useful experiment to try to cut down to the minimum the moral expenditure (of whatever kind) that accompanies all our actions, to satisfy ourselves with being moral only in those exceptional cases where it really counts, but otherwise not to think differently from the way we do about standardizing pencils or screws" (265). Here again Musil dissolves morality into logic and ethics. The application of science to human life would do away with many moral rules which Musil describes as "metaphors that have been boiled to death, with the revolting greasy kitchen vapors of humanism billowing around the corpses" (648). Instead of such do-gooder imitation of virtue, moral action would be concentrated to singular cases of exception, i.e., to individual ethical experience, which alone matters to Musil. He uses the idea of "the utopia of precision" to criticize and undermine what he considers a ubiquitous, absolutist, moralizing morality. Therefore, even if the issue of living life exactly is itself the subject of ironic questioning in the novel, the idea of precision plays a preparatory role for both of the other utopias.

Whereas "the utopia of precision" represents a rational approach to life, the utopia that takes its place, "the utopia of essayism" (267), attempts to connect reason and feeling or, as the terminology of the novel has it, 'exact and inexact', 'precision and passion', 'rationality and soul'. According to Musil an essay is situated in a realm somewhere between a scientific treatise and literature, between truth and subjectivity. It treats its subject matter from several different angles or perspectives, without fixing its content in any final form. An essay is not just an *attempt* (French: *essai*, German: *Versuch*) to express something that could otherwise be formulated as a scientific truth; incapable of being expressed in any other way, it is "the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought" (273). Thus an essay says something which could not be said differently, something unique, but it does not end in pure subjectivism as does much literature; it is "subject to laws that are no less strict for appearing to be delicate and ineffable" (ibid.). Ulrich's 'utopia of essayism' aims at treating nothing less than life and the world, including the field of morality and ethics, in the way that an essay treats its subject matter. This situates the field of morality and ethics somewhere between absolute objective truth and pure subjectivism (which is not to be confused with subjectivity). Likewise, it stresses the *relativity* of values, i.e., their dependency on

a context or on the whole of which they are a part — without this amounting to relativism. Ulrich conceives of moral actions and qualities as atoms with various potentials for chemical combination, i.e., as functional values which do not have any meaning apart from the system of relationships, the field of energy, to which they belong. As an example the narrator mentions that “a murder can appear to us as a crime and a heroic act” (270) — this depends completely on the perspective of the beholder and on the context of meaning within which he or she locates the murder. According to this view there are no absolute, independent values, and morality that has hitherto been so static is replaced by something more flexible that is “capable of fitting more closely the mobility of facts” (272). At the same time this is an emancipation of man who, one could say, is given back his original possibilities of action: “man as the quintessence of his possibilities, potential man, the unwritten poem of his existence, confronts man as recorded fact, as reality, as character” (270-71). As Ulrich notes, there is something devaluating about having to give credit to the moral law when one knows, in any case, what to do in a particular situation; it diminishes the value of the act to have to regard it as being derived from a universal commandment. It is natural and common to regard morality — since it is neither an objective truth nor a subjective invention — as an imperative. The problem with this, according to Ulrich, is that if a commandment such as ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is understood as an imperative, it only appeals to one side of man, namely to the head or the intellect, not to feeling. Musil even has a concept for the alternative way he would like to think about ethics: he calls it “senti-mental,” meaning that feeling, *senti-ment*, should play as great a part as intellect or mind (the Latin *mens* gives us the ‘mental’ in *senti-ment*) in this thinking and that the two should mutually enrich each other. The consequence of this is that you fail if you act morally only for the sake of morality, by deriving your action from a universal law as if it were a *logical* operation. What Ulrich imagines is that human beings must be able to act “wholeheartedly” (274) (namely following the prompting of their hearts) and that this ability is connected to happiness. Accordingly the narrator says of Ulrich: “He might be happy because he didn’t kill, or happy because he killed, but he could never be the indifferent fulfiller of an imperative demanded of him” (275). Thus, following “the utopia of essayism,” it must be possible to act morally with passion intact; the naked moral law is superseded by something higher, which, like the subject matter of an essay, is ineffable strictly speaking but not the less binding for that. It is an attempt to preserve the strict sense of obligation in the field of ethics while at the same time leaving room for subjectivity. In his last utopia, Ulrich takes the final step and advocates unequivocally subjective ethical experience.

