
ON GENERAL AND NON-GENERAL ABILITIES

BY

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Abstract: I distinguish two ways an ability might be general: (i) an ability might be general in that its possession doesn't entail the possession of an opportunity; (ii) an ability might be general in virtue of pertaining to a wide range of circumstances. I argue that these two types of generality – I refer to them with the terms 'general' and 'generic', respectively – produce two orthogonal distinctions among abilities. I show that the two types of generality are sometimes run together by those writing on free will and argue that both types of generality are relevant to understanding the modality of abilities.

1. Introduction

In ordinary English, the term 'can' and the phrase 'is able to' can be used to attribute two broad kinds of ability. The distinction between them can be glossed as that between those abilities, we attribute even when we know the opportunity to exercise them is lacking and those abilities the (true) attribution of which requires the presence of the relevant opportunity. As an example of the first kind of ability, consider this exchange by a medical doctor, Dr. Zaner, and the husband of one of his patients, Mr. Bittner, in which they discuss the patient's ability to write and thus communicate:

[Mr. Bittner:] 'Just the other day, I found this note she'd written on that special computer we got, her hands and fingers are so crippled and almost useless anymore, we had to do it, get that computer ...'

'She's able to write?' I was shocked.

Pacific Philosophical Quarterly •• (2022) ••••• DOI: 10.1111/papq.12424

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'Oh, yeah, she's got this what they call a 'wand' that she's able to work so it can touch this or that key. The keyboard is made really sensitive so it can tell when she touches it with the wand, so she's at least able to communicate some that way' (Embree *et al.*, 2010, p. 284).

In this exchange, the husband attributes to his wife (the patient) a skill or standing ability to write. Another example is provided by writing instructor Ruth Culham who in the following passage attributes three abilities to one of her students:

She's shown us three things in this simple [writing] exercise: 1) she's *able to write an opinion conclusion*, 2) she's *able to add a meaningful detail* that shows cause and effect, and 3) she *can self-correct for other traits and key qualities* because she's been working on them over time, too (Culham, 2018, p. 103).

These abilities are learned, stable properties of an individual. Their attribution does not state anything about the agent's circumstances. For these reasons, philosophers have often called them *general abilities* or *capacities*. Ordinary English can, of course, also *deny* that someone has a general ability. In the following passage, author and poet Myra Schneider describes two things she is no longer able to do due to her cancer:

I'm angry because I'm *unable to eat much at a time*. I'm angry because I *can't do much at a time*. I'm angry because I'm afraid I'll never have a full life again (Schneider, 2003, p. 85).

In this passage, Schneider is denying that she has the general ability to eat large meals and denying that she is, in general, able to be active for any reasonable length of time; she does not have in mind a particular occasion on which she was unable to do these things – rather, her point is that she is generally or typically unable to do them. Here's another example, where a character in a novel describes the lack of a (general) ability to express the feeling of being in love:

I'm unable to write it down properly, I'm unable to paint it. It's something that only the heart is supposed to contemplate, and nothing else. I love her (Azimi, 2014, p. 162).

In contrast to this sort of ability is a sort of ability which suggests that the agent is in a position to exercise the ability. On the face of it, attributing such an ability involves attributing a general ability of the type just discussed as well as *the opportunity to exercise that ability*. I will (for now) call these non-general abilities. Here are two examples:

Fortunately she was able to finish her Niskavuori series of plays in 1953 (Wilson *et al.*, 2013, p. 548).

Louise is able to pick Roger up from work at 6pm (adapted from Mandelkern *et al.*, 2017, p. 301).

It is also possible to deny that someone has such a non-general ability. In the following passage, the narrator recounts the moments leading up to a car accident:

Trying to avoid a collision I steer sharply into the empty lane on my left, but everything happens so quickly I'm unable to complete the manoeuvre and can't avoid clipping the car in front (Kirk, 2013, p. 2).

Here, the narrator states that he was unable to make the required manoeuvre. It is clear that the narrator is saying he was unable to do it *on this particular occasion*; he is not claiming that he is in general unable to steer into an empty lane.

Philosophical theorising about abilities tends to begin by accepting this intuitive distinction between a type of ability which doesn't require an opportunity and a type of ability which does. Mele, for instance, opens his article on agential abilities with the following statement:

Although I have not golfed for years, I am able to golf. I am not able to golf just now, however. I am in my office now, and it is too small to house a golf course (Mele, 2003, p. 447).

Here Mele affirms that he has some sort of ability to golf, but that nevertheless he cannot or is unable to golf just now. The latter claim doesn't negate the former. If it did, then it would not be possible to distinguish between the person who possesses a general ability but is currently unable to exercise it on the one hand from someone who does not possess the general ability on the other. Philosophers have referred to the type of abilities which stand opposed to general abilities as *all-in* abilities (Austin, 1979; Campbell, 2005), *particular* abilities (Honoré, 1964), *specific* abilities (Mele, 2003, p. 447; Mandelkern *et al.*, 2017), *all-in local* abilities (Whittle, 2010), *token* abilities (Berofsky, 2012, p. 75), and *wide* abilities (Vihvelin, 2013); they have also been equated with *its now being within the agent's power* to act (Maier, 2015, p. 123). There are differences in how the aforementioned theorists conceive of these non-general abilities, but many of them take themselves to be explicating the same distinction as each other, and they are often happy to gloss this as the distinction between possessing a general ability and possessing a general ability together with the opportunity to exercise it (Austin, 1979, p. 222; Mele, 2003, p. 447; Berofsky, 2012, p. 255).