“The novelists tell us about the exceptions, from Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac to the most recent beauty who shot her lover, and dissolve it [i.e., the “deduced truth” (274) of morality, M.B.] again into something subjective” (274). One could say instead: from Abraham to the extraordinary love story of Ulrich and Agathe. *The Man without Qualities* is a novel, not an over-length essay. Consequently, we



have some right to expect a distinct accentuation of subjective ethical experience, and this is exactly what the reader is presented with in 'the utopia of the other condition' in the second volume. This 'other condition', which was introduced above as Ulrich's intense love experience with a major's wife, is best described as an experience that borders on the realm of religion: an experience of the dissolution of individuality and its merging into the world — what the mystics call *unio mystica*. It is an experience of intense happiness and meaningfulness, a condition of love not primarily directed toward a person, but toward the world as such or perhaps toward God. To give an example from Ulrich's first experience of the other condition: "He sank into the landscape, although it was just as much an inexpressible being borne up by it, and when the world surpassed his eyes, its meaning lapped against him from within in soundless waves. He had penetrated the heart of the world; from it to his far-off love was no farther than the nearest tree" (130-31). Throughout the first volume, not only Ulrich but almost all important characters of the novel have experiences or at least glimpses of this condition, and many of them realize that it constitutes the underlying ground of morality. It is not until the second volume, however, that Ulrich and Agathe decide to explore this condition systematically, to see if it is possible to live in it permanently. There are several instances in which they act in a morally unjustifiable way, the most spectacular of which are the forgery of their father's will and the incestuous temptations within their relationship, to which they might, or might not, succumb.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, they are portrayed as modern saints who, isolated and unworldly, act out of an 'other' and higher order than the moral one. They have endless conversations on morality, religion, and love, and in an important sense their love consists in this never-ending conversation. Read metaphorically, Ulrich's and Agathe's kinship is a necessary condition of their love: in Musil, unlike in Levinas' ethics of the face, the Other is not wholly other, but similar to the self, and love of self, in the Aristotelian sense of *philautia*, is necessary for the ability to love the Other.

The last two chapters of the first volume of *The Man without Qualities* have the titles "Going home" and "The turning point" (German: *Heimweg* and *Die Umkehrung*). There is no doubt that these titles are to be taken not only literally, but also metaphorically. What Ulrich and Agathe experience is something very similar to a religious conversion. Such a conversion is by definition subjective and personal; as Kierkegaard would say, it has to do with "that individual," i.e., with the individual in its individuality. Therefore the relation between religion and morality or ethics becomes central in the second volume. As illustrated above, Musil draws on the mystics in his description of the 'other condition'; he owned Martin Buber's collection of extracts from the mystics called *Ekstatische Konfessionen* and made frequent use of it, transferring (unattributed) quotations directly to the text of *The Man without Qualities* (Goltschnigg 1974). With an expression borrowed from Nietzsche, he says of the mystics: "They were, in the bourgeois sense, all immortals" (127). Like Nietzsche, Musil believes that there is something higher than



morality; but whereas for Nietzsche this is the flourishing of man in some broadly Aristotelian naturalistic sense, in Musil's version morality is something external, something quality-like which prevents man's authentic, ethical-religious experience of himself and the world. Therefore he has Ulrich quote Emerson to Agathe, a man to whom Ulrich declares his love: "Society's virtues are vices to the saint" (756).<sup>7</sup> As Ulrich later notes, of course this doesn't mean conversely that society's vices are virtues to the saint. Still, it means a "revaluation of all values" in a Nietzschean sense because it leads inevitably to Agathe's rhetorical question: "Isn't it good to be good?" (812). The distinction being made here is between good deeds and intrinsic goodness, that is once more a distinction between external and internal, between appearance and being. As Ulrich says: "There's an absurd paradox inherent in those good people .... They turn a condition into an imperative, a state of grace into a norm, a state of being into a purpose! In a whole lifetime this household of good people never serves up anything but leftovers, while keeping up a rumor that these are the scraps from a great feast day that was celebrated once" (Ibid.). In other words, goodness is a condition, a grace and a state of being, whereas a morality, which is reduced to doing one's duty as if paying one's taxes, is like the sad remains after a much richer feast. This feast is the 'other condition', in which everything is a 'yes' and good action flows from a state of goodness, happiness and plenty — in so far as action takes place at all: the 'other condition' is mainly contemplative, and here lies ultimately its limitation.