The nature of general abilities, the nature of non-general abilities, and the distinction between them are intrinsically interesting topics. But they are also relevant to other areas in philosophy. I focus here on the topic of free will, but some notion or other of ability has been taken as a primitive in

philosophical accounts of know-how, intentionality, and perception, among other topics. For traditionalists about free will, free will requires the ability to do otherwise. Incompatibilist traditionalists straightforwardly maintain that the ability to do otherwise requires more than a mere capacity or general ability to do otherwise; free will requires some sort of non-general ability to do otherwise (van Inwagen, 1983, p. 13; Kittle, 2015a; Franklin, 2018, ch. 2). And at least some compatibilist traditionalists agree. Wolf, for example, argues that free will requires an agent to have ‘the skills, talents, capacities that are necessary’ for the performance of the action in question *and* that ‘nothing interferes with or prevents’ the agent from exercising those skills, talents, and capacities (Wolf, 1990, p. 111; cf. Nelkin, 2011, ch. 3). In a similar vein, Vihvelin (2013, p. 123) contends that free will requires what she calls *the wide ability*, understood as possession of a narrow ability (roughly, Vihvelin’s term for a general ability) plus the opportunity to exercise it. Many traditionalists, then, agree that free will requires some sort of non-general ability to do otherwise. However, there is evidentially a substantive disagreement between the incompatibilist and compatibilist traditionalists inasmuch as the former think the non-general ability to do otherwise is incompatible with determinism while the latter deny this. Yet, as Vihvelin notes, despite a mountainous literature on the topic of free will and determinism, ‘no one is ever very clear about what [the phrase “general ability”] is supposed to mean’ (Vihvelin, 2013, 240 fn. 26).

In previous work, I briefly sketched two ways an ability might be general (Kittle, 2015a, pp. 3029–3030). First, abilities might be general inasmuch as a true ascription of the ability entails no claim about the agent’s environment. Second, abilities might be general inasmuch as the ability applies to a wide range of circumstances. These two types of generality are orthogonal to each other and so give rise to two orthogonal distinctions among abilities. In this paper, I expand on these distinctions, defend the need for this two-fold distinction, and draw out some implications of the account. I begin in Section 2 by introducing Austin’s (1979) distinction between three senses of ‘can’: an ability sense, an opportunity sense, and an ability-plus-opportunity sense. Austin’s distinction is based on the first notion of generality introduced above: that is, on generality as entailing no claim about the agent’s opportunities. I call this the general/particular distinction. I then outline the second distinction in some depth. This distinction concerns the range of circumstances which are used to assess the possession of the ability. I call this the generic/specific distinction. I argue that the latter distinction cannot be understood in terms of the former. In Section 3, I chart some of the connections between abilities of different types, and I address some objections to the two-fold distinction articulated here. I close by suggesting that the concept of skill cannot be equated with either the concept of a *general* ability or the concept of a *generic* ability.

2. *Two ways an ability can be general*

2.1. GENERAL ABILITIES AS COMPARED WITH PARTICULAR ABILITIES

In a classic paper on the topic, Austin identified three different uses¹ of ‘can’ (and the past-tense ‘could have’):

We are tempted to say that ‘He can’ sometimes means just that he has the ability, with *nothing said* about opportunity, sometimes *just* that he has the chance, with nothing said about ability, sometimes, however, that he really actually *fully can* here and now, having both ability and opportunity (Austin, 1979, p. 230).

According to Austin, ‘can’ may be used to ascribe (i) an ability, (ii) an opportunity to exercise an ability, or (iii) both the ability and opportunity. Although Austin doesn’t comment on it, the English term ‘able’ may also be used in a similar three-fold manner. In particular, and perhaps most surprisingly, just as ‘can’ may be used to ascribe an opportunity with nothing said about whether the agent possesses an ability to make use of the opportunity, so too may ‘able’. For example, ‘He is able to apply for a British passport’ may be truly said of someone who is able to apply for a British passport in virtue of being a British citizen irrespective of whether they have the ability or capacity to correctly fill out the required paperwork. Similarly, ‘The student is able to take the exam once per year’ expresses an opportunity which the student has and may be true irrespective of whether the student possesses the skill, knowledge, or ability to take the exam (Berofsky, 2012, p. 240).

The third use of ‘can’ is Austin’s famous ‘all-in’ sense of ‘can’ (Austin, 1979, p. 229). All-in abilities are those abilities which involve the agent ‘having both ability and opportunity’. Austin thought that when an agent possesses an all-in ability to act, it follows that the agent ‘really actually *fully can* here and now’ perform the action (Austin, 1979, p. 230). Unfortunately, this thought is not developed in any depth. Austin appears to be placing both a modal and particularly criterion on all-in abilities, but it is not clear what those criteria are. What does it mean to be ‘really actually fully able’ to do something? Does that differ from just being ‘*really actually* able’ to do something, or from being ‘*fully* able’ to do something? Does it require being able to do something *holding everything fixed*? If so, what does the ‘here and now’ add, since the facts specifying what obtains ‘here and now’ would in that case already be being held fixed?

¹Austin writes about the *meaning* of ‘can’. The primary question for all concerned, I take it, is the nature of the property that is attributed by the various utterances involving ‘can’ or ‘able’ and is therefore to do with the truth-conditions of the relevant can- or able-involving utterances. Given that aim, whether our interest should be in the *sense* of ‘can’ / ‘able’ or the *use* of ‘can’ / ‘able’ depends on which semantic theory one adopts and the correct way of distinguishing semantics and pragmatics. I use ‘sense’ and ‘use’ loosely here, in the way van Inwagen does in his ‘Ability’ van Inwagen (2017). For more on this, see Kittle (2021).

To the degree that abilities are contrasted with opportunities, it seems appropriate to think of them as *general abilities*: Such abilities are *general* in that their possession does not depend on the agent's *particular* circumstances. Put otherwise, no claim is made about whether the agent is currently in a position to exercise the ability. It is in this general sense of 'able' (which doesn't require the possession of an opportunity) that Mele is able to play golf even while in his office. This is an intuitive idea and Austin has been widely followed in carving things up in this way (refer to sympathetic discussions in, e.g., Kenny, 1975, pp. 150–152; Horgan, 1977, p. 407; Berofsky, 2012, pp. 70, 255; Alvarez, 2013, p. 108; cf. Lehrer, 1976, p. 242, for cautionary note). Call this distinction the general/particular ability distinction. Intuitively, an agent possesses a general ability in virtue of having certain intrinsic properties – though we will see that this is not a straightforward matter. And the possession of a general ability together with the opportunity to exercise it yields the possession of a particular ability. This is useful progress. But to say more, we will need to expand on the nature of general abilities, opportunities, or both.

2.2. GENERIC ABILITIES AS COMPARED WITH SPECIFIC ABILITIES

When an agent possesses a general ability, nothing is uniquely entailed about the agent's current environment by possession of that ability. (The mere existence of an agent qua biological organism entails things about the agent's environment, and therefore inasmuch as an agent's possession of a general ability entails that the agent is alive, the possession of the general ability will entail various things about the agent's environment, e.g., that it is hospitable to life. But an agent's possession of a general ability entails nothing over and above such facts). I maintain that there is a distinction among the class of general abilities which is pertinent to many philosophical issues and which is apt to be thought of in terms of a different kind of generality. I call this the generic/specific distinction.

To see the need for this distinction, consider the following. When I say that I'm able to play tennis, I often mean something like the following: I'm able to *play tennis on a regulation court in good weather conditions*. In making that assertion, and as Vihvelin has pointed out in the context of dispositions, I say nothing about whether I can play tennis 'on the surface of the moon, in a sandstorm in the desert, [or] at the top of Mt. Everest' (Vihvelin, 2013, p. 185). Even if I can play tennis in a sandstorm in the desert, that is not the claim I make with normal utterances of 'I can play tennis'. The claim I'm making is limited to a claim about circumstances in which I'm on a regulation court in good weather conditions. This point is not always easy to appreciate with abilities to perform common actions such as *playing tennis* because the conditions in question are usually supplied by the context and we rarely have the need to investigate them in any detail. The following

example, which deliberately employs an unusual type of action, helps to bring to the fore the role played by some set of circumstances in defining abilities:

(Four Memorisers) Marvin can memorise a shuffled pack of cards, but only if he's listening to his favourite song, 'Philosophy by Numbers', by Orbital. Marvin knows every beat of that song and has spent hours creating a vivid 'memory palace' through which he traverses whenever he listens to it, and in which he can 'place' items. In this way, and only this way, can Marvin memorise a shuffled pack of cards; he can't memorise using any other song.

Mary can memorise a shuffled pack of cards, but only if she's listening to heavy metal music (and nothing else), which she uses to create a 'memory palace' to aid her. Mary doesn't need to listen to any particular song; any heavy metal track will do.

Marty can memorise a shuffled pack of cards, but only if he's listening to classical music (and nothing else), which he uses to create a 'memory palace' to aid him. Like Mary, Marty doesn't need any particular piece, just some form of classical music.

Margot can memorise a shuffled pack of cards, but only if she's listening to some sort of music (and nothing else), which she uses to create a 'memory palace' to aid her. Margot can do this using any music whatsoever.

Neither Marvin, Mary, Marty nor Margot can memorise a shuffled pack of cards in silence; nor can any of them memorise the cards while listening to multiple kinds of music at once.

In this example, each of the four memorisers can memorise a shuffled pack of cards. However, their memorisation abilities differ. And the difference between their memorisation abilities cannot be explained in terms of the general/particular distinction outlined above; that is, it cannot be explained in terms of some of the agents possessing the general ability to memorise a shuffled pack of cards and some possessing the particular ability to memorise a shuffled pack of cards. The reason for this is simple: The story – the four Ms possessing these different abilities – is consistent with all of them currently lacking the opportunity (on any plausible account thereof) to exercise their memorisation ability. Even if we knew, for example, that there was no music playing, we could still truthfully ascribe to them the abilities they possess. The abilities possessed by Marvin, Mary, Marty, and Margot must, therefore, be *general* abilities. As such, the differences between them must be explained by a difference within the class of general abilities.

How should we understand this difference? I maintain that the key to understanding the difference (and to understanding the nature of general abilities more widely) is to recognise that the *possession* of a general ability is assessed using, as I put it elsewhere, a set of 'hypothetical' circumstances: A set of circumstances which may or may not obtain (Kittle, 2015a, p. 3029; see also Ayers 1968, ch. 4; and Mandelkern *et al.*, 2017, on the

hypothetical nature of abilities). When assessing the possession of a general ability, we suppose that the hypothetical circumstances in question obtain, and we then consider what happens: does the agent succeed in performing the action, or bringing about the result, and to what degree? Call the set of circumstances which play this role the ability's *definitional circumstances*. As the name suggests, these circumstances, which are used to assess whether an agent possesses the ability, partly *define* or *characterise* the general ability.

How do we determine the relevant assessment circumstances? Some authors have suggested that, for any given action type, such as 'walking', 'swimming', etc., there is a single set of assessment circumstances against which the ability to perform that action should always be assessed; sometimes the circumstances appealed to are considered 'normal' or 'ideal' in some way.² The *Four Memorisers* example puts pressure on that idea. What might count as 'normal' circumstances when it comes to *memorising a shuffled pack of cards*? It is unclear. If any set of circumstances has a claim on being the normal circumstances for memorising a shuffled pack of cards, it may be circumstances of near total silence, since those are the conditions under which official memory competitions are usually held. But if the possession of the general ability to memorise a shuffled pack of cards were only assessed against silence-involving hypothetical circumstances, none of the agents in *Four Memorisers* would count as having the general ability to memorise a shuffled pack of cards. So this suggestion fails to account for the abilities of the four memorisers.

Moreover, even when there is a good candidate for a set of normal circumstances, we can still ascribe abilities that pertain to other circumstances: With an utterance of 'I can play tennis', I don't normally mean to affirm that I can play tennis in a sandstorm. But were a bizarre new extreme sport to gain popularity, there would be occasions on which the tennis playing abilities of interest were only those with definitional circumstances limited to sandstorm-type circumstances.