During the first decades after Musil's death, the central question in Musil scholarship was whether he had intended to allow Ulrich and Agathe to fail in their attempt to live in the 'other condition'. As mentioned above, the novel was unfinished, and there were great editorial problems.<sup>8</sup> Today the accepted view is that 'the utopia of the other condition', Ulrich's most important utopia, was meant to prove impossible to realize permanently. I wholly agree with this — one can find many proofs for this in Musil's posthumous papers — but maintain that this is not as significant as it is often held to be. It is completely consistent with Musil's overall thinking that the 'other condition' remains an ecstatic borderline experience which is incompatible with an active public life and impossible to maintain permanently since this would go against the eternal becoming of the world and moreover lead to standstill, boredom and nausea. The crux of the matter is, however, that this by no means renders the 'other condition' invalid. Musil nowhere renounces his view that it is necessary to distinguish between morality and what could be called alternately ethics, religion (as long as this is undogmatic) or 'other condition', and that morality has its vital counterpart, its *sine qua non*, in this 'other'. Thereby Musil has established the primacy of subjectivity — as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Emerson had done in different ways before him. To Musil, subjective ethical experience is of decisive importance; it constitutes the fire behind cooled morality, to use a frequent metaphor of the novel (Payne 1978), and it ultimately motivates us to act morally. Thus, Musil by no means pleads for the abolition of morality (this would indeed

be meaningless); he insists on its necessity as a regulative order, but he anchors it in an ‘other’, to which he lends absolute primacy. As he has Ulrich say to Agathe in a diatribe, which might be described as the profession of a non-believer’s religious creed: “But maybe I believe that the time is coming when people will on the one hand be very intelligent, and on the other hand be mystics. Maybe our morality is already splitting into these two components. I might also say into mathematics and mysticism. Into practical improvements and unknown adventure!” (837). In the second volume of *The Man without Qualities*, Musil devoted himself to the unknown adventure, in accordance with his conviction that ethics is necessarily utopian, its primary purpose being the opening of a space of possibilities. The answer to the question why Musil, the philosopher, chose to write a novel and not a philosophical treatise is probably to be found here. Ethics, understood as a teaching of life — as the question of how to live, with its potential answers — cannot be written in the traditional philosophical way without either remaining totally abstract or becoming dogmatic. The teaching is not to be presented as dogma, but to be shown by examples. The gallery of characters in *The Man without Qualities* makes it possible for Musil to show a whole series of different ethical positions, and thus to offer his readers an overall epistemological perspectivism. This is not equivalent to relativism in the field of ethics, however, but only to ethical questions being context-dependent. There is no doubt that Ulrich and Agathe represent Musil’s ‘good examples’, and they do in fact reach an answer to the question of how to live: namely in the ‘other condition’ (cf. 1716). The impossibility of maintaining this condition permanently is not a sign of resignation on Musil’s part; rather, it is part of the nature of ethics as he conceives it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Musil finished approximately the first half of the second volume, leaving hundreds of pages of drafts for the second half and for parts of the novel already completed. Much of this material has been published posthumously and all of it is available on a recent DVD-edition of Musil’s complete works: Walter Fanta, Klaus Amann and Karl Corino (eds.), *Klagenfurter Ausgabe* (Klagenfurt, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> “Typically different ... are the ethicists. Names: Confucius, Lao-tse, Christ and Christianity, Nietzsche, the mystics, the essayists.”

<sup>3</sup> See Musil 1995, 274 and also Musil’s essay “Skizze der Erkenntnis des Dichters” (1978, vol. 8, 1028). The novel, of course, has its own example of a transgression of this commandment, Moosbrugger. But Moosbrugger is shown to be both a victim of his psychopathic nature — which is not so far from the nature of the healthy mind as one would like to think — and a victim of society’s inherent, but suppressed violence: Moosbrugger takes on the character of a scapegoat, redeeming the common sins of humankind. Thus he is not condemned by the narrator, and the fifth commandment is shown to be in an important sense *irrelevant* to his case. Related to this theme is Ulrich’s momentary aggression toward Arnheim, Agathe’s disturbing wish to kill Hagauer, and, in the posthumous papers, Hans Sepp’s suicide.

<sup>4</sup> My translation of “Seinesgleichen geschieht.” In the new English translation (1995) this is rendered as “Pseudoreality Prevails.” This latter version may be true to Musil’s intention, but as a translation I find it very problematic. See below.

<sup>5</sup> The German word translated into “different(ly)” or “other(wise)” is “anders.” It is noteworthy that Ulrich is called “Anders” in some of the early drafts of the novel.

<sup>6</sup> There are early drafts depicting incest, but it is uncertain if Musil would have used them. I do not find this question so important, however; Ulrich and Agathe have long since transgressed the moral law by loving each other erotically. Rather, a physical consummation would be a fall in the sense that it would break with the non-appetitive nature of the ‘other condition’ and thus bring it to an end.

<sup>7</sup> The quotation is from Emerson’s essay “Circles.” The original has: “The virtues of society are vices of the saint” (Emerson 1983, 411).

<sup>8</sup> Musil’s wife and his editor Frisé wished to complete the novel, and made the posthumous material look more coherent in the first editions than it was, leaving out what, according to them, did not fit the story as Musil would have told it.

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