The lesson to draw from this, I want to suggest, is that action types such as 'walking', 'playing tennis', 'memorising a shuffled pack of cards', etc., when combined with a phrase such as 'is able to', do not suffice to pick out a useful ability property. Instead, an action type like 'memorising a shuffled pack of cards' needs to be combined with a set of hypothetical circumstances in order to yield a usefully ascribable ability. Put slightly differently, all general

²Vihvelin ties each disposition and ability to a single set of circumstances, though she doesn't state this explicitly. But Vihvelin appeals to Lewis's 'getting specific strategy' to fill out the details of how that disposition or ability should be defined; this amounts to specifying which circumstances should be used to assess possession of the ability Vihvelin (2013, pp. 184, 186). And since, for any given disposition or ability, the 'getting specific strategy' provides no scope for varying the circumstances in question, dispositions and abilities end up tied to a single set of circumstances – see Kittle (2015a, pp. 3025–3026) for substantiation of this point.

abilities are partly characterised or defined by a set of hypothetical circumstances that are used to assess the possession (not the exercise) of the ability. Such circumstances are the ability's *definitional circumstances*. Let us adopt the convention of using hyphens to indicate when some description is part of the characterisation of the ability.³ Using this notation, we could say that Marvin has the ability to-memorise-a-shuffled-pack-of-cards-when-listening-to-Philosophy-By-Numbers; Mary has the ability to-memorise-a-shuffled-pack-of-cards-when-listening-to-heavy-metal-music; Marty has the ability-to-memorise-a-shuffled-pack-of-cards-when-listening-to-classical-music; Margot has the ability to-memorise-a-shuffled-pack-of-cards-when-listening-to-any-music-whatsoever. Each of these abilities is a *general* ability. And each is a general ability to memorise a shuffled pack of cards. But each ability differs with respect to the set of hypothetical circumstances that are used to assess the possession of the ability. To assess whether Marvin has the general ability to-memorise-a-shuffled-pack-of-cards-when-listening-to-Philosophy-By-Numbers, we would need to consider only those hypothetical circumstances where Orbital's song is playing; by contrast, to assess whether Margot has the ability to-memorise-a-shuffled-pack-of-cards-when-listening-to-any-music-whatsoever, we would have to consider what she does across all hypothetical circumstances in which some music or other is playing (which is not to say that Margot must succeed in all such cases; possession of an ability doesn't require guaranteed performance in all relevant assessment circumstances – see below).

If this is the right way to think about these abilities (and I give further arguments for this below), then because general abilities – abilities which do not entail the agent's possession of the opportunity to exercise the ability – can vary according to which hypothetical circumstances are used to assess possession of the ability, general abilities can 'apply to' or 'pertain to' a wider or a narrower range of possible circumstances. For example, Marvin's memorisation ability only 'pertains to' those hypothetical circumstances where Orbital's 'Philosophy by Numbers' is playing; Margot's memorisation ability 'pertains to' any hypothetical circumstance in which there is some music or other playing. Intuitively, Margot's memorisation ability applies to more potential circumstances than does Marvin's memorisation ability. And inasmuch as Margot's memorisation abilities applies to a *wide range* of circumstances (compared with the memorisation abilities of Mary, Marty, and especially Marvin), Margot's memorisation ability could be considered *general* in a second sense – *general* qua applicable to a wide range of circumstances. It is my contention that the two senses of general outlined – general qua not entailing possession of opportunity; general qua being applicable to a wide range of circumstances – are sometimes conflated in the literature, or at least not clearly distinguished. I will label the

³This notation originates with Bird (2000).

second type of generality *genericity*. Thus, I will say that general abilities are *generic* to the degree that they are assessed against a wide range of hypothetical circumstances. And I will contrast generic abilities with *specific* abilities. Clearly, ‘generic’ and ‘specific’ are comparative terms in a way ‘general’ and ‘particular’ are not. General ability G1 might be *specific* compared with general ability G2 but *generic* compared with general ability G3.

The memorisation example makes clear that at least some action types can be combined with different sets of definitional circumstances to produce different general ability properties. But there is good reason to think that this point applies more widely, and that even what we think of as ordinary, everyday abilities should be partly defined with reference to some set of hypothetical assessment circumstances. Indeed, there is reason to think that there may be variation in the definitional circumstances employed across different uses of a phrase like ‘is able to ride a bike’, such that some ordinary or everyday abilities really pick out clusters of abilities. Consider an example drawn from sociologist Harry Collins (2006): Collins notes that the successful exercise of an ability to ride a bike depends on a vast number of social cues and practices, many of which the road users themselves may not be consciously aware of, and some of which may vary across cultures. For instance, knowing how to successfully navigate a road often ‘involves knowing how to make eye contact with drivers at busy junctions in just the way necessary to assure a safe passage and not to invite an unwanted response’ (Collins, 2006, p. 259). It is not implausible to think that in some cases a person’s ability to ride a bike (at least on busy roads) might *depend on* such cues: Without such cues, without the knowledge of how to perceive and deploy them, the person would be unable to ride. In such a case, the person in question has the ability-to-ride-where-such-cues-are-available but not the-ability-to-ride-in-the-absence-of-such-cues. Moreover, if the cues differ across cultures, then the bike riding abilities possessed by those of one culture will vary slightly compared with those in another, in that they will ‘pertain to’ a slightly different set of hypothetical circumstances. Of course, such differences may be slight, and may not be observable in most real-world situations because human beings are adept at learning new abilities and expanding the scope of existing abilities very quickly, but that doesn’t negate the point being made.

3. *Elaborating on the distinctions and their implications*

I have articulated two distinctions that can be drawn among abilities. The first distinction is that between *general* abilities and particular abilities, where the latter are construed as requiring the agent’s possession of a general ability together with the opportunity to exercise it. The second distinction is that between *generic* and *specific* abilities. The genericity/specificity of an

ability is a property of the ability's definitional circumstances: The wider the range of circumstances used to assess possession of the ability, the more generic it is; the narrower the range of assessment circumstances, the more specific it is. Crucially, no matter how specific the definition of a general ability is made, nothing is thereby entailed about the suitability (or not) of the agent's environment for exercising the ability. And therefore, no matter how specific the definition of an ability is, the ability is not thereby a particular ability.

Sometimes the two types of generality – what I have called *generality* and *genericity* – are run together. We see this in Whittle's notion of *global* abilities, which pertain to a wide range of cases and don't require the presence of an opportunity (Whittle, 2010, pp. 2, 8–10). More recently, we see it in a recent paper by Cyr and Swenson, who present the following account of general abilities:

General Ability: S has the general ability to A iff, in a wide range (or suitable proportion) of circumstances, if S were to choose (or attempt) to A, then S would A (Cyr & Swenson, 2019, p. 25).

This account of general ability requires, employing my terminology, both generality and genericity. Thus, according to Cyr and Swenson, a general ability is one which entails nothing about the agent's actual circumstances (i.e. requires no opportunity) *and* is one which applies to a 'wide range' of circumstances. In employing such an account, Cyr and Swenson overlook the fact that general abilities (as I've defined them above) routinely vary according to how generic or specific they are. This means that Cyr and Swenson's account makes it impossible to attribute a non-opportunity involving ability that applies only to a small range of circumstances. Since one of Cyr and Swenson's aims is to argue that moral responsibility does not require the general ability to do otherwise, this limitation of their account has implications: Their understanding of general abilities precludes them from considering what I refer to as general but specific abilities, and this weakens their conclusion. This demonstrates, I think, that there is good reason for keeping the two distinctions I've articulated separate.

The account of generic and specific abilities presented above means that the following statements might ascribe different abilities:

- (1) Dina is able to drive.
- (2) Dina is able to drive on narrow roads.
- (3) Dina is able to drive on narrow, icy roads.
- (4) Dina is able to drive on narrow, icy roads in high winds.

If all the information mentioned in each statement is taken as contributing to part of the definitional circumstances of the ability being ascribed to Dina, then (1) ascribes the ability to-drive, (2) ascribes the ability to-drive-

on-narrow-roads, (3) the ability to-drive-on-narrow-icy-roads, and (4) the ability to drive-on-narrow-icy-roads-in-high-winds. On the present account, each of these abilities is a different general ability.

It might be questioned whether we really need an account which recognises such apparently *ad hoc* abilities as the ability to-drive-on-narrow-icy-roads-in-high-winds. First, it might be noted that if statement (4) is true of Dina, then so are the other statements, and this – it might be suggested – shows that we would be better endorsing an account according to which Dina possesses a single driving ability which grounds the truth of (1) through (4). Second, it might be objected that if (4) is taken to ascribe the ability to drive-on-narrow-icy-roads-in-high-winds, then the account will be forced to admit the existence of even more absurd abilities, abilities which potentially water down the concept to absurdity, thus yielding a *reduction* of the account. For example, if abilities can be defined using *any* set of conditions, then one could gerrymander things such that I count as (say) having the ability to beat a multiple-times grand slam champion at tennis: We just need to add to the definition of the ability that the tennis champion is anaesthetised, hobbled, and seriously ill. With the champion in such a state, I could perhaps beat her at tennis. But surely this is an absurd result, one which makes a mockery of the account being proposed.⁴

In response to these objections, several points are worth noting. First, it is plausible to think that in the case of Dina, the truth of each latter statement entails the truth of all the previous statements (so that [4] entails [3], [2], and [1]; [3] entails [2] and [1], etc.). This may give us initial reason to think that Dina has a single driving ability which grounds the truth of statements (1) through (4). However, as the case of the *Four Memorisers* shows, this is not always the case when considering multiple general abilities to *A* which vary in how generic/specific they are. That these entailments hold in the Dina example is due to a contingent feature of the case, namely, that each of the conditions mentioned makes driving harder, so that if (4) is true – if Dina can drive in the most difficult conditions mentioned – the others will be true. The following example inverts this feature of the case:

- (5) Dan is able to drive.
- (6) Dan is able to drive on wide, straight roads.
- (7) Dan is able to drive on wide, straight roads in good weather.
- (8) Dan is able to drive on wide, straight roads in good weather and no traffic.

In this example, the circumstances mentioned make driving easier. Thus, it would seem that (8) might be true while the other statements are not. This might be the case if Dan is a particularly nervous, uncoordinated, new

⁴I would like to thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection and providing the example.

learner driver, for example. On the account I'm defending here, statement (8) ascribes the (general) ability to-drive-on-wide-straight-roads-in-good-weather-and-with-no-traffic. The hypothetical assessment circumstances relevant to assessing Dan's possession of that ability are circumstances where there is a wide, straight road, the weather is good, and there is no traffic. There are myriad circumstances matching that description; Dan's possession of that ability is assessed by considering his performance across that range of circumstances. To be sure, the ability ascribed by (8) is rather *ad hoc*, and it is unlikely to be a useful ability to ascribe in everyday life. Nevertheless, there are contexts where it would be useful to ascribe precisely that ability, and *not* one of the abilities ascribed by an utterance of (5)–(7). In other words, it may sometimes be useful to differentiate people based on whether or not they possess the ability to-drive-on-wide-straight-roads-in-good-weather-and-with-no-traffic. Suppose, for example, that we are with Jacob who needs help tomorrow transporting some heavy boxes down a wide, straight road. The forecast for tomorrow is good weather, and it'll be Sunday, so they'll be no traffic. Suppose that Jacob is with Dan and Mieko. Dan is the nervous new driver mentioned above; Mieko has never taken a driving lesson nor even sat in a car. If Jacob were to ask his friends for help, Dan could truthfully assert that he is able to drive and so help Jacob transport his boxes, whereas Mieko could not truthfully say that. Moreover, Dan would be able to say this even if he can only drive in those very conditions – that is, even if Dan doesn't have a 'normal' driving ability. By contrast, Mieko has no driving ability whatsoever, so she could not offer Jacob any help with the driving. So despite the *ad hoc* nature of the ability ascribed by (8), it might in certain situations be useful to distinguish between those who possess that precise ability from those who don't. This supports the claim that (8) ascribes a genuine ability property.

A similar thing can be said of the tennis champion example. On the account outlined above, given that abilities can be defined using an arbitrary set of conditions against which possession of the ability is tested, it is indeed possible to ascribe an ability such as the ability-to-beat-a-multiple-times-grand-slam-champion-at-tennis-when-they're-anaesthetised-hobbled-and-seriously-ill. That is a genuine ability. However, even if I have such an ability, it doesn't follow that I have the ability-to-beat-a-multiple-times-grand-slam-champion-at-tennis. Those are distinct abilities which pertain to different sets of assessment circumstances. The former ability is highly gerrymandered; its possession is assessed by considering one's performance against only anaesthetised, hobbled, and seriously ill champions. Nevertheless, it is a genuine ability and we could, with a bit of uninhibited philosophical imagining, outline a scenario in which ascribing such an ability would be useful: A grudge holder desperate to see a multiple grand slam tennis champion lose plans to kidnap such a champion and then anaesthetise and hobble her, before making her play someone at tennis. Now, suppose the

kidnapper has never played any tennis, and thus has no tennis playing abilities; *a fortiori*, the kidnapper doesn't have the ability-to-beat-a-hobbled-anaesthetised-and-seriously-ill-multiple-grand-slam-tennis-champion-at-tennis. Instead, the kidnapper must seek out a mediocre tennis player to beat the champion. A mediocre tennis player won't, of course, have the ability-to-beat-a-multiple-times-grand-slam-champion-at-tennis, but such a player will have the ability-to-beat-a-hobbled-anaesthetised-and-seriously-ill-multiple-grand-slam-tennis-champion-at-tennis. The possession of the latter ability marks a genuine difference between the mediocre player and the kidnapper himself (or any other non-tennis player). And thus, we have a situation where it may be useful (to the kidnapper) to ascribe even such a gerrymandered ability as this. Crucially, however, the mediocre player's possession of the ability-to-beat-a-hobbled-anaesthetised-and-seriously-ill-multiple-grand-slam-tennis-champion-at-tennis doesn't depend on them possessing the opportunity to exercise such an ability: The kidnapper might be interested in who has this ability, even when there is no opportunity to exercise it. So this difference between the mediocre player and the non-tennis playing kidnapper must be explained by citing a difference in the *general* abilities that they either possess or lack. To sum up, the account defended here does recognise the rather *ad hoc* ability-to-beat-a-multiple-times-grand-slam-champion-at-tennis-when-they're-anaesthetised-hobbled-and-seriously-ill; but this does not constitute an objection to the account, because in fact that is a genuine ability property that could be appropriate to ascribe and which might mark a real distinction among agents.

Two additional comments are worth making in connection with the above objections. First, in support of the idea that it is harmless to recognise the existence of such abilities, we need only note that this proliferation of abilities only concerns abilities conceived of as abundant properties (cf. McKittrick, 2018, for a similar stance on dispositions). Second, the account presented here is compatible with the idea that many of an agent's (abundant) abilities might be grounded in the same set of intrinsic properties; that is, a single set of intrinsic properties may ground, for example, an agent's ability-to-drive-in-circumstances-X, their ability-to-drive-in-circumstances-Y, and so on. So the idea that the abilities ascribed in statements (1) through (4) are systematically connected to each other causes no problem for the account being presented.

General abilities vary according to how generic or specific they are, such that for each action type A, there is a 'spectrum' of general abilities to A (as Whittle, 2010, p. 8, put it). But if, as I've suggested above, ascriptions of particular abilities just are ascriptions of general abilities plus the corresponding opportunity, it follows that ascriptions of particular abilities also vary along the generic/specific dimension. This means that each of the statements (1) through (8) may be used to ascribe either a general ability or a

particular ability. To explore the difference, consider (3) in more detail. According to the scheme I'm presenting, when (3) is used to ascribe a general ability, it can be informally glossed like so:

(3-General) Holding fixed the intrinsic properties of Dina which ground her ability, and *on the assumption that Dina is in narrow-icy-road-type circumstances obtain*, Dina is able to drive.

In this gloss, the contents of the clauses prior to the 'Dina is able to drive' should be understood as modifying the modal content of the 'is able to' expression. That is, the modal claim expressed by 'Dina is able to drive' is in part a function of the preceding conditions: relative to some of Dina's intrinsic properties, and the assumption that Dina is in narrow-icy-road-type circumstances, it is possible for Dina to drive. On many accounts of ability, this is to be understood, roughly, as the idea that Dina drives in a 'suitable proportion' of all such circumstances. I think there is something to this idea, though it must be conceded, it has some significant difficulties.⁵ For present purposes, the important point is how (3-General) differs from the claim expressed by (3) when it used to ascribe a particular ability. On the present way of construing things, when (3) ascribes a particular ability, it can be understood like so:

(3-Particular) Holding fixed the intrinsic properties of Dina which ground her ability, and *given that Dina is in fact in narrow-icy-road-type circumstances*, Dina is able to drive.

Understood like this, (3-Particular) adds to that which is expressed by (3-General) the claims that Dina's current circumstances are in fact narrow-icy-road-type circumstances. So (3-Particular) will be true only if Dina is currently in circumstances where there are narrow, icy roads. One nice feature of this account is that it provides a straightforward account of opportunities: An opportunity is any particular set of circumstances which match the description of the ability's definitional circumstances. For example, the definitional, assessment circumstances for (3-General) is the set of all narrow-icy-road-type circumstances. This set contains all the

⁵What counts as a 'suitable proportion' is a tricky matter, and on two counts. The easier problem is that, intuitively, the more possible circumstances a person successfully A-s in, the better the person's A-ing ability, but where we put the threshold for being able to A (vs. not being able to A) looks to be a contextual matter, dependent (in part) on the kind of ability we want to ascribe. For example, when ascribing abilities to perform routine actions like walking, swimming, etc., we typically require a very high success rate across some range of circumstances. By contrast, when ascribing abilities to perform actions where success is acknowledged to be more difficult to come by – e.g., scoring a penalty; hitting the bull's eye – we do not impose such stringent requirements. How to work this out is not a straightforward matter, but it doesn't affect the main point of this paper, so I leave it to one side here. The harder problem is that, because there seem to be a transfinite number of possible scenarios, it is not clear what sense can be given to counting proportions of possible scenarios. Manley & Wasserman (2008, 79ff) have offered some ideas as to how this problem might be handled. I will not discuss it further here but acknowledge that the approach taken here relies on a solution to this problem.

possible circumstances which are of that type, and the obtaining of any of those circumstances would count for Dina as an opportunity to exercise the general ability to-drive-on-narrow-icy-roads.

How do general abilities to A, which vary in their genericity, relate to each other? Since most extant accounts of ability tie the possession of ability to a fixed set of circumstances, this question is rarely considered. Whittle, who does recognise this variation in general abilities, suggests that the possession of (what I'm calling) a generic general ability doesn't entail the possession of a specific general ability, and vice versa (Whittle, 2010, p. 3). Whittle produces a pair of examples to support this claim. First, we're asked to consider Sally, who is a very good singer but who cannot sing in front of her aunt (Whittle, 2010, p. 3). According to Whittle, by hypothesis, Sally has the generic general ability to sing, but since she freezes when in the presence of her aunt, Sally doesn't have the specific general ability to sing in front of her aunt. So possessing the generic general ability to sing doesn't entail possessing the specific general ability to sing. Second, imagine that Jay 'cannot make a five-foot high jump in the vast majority of circumstances ... [but] in one fortuitous set of circumstances [Jay] can make the jump' (Whittle, 2010, p. 4). The idea here is that Jay doesn't have the generic general ability to make five-foot high jumps, but he does have the specific general ability to make a five-foot high jump in the fortuitous circumstances F. This is supposed to show that possessing a specific general ability doesn't entail possessing a more generic general ability.

Whittle's examples are suggestive and an adequate account of abilities should be able to account for the cases she presents. Nevertheless, her conclusions do not get to the heart of the issue. The problem is this. If we take seriously the idea of a spectrum of general abilities, understood in the manner I've outlined above (which parallels Whittle's own account), then there will be a single maximally generic general ability to A but there will be an entire range of maximally specific general abilities to A (one for each maximally specified possible circumstance in which A might be performed). The maximally generic general ability to A will put no restrictions on the ability's definitional assessment circumstances: All possible circumstances will be relevant to the assessment of the maximally generic general ability to A. But for this very reason, the maximally generic general ability to A will, for all practical purposes, rarely if ever be a useful property to ascribe. To echo once more Vihvelin's critique of accounts of dispositions according to which the possession of a disposition is to be assessed against all possible circumstances, it is simply mistaken to think that when we say that a match has the disposition to light when struck, we mean to claim anything about whether the match will light when under water, in a sandstorm, or on the moon (Vihvelin, 2013, p. 185). The same point applies to abilities. When we say someone has the ability to sing, we don't usually mean to assert anything about whether the person can sing when underwater or in a sandstorm.

This means that we will rarely (if ever) ascribe the maximally generic ability to A to anyone, and so Whittle's statements about what such an ascription might entail are not really to the point. Moreover, since there are myriad specific abilities to A, Whittle's claim that an agent who possesses the generic ability to A doesn't necessarily possess *the* specific ability to A is underspecified: We need to say which specific ability to A is under consideration.

What then should we say? Well, for any given action type A, there is no such thing as *the* specific ability to A. There are an indefinite number of specific abilities to A. Some are what we might call *maximally specific* abilities to A: Abilities which pertain only to a single assessment circumstance. With this in mind, the lesson from the Sally example is not, *pace* Whittle, that possession of the maximally generic ability doesn't entail possessing *the* specific ability; rather, it is that possessing the maximally generic ability doesn't entail possessing *any given* specific ability. We can also conclude that an agent's possessing the maximally generic ability to A doesn't entail that the agent possesses *every* specific ability to A. However, possessing the maximally generic ability to A does entail possessing *some or other* specific ability to A. This follows because, if the agent possesses the maximally generic ability to A, then there must be some success cases where the agent A-s, and so we can simply ascribe a specific ability to A which is defined in part by making reference to those success circumstances. To illustrate, suppose that in virtue of her generic singing ability Sally can sing on a stage in front of 500 people as long as her aunt isn't on the stage; then we can conclude that, in addition to possessing the generic ability to sing, Sally also possesses the (somewhat more) specific ability to sing on a stage in front of 500 people when her aunt isn't on the stage.

More generally, it seems we can say the following. If an agent possesses the ability-to-A-in-D, then unless that ability is a maximally specific ability, there will be some more specific ability, the ability-to-A-in-DE, which the agent will possess. That's because in specifying the ability in greater detail, we can simply focus in on only those circumstances where there is success, and this guarantees that the ability will be possessed. The converse, however, does not hold. Suppose that an agent possessed the ability-to-A-in-DEF, where D, E, and F are separable environmental conditions. The ability in question is thus assessed against all the DEF-type situations. And the agent succeeds in a 'suitable proportion' of the DEF such that they count as possessing the ability. Now suppose we consider the more generic ability-to-A-in-DE: We are no longer considering only situations where conditions D, E, and F obtain, but are now also assessing the ability against those DE-type situations where F does not hold. We are therefore assessing the ability against a wider range of possible circumstances (both those where F holds and those where it doesn't). And since the original ability ascription expresses no claim about whether the agent succeeds in A-ing in the DE-type

situations, it might be that all of the newly included possible circumstances are cases where the agent fails to A. And this might mean the proportion of success cases has dropped below what counts as a 'suitable proportion' of cases, with the result that the agent doesn't possess the ability-to-A-IN-DE. This shows that possessing a generic ability to A does not entail possessing an even more generic ability to A (although of course, it is compatible with that).

The account of abilities developed above is, as it should be, neutral on the question of which abilities are most relevant to free will. But being clear about the differences between general/particular and generic/specific abilities should help facilitate clearer and more precise discussion of which types of ability free will require. I will illustrate this with two examples.

First, Whittle has claimed that incompatibilism requires what she calls all-in local abilities (Whittle, 2010, p. 18). Now, Whittle endorses the idea that for each action type A, there is a 'continuous spectrum' of abilities to A, with the global ability to A lying at one end of the spectrum and the all-in local ability to A lying at the other end of the spectrum (Whittle, 2010, p. 8). Whittle's notion of the global ability to A parallels what I have called the maximally generic general ability to A; her notion of an all-in local ability parallels what I have called a maximally specific general ability. In other words, all of the types of ability Whittle gives an account for are, despite what she herself wants to claim, general abilities in the sense that none of them entail possession of an opportunity. This is the case because, according to Whittle's definitions, what the possession of both global and local abilities requires is that the agent instantiate a property in virtue of which, were the ability's definitional circumstances to obtain, the agent would succeed in performing the action across a suitable proportion of cases (Whittle, 2010, pp. 4–5). Nothing is said one way or another whether the ability's definitional circumstances do in fact obtain; in other words, nothing is said one way or another whether the agent currently has an opportunity to exercise the ability being ascribed. This is the case for both global and local abilities. And it follows from this that according to Whittle, global and all-in local abilities (and the continuous spectrum of abilities in between), are all general abilities – they vary only with respect to what I have called genericity/specificity. And since, as I've outlined above, there is agreement among traditionalists about free will – compatibilist and incompatibilist – that the ability to do otherwise is a particular ability, it follows that Whittle's all-in local abilities cannot be the kind of ability that incompatibilist traditionalists take free will to require. The source of the problem is the failure to distinguish the two types of generality discussed throughout (generality and genericity).

Second, consider again Cyr and Swenson's account of general ability:

General Ability: S has the general ability to A iff, in a wide range (or suitable proportion) of circumstances, if S were to choose (or attempt) to A, then S would A (Cyr & Swenson, 2019, p. 25).

As already noted, Cyr and Swenson's account of general ability runs together what I have called generality and genericity. They present a number of cases which purport to show that moral responsibility does not require, in their terminology, a general ability to do otherwise. But since they run together generality and genericity, even if their argument is successful, all they have shown is that moral responsibility doesn't require a general and (very) generic ability to do otherwise. They have not shown that moral responsibility does not require any general ability to do otherwise whatsoever. This is because their account, by running together generality and genericity, makes it impossible to ascribe specific general abilities. In each of these cases, attention to both distinctions would facilitate clearer discussion of the issues.

I have distinguished between two ways an ability might be general. There is what I have called *generality*: general qua not entailing the possession of an opportunity; and there is what I have called *genericity*: the property of 'pertaining to' or being assessed against a wide range of possible circumstances. In closing, I want to offer a brief comment on a third way that abilities are sometimes described as general. Sometimes, general abilities are identified with 'the relevant skills, competence, or know-how required to do that thing' (Vihvelin, 2013, p. 7 fn. 26). How does the notion *skill* relate to that of *general ability* and that of *generic ability*?

First, skills cannot be equated with *general* abilities (abilities the possession of which don't entail the agent has an opportunity to exercise them). A general ability requires success across some range of cases. Loosely, and without meaning to go beyond the idea of success across a 'suitable proportion' of cases, this could be understood in terms of being reliably able to do something. But success across a 'suitable proportion' of cases, or being reliably able to do something, is not sufficient for skill. It might be that I can reliably change a car tyre, or reliably tie a necktie, but nevertheless that I am unskilled at these things. Perhaps I achieve success across a suitable proportion of cases just because I don't give up: I might need two or three tries each time, but eventually I get there (Kittle, 2015b, p. 186). In such cases, there will be contexts where it is useful to distinguish between me and someone who cannot – no matter the circumstances, and no matter the time given – perform the action. Since I'm reliably able to do it, you could rely on me to change your tyre. Even so, since I'm not particularly skilled at it. Moreover, in these kinds of cases, even if I can reliably bring about the result, the action may not have been skilfully performed, nor the result a work of skill: I can reliably tie a necktie, but the result never looks very good.

Second, skills cannot be equated with *generic* abilities (abilities which pertain to a wide range of circumstances). It is often true that a skilled agent will, in virtue of their skill, possess a generic ability: The highly skilled skier can no doubt ski in a wide range of circumstances, and as such has a generic ability to ski. But there is no necessary connection between generic abilities and skills. It is possible, for instance, to be able to do something in a wide

range of circumstances but only be able to do it badly. I have a very generic ability to cook – that is, across a wide range of circumstances I can produce something edible. Still, that is consistent with me being a really bad cook and only ever cooking mediocre food. Or again, many people have the very generic ability to lie in bed in the morning; they can do so in the face of many interruptions (alarm clocks, sunlight streaming in through the window, etc.) (Collins & Evans, 2007, p. 17). But even if someone can successfully lie in bed in the morning across a wide range of circumstances, it doesn't take much skill. Conversely, sometimes skills are constituted by very specific abilities. Consider someone who is highly skilled at tiddlywinks. The skills required to play a masterful game of tiddlywinks are not particularly transferable: They pertain only to a relatively narrow range of possible circumstances. As such, the ability to play tiddlywinks is a fairly specific general ability. Still, such an ability can nonetheless be a skill. So skills should be distinguished, both from general abilities and from generic abilities. However, we can say at least this about the relationship between skill and generic abilities: Even if possessing a skill doesn't involve possessing a generic ability according to any objective standard, it is plausible to think that someone who is skilled at A-ing is likely to possess abilities to A that are *more generic* than those unskilled at A. This is not a necessary connection, for the reasons given above, but it is likely to be the typical pattern. For example, a highly skilled tiddlywinks player will be able to adjust more easily to different playing mats than will a less skilled player, and so even if their ability is, by any objective standard, a very specific ability, it will still be more generic than those of lesser skill.^{6,7}

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⁶I would like to thank two anonymous referees and the editors of *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

⁷This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, *God and the Book of Nature* (Grant ID. 61507). The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the John Templeton Foundation.

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